

# Against Democratic Interventionism

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In *Justice and Foreign Policy*, Michael Blake argues that liberal states are permitted to insist that all other states become liberal democracies.<sup>1</sup> According to Blake, democratic governance is a basic moral right of individuals (p. 3). A liberal foreign policy that uses coercive means to pursue democratization abroad, he argues, does not show any objectionable lack of respect for other societies or their inhabitants.

At first blush, this may seem a defense of liberal imperialism. But Blake adds two caveats that soften this conclusion. First, he holds that there are powerful prudential reasons to hesitate about coercive intervention in favor of democracy,<sup>2</sup> and he points to eight such considerations: (1) intervening may induce the government to do the opposite of what the interveners demand, worsening the situation; (2) after an intervention, citizens may “rally round the flag” of a nondemocratic regime; (3) intervention creates a perception of hierarchy in the international system, since the “core” states intervene in the weaker periphery; (4) it is difficult to coerce attitudes of norm acceptance that are necessary for a successful transition; (5) interventions are inherently unpredictable; (6) liberal interventions may induce “copycat” behavior by illiberal states; (7) states are prone to intervene for self-interested reasons, so it is wise to require a high burden of proof; and (8) it is difficult to understand a society’s practices well enough to be sure they merit intervention (pp. 52–59). Blake thinks these prudential reasons ground a strong presumption against intervention, given the high probability of bad outcomes. But this strong presumption is defeasible. There will be rare cases where a coercive intervention is both proportionate and likely to succeed. In these cases, Blake insists liberal states have no principled reason to refrain from using coercive means to promote democracy abroad.

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Blake's second caveat is that there are some (limited) principled reasons for toleration in the international system. States do not have a general right to coerce erring regimes to implement the correct view of justice. Where an erring regime is a liberal democracy, Blake thinks it should be tolerated. Thus, while the United States and Sweden disagree over what market regulations are fair, Blake holds that neither country has a claim to coerce the other "to convert to its own particular interpretation of liberalism" (p. 64). Yet what precisely is the difference between Sweden coercing the United States and the United States coercing a nondemocratic regime?

Here Blake draws an analogy between domestic toleration and international toleration. In the domestic case, we tolerate "mistaken" ethical and religious views because of the importance, in an individual's life, of the project of asking and answering questions about ultimate value (p. 60). These commitments are entitled to principled respect, "because of the importance of these mistakes *for the people who live them*" (p. 31). Analogously, it is an important project for a liberal society to ask questions about how best to treat persons as moral equals (p. 62). "Just as individual persons must develop and pursue a plan of life based upon their own conceptions of the good, so individual states must develop and pursue a conception of equal treatment," and this project has "value for a people" independently of the answer reached (p. 63). We have principled reasons for not coercing other liberal states to adopt our conception of justice, then, because a liberal political society is "a shared project of the individual persons of that society, such that respecting these people involves respecting that which they have made together" (p. 63).

I think Blake's account of the principled reasons for international toleration is broadly correct. But why draw the line at liberal democracy? Working out together a shared conception of justice can be important in a society that is not fully liberal and democratic, so long as this society makes a good-faith effort to respect all citizens and to include them in a cooperative process of political reasoning. I therefore believe Blake's own account of the principled reasons to respect "even wrong visions" (p. 4) of justice grounds a wider conception of international toleration than he himself endorses. Some nondemocratic regimes represent shared political projects that all citizens (including minorities) willingly participate in, and reasonably value. If so, then I believe they are entitled to international toleration, for principled (not just prudential) reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Like Blake, I doubt that a plausible conception of international toleration will justify tolerating *all* existing states. Some states—such as North Korea or Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—are not reasonably interpretable as cooperative ventures among their citizens, but represent the naked domination of one group by another. Yet not all nonliberal-democratic states are like this. In other cases, nondemocratic regimes are sustained through their citizens’ free cooperation, rather than imposed upon them.

Blake presents himself as taking an individualist approach to foreign policy, and contrasts this with an alternative view that takes cultures or communities to be rights-bearers in themselves. This alternative “tradition regards the notion of equality as applicable not only to individual persons, but to collective bodies” (pp. 14–15). Like Blake, I am an individualist. My critique does not assume that nations or states possess irreducible rights of autonomy that must be respected under all circumstances. Yet I think one can be an individualist without embracing liberal imperialism (even in those rare cases where it can be expected to work). Blake moves too quickly from the premise that liberalism is universally valid to the conclusion that it is permissible to coercively impose it (p. 6). In so doing, he adopts an overly one-sided conception of the individual interests that are relevant to justifying coercive political power. A fuller account of these interests, I believe, would support a less interventionist liberalism.

