

Readers respond to comment by Barry Grey on Michael Ignatieff's defense of Kosovo War

30 November 1999

The WSWWS received the following letters in response to our November 27 comment "Michael Ignatieff in the New York Times—Liberal historian defends the Balkan War against Kosovo "revisionists:" Sophistry in the service of imperialism."

I was waiting for someone to attack this article by Ignatieff and the wsws.org didn't let me down. Ignatieff's article was shocking and really, basically, insane. He used the word "revisionist" fourteen times in a short piece as if the sheer repetition would create some validity and significance. Revisionism implies that there is some true, correct interpretation that is being changed to untrue and false—that NATO has the true story and any change to that is a change to falseness—the Media and NATO version become fact and any challenge to that becomes a lie.

This is where we are, but for so many "liberals," "left-wingers" to embrace this is alarming in a most hideous way. When I say Ignatieff's article is insane, I am not using the word insane in a pejorative, insulting manner but rather more of a clinical description—a case where the human mind can so twist, distort, deny reality one would have to say is the quality of a profoundly disturbed mind (i.e., psychosis). Is it not so? It could be a sign of senility as in the recent pronouncements of Galbraith on Johnson but I believe it is the common faculty of the human mind to rearrange reality to suit its perceive goals—in the past we called this psychological rationalization.

The human mind is capable of any lie, distortion to justify its position with no limit to cruelty and barbarity. Ignatieff probably wants to sell books, make a space for himself in the establishment media and justify his descent into maniacal conservative ideology of hatred and destruction (I don't think these words are too strong). Most "liberals" or "radicals" of the past are lost in the sea of mental illness (could be from

alcoholism, Prozac or the cruelty of life in modern society or perhaps just a failure to seek and find something true and real in this life rather than "buying" into a life of mindless materialism, egotism and a self-satisfying insanity).

Then some on the Right have opposed the Serbian war but for the wrong reasons—they want to make the world safe for laissez-faire capitalism or "Libertarianism," such as found at antiwar.com—they care nothing about death, destruction and fear but only their own "freedom," nationalistic and personal. To come to the conclusion found on antiwar.com that Buchanan is a saint and antiwar comes from the same source of madness that Ignatieff draws upon.

These problems are mental and psychological, not political and moral, but apparently that analysis is not interesting to anyone, or is perhaps too unusual or too unconventional or too impolite or something that I know nothing about. What is the mind that looks at a smoldering, dismembered corpse of a fleeing refugee and says "we had to do it for 'democracy'" or "we shouldn't have done it for 'freedom'"? Well, I'm glad you didn't let Ignatieff get by unchallenged.

Thanks for the article.

LR

Dear Sir or Madam:

I have found the commentaries posted to your News & Analysis/Europe/The Balkans web page to be the best source of analysis on Kosovo available in the news media. The WSWWS commentaries have influenced my own analysis of the issue, as you can perhaps see from my Letter Of The Day published in the *Toronto Star* earlier this week, available at <http://www.geocities.com/wallstreet/8691/counts.html>.

The comment by Barry Grey on the November 21 *New York Times* op-ed by Michael Ignatieff maintains the high standard established in previous commentaries

on your News & Analysis/Europe/The Balkans web page.

My comment on Grey's "Sophistry in the service of imperialism" is not a criticism of the author but a suggestion about a slightly different angle from which to view Ignatieff's sophistry. The angle relates to Ignatieff's use of the term "we."

In "A trial by fire of everything we believe," an influential piece of rhetoric he penned during the war, Ignatieff concluded: "Kosovo is more than a test of military resolve. It has become a trial by fire of everything we believe. We talk about human rights. What are we prepared to do to defend them? We talk about a right of humanitarian intervention. Is this nothing more than words? We talk about "one world." Do we suppose that there is such a thing when an entire nation is deported before our eyes and we do not stop it? We have reached one of those occasions when we cannot split the difference. We are in the middle of the dark wood and we must keep on walking to the end of the road" (*National Post*, May 29, 1999, <http://www.nationalpost.com/news.asp?s2=worldf=990529/2655182.html>).

"We" is used 11 times in one paragraph! Yet it is never defined. The same usage of the undefined "we" characterizes the Ignatieff op-ed critiqued by Grey. Ignatieff accuses "revisionists" of implying "we should have waited until oppression turned into mass murder." He denies that "we were lied to" by NATO leaders and he claims that the "true lesson of Kosovo might be that we should have intervened in the summer of 1998..."

In an as-yet unpublished letter to the *New York Times*, I observed that this undefined "we" apparently "possesses the penetrating vision, moral rectitude and right of intervention hitherto reserved to caped superheroes in children's comic books."

If pressed, Ignatieff would surely define "we" as the "international community." For the purposes of pro-war liberal rhetoric, the "international community" is a good, slippery term, as I have analyzed in a joint column with Osvaldo Croci on "Who is represented by NATO?" available at: <http://www.geocities.com/WallStreet/8691/nato.html>

But "we" is an even more slippery term, perfectly suited to the sophistry so ably dissected by Grey.

Sincerely,

BKM

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