A Foreign Policy for the Left, Michael Walzer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 216 pp., $30 cloth.

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"If we force ourselves to look," Michael Walzer writes, "the [international] picture is grim: extraordinary wealth and terrible poverty, the powerful few and the powerless many, tyrants and warlords and their desperate victims, transnational corporations and oppressed workers, those who live in mansions and those who live in squalor, diners on haute cuisine and scavengers for garbage. These polarities are frightening and, from a left perspective, obscene" (p. 100). This is the political reality that confronts us globally according to Walzer's new book, which brings together essays from the past sixteen years—most of them first published in *Dissent* and updated in light of recent events—to offer ethical guidance.

So how is the left to respond? First, who or what is "the left"? Though Walzer describes himself and his "*Dissent*nik" colleagues narrowly as democratic socialists, he broadly embraces any and all who consider themselves leftists—or at least anyone doing so in good faith. Walzer is adamant that genuine leftists need to call out fraudulent cases, such as a Castro or a Chavez, rather than rally to them uncritically (p. 32).

In pursuing international justice, true leftists need to follow a path between doing too little and trying to do too much. The left's default position, according to Walzer, is to focus almost exclusively on relations between citizens within the state: "the only good foreign policy is a good domestic policy" (p. 3). One rationale for this is the idea that a just state could be a "light unto the nations." But in contemporary America (and, to a certain extent, Europe) it is closely allied to a cluster of dubious positions: the wholesale rejection of force internationally; support for international institutions even (or perhaps especially) at the expense of necessary unilateral action; and an anti-American bias that blames the United States for "everything that goes wrong in the world" and insists that it should "refrain from doing anything at all" (pp. 2–3). However worthy their motives, this last commitment puts leftists in the morally dubious position of having significant overlap between their position and that of the America First movement of Charles Lindbergh, lately recalled in the rhetoric of the Trump administration.

On the other side, more assertive leftists sometimes slide down the slope into utopianism and even outright aggressive adventurism. The path narrows to a knife edge as human rights—"which is, and probably should be, the favorite language of the left" (p. 70)—tempt people into unrealistically demanding and culturally insensitive normative ambitions.

Tasked with such difficult judgments, leftists are prone to resorting to critical shortcuts. Instead of blindly accepting these shortcuts, argues Walzer, they ought to embrace the intellectual demands of "the politics of distinction" (p. 18), which often requires fighting and arguing on two fronts. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, leftists ought to have opposed the Algerian National Liberation Front's means even while they rightly supported their ends. And then they ought to have denounced

the Vietcong as a whole even as they rightly opposed the U.S. war in Vietnam. Consistency plays out in other ways too: If you are going to challenge real (or apparent) lapses into neo-imperialism by the United States, then you should also be prepared to challenge Vladimir Putin's actions in Georgia and Ukraine. And if you are happy to endorse the use of force by rebels against domestic tyrants, then do not write off altogether the possibility that force might also be used in justifiable ways by states. Not all rebels are terrorists; not all intervening states are imperialists.

Walzer's aims are generally exhortative rather than philosophical, concentrating on the practical problems of putting good intentions and high values into some effect. But his normative vision is not tempered by pragmatism alone. It reflects deeper philosophical tensions with globalist cosmopolitanism and its impatience with borders and cultural pluralism.

Theories of a singular, universal justice are plagued by well-known difficulties. There is of course no world government or single global agent capable of enacting social justice, and Walzer shares something of Kant's misgivings about the "soulless despotism" that might result from attempts to create one (p. 116). Further, even those who agree that justice is globally singular differ on its substance. And there is no "universal common life" to ensure that the same theory is understood in the same terms everywhere (p. 99). But, as Walzer points out, even while the highest ideals are envisaged differently, universal agreement on the worst evils *is* possible. The left should therefore recognize the virtue in necessity and embrace the idea of a world in which the state is plural but universal, reflecting multiple positive visions of justice, while upholding a common view of profound injustice.

This approach, which Walzer terms a "little theory" of justice, grounds a two-stage program. First, a humanitarian project demands that all citizens—not just those on the left—help those faced with catastrophe, whether arising from natural disaster, neglect, or violence. This, as John Rawls said, is a natural human duty. Here, Walzer renews his longstanding assertion of unilateralism. While he allows that at the individual level participating in humanitarian missions may not be obligatory, he questions the idea that intervention is an imperfect duty for states. If there is an opportunity for a particular state to act, then it must do so: the opportunity determines the duty-bearer.

Second, the left's political project then attends to the anthropogenic causes of injustice in particular. This is framed as part of a wider attempt to remedy the injustices in which global elites are morally implicated, and its most recognizably leftist position is in challenging "the neo-liberal version of a global economy" with its commitment to "the laissez-faire trinity: the free movement of capital, commodities, and labor" (p. 107).

On the question of Syria, Walzer remains wedded to his Millian account of civil war and intervention from his 1977 book *Just and Unjust Wars*. "It is best," he writes, "if the local balance of power determines the war's outcome. Self-determination of that sort may be brutal, but it is most likely to produce results that reflect the local culture and the commitments, active or passive, of most of the people" (p. 72). This view, however, underplays the extent to which the tools and techniques of military violence are likely to distort self-determination: military balances will not always directly reflect political balances, but can shape political outcomes. It may also underplay the extent

to which civil war can redefine political balances by enabling new or marginal players like al-Qaeda and ISIS to gain a following.

Walzer's repeated references to an International Brigade—something he thinks could have played a positive part in Syria at one point (p. 72)—raises another question: Would not the appearance of foreign fighters in significant enough numbers to be of real help to democratic rebels in Syria violate Millian principles in the same way a state-led intervention would? Given these principles, why might contributions from such a brigade to a civil conflict such as Syria's appear more attractive than a state intervention? Perhaps the answer is that it is easier to imagine foreign volunteers being incorporated within local militias and subjected to their military and—crucially—political leadership. If this is the case, then the real issue might be figuring out how the political leadership of local actors can be coordinated with agents from the outside (states or otherwise) who offer assistance. That way, the voice and agency of the people most deeply involved in civil conflicts will retain primacy, avoiding the domination that Walzer fears comes with state-led interventions (pp. 112–13).

The attainable ideal to which Walzer thinks the left ought to aspire is one in which everyone eventually has the benefit of living under the protection of a state. As he has long argued, states at their best protect individual rights in the here and now, and they provide plural arenas within which different peoples can work out diverse comprehensive notions of justice. Were such a possibility fully realized, it could help address a range of other injustices. On such a basis, regional alliances and bonds could be developed that would increase integration but would stop short of the globalist cosmopolitan disregard for borders and the attendant loss of democratic restraint on capitalism.

Walzer's statist perspective, particularly with regard to questions of migration and of religion, will not please everyone. Some may feel that pushing back against the far right's exploitation of anti-immigration and anti-Islamic sentiment requires more urgent attention, whereas Walzer is more concerned with pushing back against leftists who are deaf to the concerns of receiving populations or who are too hesitant about highlighting the relationship between religious belief and terrorism. Whatever perspective one might identify with more strongly, Walzer's ideas on these and the other issues addressed in this volume are, as always, deeply thoughtful and powerfully thought-provoking. The current political moment is an opportune time to reengage with Walzer's blend of idealism and political pragmatism and his enduring commitment to both individual rights and political and cultural diversity.

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