At the most foundational level, Blake sees all individuals—citizens as well as foreigners—as having an equal claim to *autonomy*, and I will follow him in this.<sup>4</sup> He references Joseph Raz’s conception of autonomy as the ability to be a “part author” of one’s own life (p. 21). One might also appeal to a broader, Kantian definition of autonomy as the value of governing one’s life in accordance with one’s own evaluative judgments. This value of autonomy constrains coercive institutions: as Blake puts it, “all individuals have a right to have the coercive actions of . . . political institutions justified to them as autonomous agents” (p. 25).

What does individual autonomy require of coercive institutions? Blake stresses that political institutions must provide individuals with “the basic rights needed to make . . . a plan of life for themselves” (p. 25). This view addresses individuals largely from the perspective of a beneficiary of state power, an institutional “taker.” Moreover, Blake conceives of political justification as essentially hypothetical: what matters for him is not whether *actually* coerced individuals would agree that state coercion is justified, but rather what a set of rational contractors would agree to (p. 85). If Blake adheres strictly to a hypothetical conception of

justification, however, this risks undermining even his principled reasons for tolerating liberal democracies. If actual consent plays no role in justifying state coercion, then what is wrong with Sweden imposing its correct conception of justice on an unwilling United States? Surely, if hypothetical rational contractors would choose Sweden's social-democratic model over the United States' market-liberal one, then there is no further objection to forcibly imposing it. To forestall this conclusion, we must appeal to another line of reasoning.

Unlike Blake, I believe that an autonomy-based conception of political justification has a nonhypothetical dimension. As Blake emphasizes, coercion demonstrates an attitude of "disrespect" or "infantilization" toward the coerced (p. 22). State coercion threatens autonomy because it subjects the coerced to the will of the coercer: it "expresses a relationship of domination" (p. 83). But does the provision of a package of rights and essential goods neutralize this threat? Suppose that a colonial power provides basic rights and goods to a subject population that does not endorse its coercion. This imperial authority—though perhaps substantively just—is still dominating. It is inconsistent with its subjects' claims to govern their political lives in accordance with their own judgments.

For this reason, I think that an autonomy-based conception of political justification encompasses an additional, "maker" dimension. This dimension addresses individuals as political agents who have an interest in ordering their collective life in accordance with their own values and priorities. The threat of domination is fully neutralized only if those subject to state power *see the point* of the coercive demands imposed upon them. To ensure subjects' autonomy, it is not enough for a political power to give objectively correct reasons on behalf of its use of force. It must also give reasons that its coerced subjects can accept from their own evaluative perspectives. Only then can these individuals be part authors of the political institutions that govern their lives. Without such a justification, coercion will simply be imposed by a hostile state that dominates them and forces their compliance.

I believe this importance—to the individual—of co-authoring the political institutions that govern one's life is our most important reason for tolerating political projects whose views of justice differ markedly from our own. One of the most destructive effects of colonialism was the forcible imposition onto a subject population of a social order that bore no relation to that population's own priorities and values. Those who have lived through this experience tell of a sense of powerlessness and a loss of orientation and control.<sup>5</sup> This alienation is distinct from the other abuses perpetrated by colonial institutions, and it persists today as a

legacy of bitterness and resentment among formerly colonized populations. Even in the best imaginable scenario, where colonial institutions are substantively just, they still deny the political agency of colonized subjects by treating them as objects to be paternalized on the basis of values they do not accept. By overlooking the moral importance of this “maker” interest, I believe democratic interventionism commits a serious mistake.

Let me define these two dimensions of an autonomy-based conception of political justification more precisely:

- (1) *Taker Perspective*: Political institutions must define and guarantee certain personal autonomy rights for each member, including security, basic liberties, property, and subsistence.
- (2) *Maker Perspective*: As “makers,” members must actually endorse their cooperation together in a coercive state that provides them these rights-guarantees.

There are many further questions one could ask about the “maker” perspective, but here I consider two. First, the idea of a “maker” interest suggests that the coercive institutions that govern a particular group ought—in some way—to reflect those people’s shared values and priorities. Yet a state’s entire population rarely agrees on anything in politics. So how can these people share values and priorities? As Blake notes, “we should take care before we insist that a given attitude or political conception simply *is* that which is held by the country in question” (p. 32). Instead, as he emphasizes, states “are composed of persons, who disagree and quarrel and find their own answers to a variety of disputed questions” (p. 32). A good account of institutional co-authorship must be compatible with this fact.

Second, the two perspectives on political justification just outlined—the “maker” and “taker” perspectives—can come into conflict. When they do, how much weight should the “maker” interest in co-authorship have? The worry is that, as “makers,” some people will fail to affirm the institutions that protect their rights as “takers.” How seriously should we take this potential challenge?

