

Keynote Address

A WAR FOR AFGHAN WOMEN?

by Christine Delphy

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It would appear today that since Kabul was captured, the Coalition against terrorism has waged war against Afghanistan in order to liberate Afghan women. But if one casts one's mind back over the sequence of events this is the fourth declared objective, and the third change, since the beginning of the war. The war was declared by Bush on 11 September 2001, on no-one in particular and on everyone in general. Even though this corresponded to what was really happening, it constituted too great a development for the press and the public to be able to be maintained. The very next day, a specific enemy was chosen: it was Bin Laden, whom the US enjoined the Taliban to hand over. To them, to the Americans. Faced with the Taliban's response — standard in cases of extradition — who asked for evidence of Bin Laden's guilt, the US repeated its ultimatum. Two weeks later it rejected a new offer by the Taliban to hand Bin Laden over to a neutral country, calling this offer 'negotiations', and God forbid that the US negotiate.¹

'Smiles from Kabul'

Then Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defence, declares that Bin Laden will perhaps never be found; second change and third objective: from now on, the enemy is the Taliban regime. There is no lack of arguments against this regime. I would go even further: there has been no lack of arguments for the last six years, and for the last six years they have not been enough to justify a war. But all of a sudden, they are enough. Not on their own of course: on top of being odious, the Taliban have given shelter to Bin Laden, suspected of being responsible for the September 11 attacks. After a month of bombing, the Alliance troops enter Kabul, the West cries 'Victory' and feels it has accomplished a very good thing at little expense. The newspapers publish photos of women's smiles — no, sorry, of one woman's smile — and the war finds its fourth reason: women's liberation.

But it is not the right reason, because the people that the Allies have brought to power are no better than the Taliban. The truth about the Northern Alliance can no longer be hidden. Given the number of reporters on the ground, the distrust of the citizens of Kabul and Jalalabad with regard to the Alliance can no longer be hidden.² It is a distrust that comes from experience: between 1992 and 1996, the Northern Alliance troops (or 'United Front') perpetrated massacres and gratuitous killings of prisoners and of the wounded, terrorised civilians and held them to ransom. Neither the massacres nor the gratuitous killings of prisoners and of the wounded can now be hidden. It can no longer be hidden that what is happening today is almost exactly the same as what happened between 1992 and 1996, in an Afghanistan newly carved up into fiefdoms where warlords are forever on the brink of the multiple civil wars which ravaged the country between the departure of the Soviets and the arrival of the Taliban.³

¹ On 22 September, the Taliban offered to hand over Bin Laden if the US could provide evidence against him, which the US refused to do. But on 1st October, Mollah Omar offered to extradite Bin Laden to Pakistan, where he would be kept under house arrest in Peshawar before appearing before an international tribunal, and this time, without asking for evidence. The US contemptuously rejected this offer, reiterating what Ari Fleischer, spokesperson for the White House, had several times repeated: 'there will be neither discussions nor negotiations with the Taliban'. If there was no other solution apart from war, it is because the US did not want there to be: it blocked the way in advance and refused the alternative path of diplomacy, even when their enemies asked for it. (see the WLUMML website)

² Patrice Claude, « Le pouvoir désordonné des Moudjahidins s'installe sur Jalalabad en proie à toutes les terreurs », *Le Monde*, 25-26 novembre 2001.

³ At the end of January, for example, Sharzai was fighting Khan over the town of Herat (*Globe and Mail*, 22 January 2002).

Taliban and Mujahidin: two of one and a pair of the other

It is not the right reason because the US is no friend of Afghan women. Women's rights have never been a US preoccupation, and no more in Afghanistan than in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia or elsewhere — one could even say that it is the exact opposite, that the US has knowingly and deliberately sacrificed Afghan women to its own interests.