Let me begin with the first question. Since individuals must share the political world, no individual’s personal priorities can be mirrored in every law and policy. Yet political unity does not require the absence of disagreement, in my view, but rather a second-order attitude of valuing a *process* of political cooperation undertaken in concert with others. Individuals often see reason for complying with their political process even when its outcomes do not reflect their views. If enough

citizens judge such reasons for compliance to exist, then their autonomous decisions will support a stable political order, even though that order does not always correspond with their personal moral evaluations. In this way, political unity can be made compatible with disagreement. When an individual's institutions are shaped through his cooperation in a joint political enterprise that he values, those institutions will reflect (second-order) priorities that he shares, even though he may disagree with some of its (first-order) outcomes.

To see what I have in mind, it is helpful to draw an analogy to the unity of smaller-scale groups. For example, while I may sometimes disagree with my colleagues about whom to hire, I prefer that we make our own hiring decisions together, even though that means accepting some decisions with which I disagree. Indeed, I would consider myself disrespected if the dean overruled our collective decision, even when the result was to impose my preferred candidate. For this reason, I do not think it is sufficient—as Blake does—to point to the existence of disagreement within illiberal societies as a justification for liberal intervention (pp. 32–33). For it may well be important to democratic dissenters in these societies that they *convince* their fellow citizens to accept their values, rather than forcing those values upon them.

Satisfying the “maker” interests of individuals in the co-authorship of their institutions, then, does not require that they agree with all their regime's political decisions. Even dissenting minorities can freely accept a group decision that differs from their first-order judgments, if they value their participation in a joint political venture. Instead, the “maker” interest requires that each person relate to the coercive political order in a certain way: that is, by affirming his involvement in the cooperative political enterprise that undergirds it. Only then can he see himself as a co-author of the institutions that govern his life. Though this “maker” interest is an interest of individuals, it can be furthered through membership in a political group, to the extent the individual affirms participation in that group.

Now let me consider my second question, about the weight of this “maker” interest in co-authorship. It is possible for people (a) to affirm their involvement in illiberal or undemocratic political enterprises (as many Russians affirm Putin's regime), or (b) to fail to affirm their involvement in a liberal-democratic polity. How seriously should we take the “maker” interest when it conflicts with basic “taker” freedoms? Blake suggests that the “maker” interest has weight only in a liberal democracy, which for him is a uniquely appropriate form of political life. Therefore, he discounts people's political judgments whenever they do not

endorse democratic principles. I think Blake is right to insist that we need not accommodate all existing values; but I argue that he is wrong to draw the line at liberal democracy. Unlike him, I doubt that democracy is the only form of shared political life that adequately respects individual agency.

Blake emphasizes that “the use of political power . . . will *always* involve the use of force against those who do not agree with the ethical foundations based upon which such force is justified” (p. 31), and he references theocrats and fascists as examples. I agree that theocrats and fascists are not owed a justification for state coercion that they can accept, because the right to institutional justification itself has a moral basis: it derives from a more fundamental claim to individual autonomy. This claim to autonomy, however, is bounded by a duty to respect others’ equivalent claims. To those who are unwilling to recognize the autonomy of others we simply say: your dissent must be discounted, because greater recognition for your values is not compatible with upholding the claims of other people. We need not accommodate disagreement with the moral basis of the justification requirement itself.

Yet the fact that we need not accommodate all political values does not suggest that the justification of state coercion is purely hypothetical. As long as people *are* willing to recognize the autonomy-claims of others, we *do* owe them a justification they can accept. This justification should engage with their actual moral perspectives, that is, the evaluative commitments they in fact have. The subjects of state coercion are free *agents*, not just passive beneficiaries. Their capacity for making their own political judgments places demands on us, and we owe them respect for that capacity.

The key question is: When do people’s political priorities demonstrate sufficient regard for autonomy that they should “count” as a party to whom an acceptable justification for state coercion is owed? Blake asserts: only when these priorities endorse *liberal democracy*. But what justifies this assertion? Many thinkers have argued for autonomy without endorsing democracy. Locke argued that a sovereign people could authorize an oligarchy or even a monarchy.<sup>6</sup> Kant did not accept that all citizens should have democratic voting rights, and he too was willing to license constitutional monarchy.<sup>7</sup> And while Mill held that representative democracy was the best regime, he thought it unsuitable for all times and places.<sup>8</sup> Though these thinkers have impeccable credentials as theorists of autonomy, none of them found it obvious that *only* democracies could respect individual autonomy.

Of course, perhaps these philosophers were wrong, and respect for autonomy—on the best account of that value—*does* require democracy. Yet Blake cannot appeal to the objectively correct account of justice as the criterion for international toleration. For he allows that Sweden ought to tolerate the United States' mistaken conception of justice because of the importance for U.S. citizens of working out together how the requirements of autonomy should be interpreted. If the bounds of international toleration are determined by the *substantively best* account of what justice requires, then Sweden could rightfully coerce us all to live by its view (assuming *arguendo* that this view is correct). So the boundaries of international toleration must be drawn somewhere else.

In my view, the proper criterion for toleration is not that a country is pursuing the best interpretation of what justice requires, but rather that *the best interpretation of what a country is pursuing* is an ideal of justice that incorporates sufficient respect for its individual members. Societies deserve toleration when their members attempt to respect one another's autonomy, *as they interpret the demands of that value*. When other people attempt, in good faith, to respect the autonomy-claims that, by their lights, I have—even when their interpretation of my claims is mistaken—I respond to them very differently than I do to people who fail to acknowledge that I have any claims at all. Though I may reject a given society's conception of justice, I can recognize its political project as one that acknowledges that each person has a claim to lead a life of her own. Call the requisite attitude one of “reasonable reciprocity.”

Does reasonable reciprocity require liberal democracy? I doubt it.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I believe it requires that each individual be treated as someone whose interests are given moral weight, and whose autonomous moral judgments are heard and attended to. But these two requirements, in my view, are compatible with a range of political forms, not just liberal democracy.

Some scheme of basic rights protection is necessary to ensure that each individual can lead her own life. Guarantees for personal security, subsistence, and liberty are essential to ensuring that people are sufficiently defended against the domination of others. These guarantees also secure the background conditions for free political cooperation. It is possible to freely cooperate with others only under conditions where one is reasonably *invulnerable* with respect to one's most essential needs and interests. Where citizens' joint activity is carried on merely out of fear or a sense of vulnerability, it carries no moral significance.



In addition, some mechanism for *political voice* is necessary to ensure that each individual's capacity for moral judgment is given expression in society. Though the group's commitments need not reflect each member's personal priorities, in order to appropriately see oneself as a "co-author," each member must at least have the opportunity to contribute her own views to the collective process. Guarantees of freedom of conscience, free speech, and free association are minimally necessary means for voice. However, voice can be operationalized in different ways; democratic elections are not the only method. It is possible for a group to decide—through a cooperative process of shared reasoning—to organize their internal decision-making along nonmajoritarian lines. My book club does not choose its reading selections by majority rule; instead, we freely defer to our literature expert. In a small-scale setting, everyone might similarly agree that the village elder is wise, virtuous, and shares the community priorities, and follow her judgments day-to-day. Similarly, many constitutional monarchies may be widely endorsed by their citizenries. As long as basic rights are protected, dissent can be freely expressed, and the regime has broad social support, I see no reason why such nondemocratic decisions are more objectionably imposed upon the minority than the decisions of a democratic majority would be.

So while reasonable reciprocity requires basic rights, on my view, it does not require full democracy. One can imagine a range of liberties that enable citizens to engage in and affirm their political project, beginning with freedoms of speech, thought, and association, and extending all the way to Western-style electoral democracy. The right to vote, to form parties, and to run for office is one way of guaranteeing voice (particularly appropriate, perhaps, in advanced industrial societies). But it is also possible for citizens to freely participate in a shared political venture even where their state's institutions are not fully democratic, so long as they can form and freely express dissenting views.

While we should *persuade* foreigners to democratize, unlike Blake I believe we have no right to forcibly impose a democratic political order on them, so long as their current arrangements manifest reasonable reciprocity. To do that would show insufficient respect for their autonomy as political agents who ought to be allowed to order their collective life in accordance with their own shared priorities.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Blake, *Justice and Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

- <sup>2</sup> I note that while Blake focuses on coercive intervention, this is a broader category than military intervention, including also economic sanctions (p. 52).
- <sup>3</sup> Rawls also suggests that liberal states should tolerate some illiberal regimes, specifically *decent consultation hierarchies*. See Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 62–78.
- <sup>4</sup> At certain points in the text—particularly ch. 3—Blake places less stress on autonomy, and speaks simply of “equal treatment” (p. 63). However, grounding equality in respect *for autonomy* is of fundamental importance for Blake’s view.
- <sup>5</sup> For powerful accounts, see Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (Bison Books, 2013); Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- <sup>6</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise* (London: Awnsham Churchill, 1689), ch. 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, §46 (6:314–16); “Perpetual Peace,” (8:352–53).
- <sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, West Strand, 1861), ch. 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Joshua Cohen offers a similar argument in “Is There a Human Right to Democracy?,” in *The Arc of the Moral Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 357–58.