How far do the Mujahidin — whose current regrouping is called the Northern Alliance — go back? Even before the Soviet Army invaded the country in 1979 to replace one marxist president (Hafizullah Amin) with another (Babrak Karmal), the tribal lords and religious authorities had declared holy war against the marxist leadership of Nur Mohammed Taraki.⁴ So even before fighting the foreign invasion, in 1978 the Khans and the Mollahs had taken up arms against a government that forced girls to go to school, that prohibited the levirate and the sale of women. For that was what shocked, scandalised and disgusted them. Women's rights were worth a war for them, were worth a fight —*against* them. The fighters became Mujahidin: God's soldiers against impious marxism, the ensuing Soviet invasion giving a patriotic dimension to that combat. The US helped the Mujahidin, for its enemies' enemies were its friends. What did it matter what they did or wanted? The US knew what the Mujahidin wanted: to put women in their place. But they thwarted Moscow's plans, and that's what counted for the US. It was also, alas, what counted for our romantic French pioneers, the 'French doctors': anti-Soviet was for them a synonym of 'for freedom'. Whose freedom? They did not ask themselves that question: they found the berets becoming and the adventure exciting. Doing good in magnificent countryside, all the while contributing to the fight against totalitarianism, what more could a young western man of our times ask? As for women's rights: well, it's their custom, and custom is sacred, especially when one does not suffer from it personally.

Media whitewashing of the Western Coalition's mercenaries

In 1988 the Soviet army left. The only remaining enemy for the Mujahidin was Najibullah's government. The Mujahidin fight everyone in the name of Islam, for an Islamic state and the application of the Sharia, hence their name. In Pashtun, Urdu (and all the other local languages), they are called 'Jihadi', which is clearly derived from 'Jihad'. They have never hidden the fact that they are fundamentalists. Since the war against the Soviets, however, the French have pretended that the name means 'freedom fighters'. We have been plagued by even more TV disinformation since the 'events'. In September, 2001, the hagiographic film 'Massoud l'Afghan' was broadcast⁵, along with a documentary made by unnamed Afghan women who had filmed, with a hidden camera, executions carried out by the Taliban in the Kabul stadium. After the capture of Kabul, some information on the conduct of the 'allied' troops started to filter through. The French media clearly indulged in self-censorship, and blocked any objective and balanced information from reaching the French public. The media had no lack of information, for even if their knowledge of the region is extremely poor — no French newspaper has a permanent correspondent in Pakistan — foreign press agencies, press, television and websites are at their disposal. They deliberately kept the public in the dark, and refused the articles that we sent them containing this information. We had to wait until

⁴ Ahmed Rashid. 2001. *Taliban*. London: Pan, pp. 12-13.

⁵ This film, by Christophe de Ponfilly's, irresponsibly idealises its subject, unless it was made as a deliberate work of disinformation.

23 January 2002 for the film on the executions in the Kabul stadium to be rebroadcast in full (on ARTE), in *'Sorties de ténèbres?'* ('Out of the Shadows?') by Saira Shah, to learn that the filmmakers belonged to the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), for another documentary, 'Women of Kabul' by Antonia Rados, also made thanks to RAWA, to show the reality of women's lives following their supposed 'liberation', and finally to allow Afghan women to explain what the journalists had hidden for four months: that the repression of women had started with the Mujahidin, and not with the Taliban. Recently, the television magazine *Télérama* broke with the 'politically correct' to the point of interviewing an Afghan musician who said: 'When the Communists came to power in 1979, opportunities for concerts increased significantly and it even happened that I went to do demonstrations for music classes in girls' schools.... The difficulties commenced when the Mujahidin arrived in 1992'.⁶ This withholding of information could appear anodine: it is, however, one of the major mechanisms of the conditioning of public opinion. On one hand, Western powers could not admit that they had attached themselves to such dubious allies on the ground; because the Mujahidin were the allies of the Western Coalition, 'we have so idolised these gunmen... that we are now immune to their history'.⁷ On the other hand, in order to justify the war in the eyes of public opinion, it was necessary to promise that its aim was to 'improve' the fate of Afghans, and not just to avenge the US or consolidate Western power. Public opinion, however, would not have believed in the promise of improvement had it known the truth about the Northern Alliance. It was necessary to oppose — through action (the barefaced lies told by the usual propagandists such as Bernard-Henri Lévy), but especially through omission — the 'bad' Taliban and the 'good' Mujahidin, at least as long as the latter hadn't won.

Why the Taliban came to power in 1996

The media thus 'drew a veil over the glorious (and well-known) past' of the Mujahidin: from the time of the Soviets' departure in 1989, the commonalities among them no longer sufficed to silence their rivalries. The cupidity and the hunger for power of all these warlords pushed them to fight incessantly among themselves, within alliances that were hardly formed before they were overthrown. At the end of four years, in 1992, they took Kabul and overthrew Najibullah, the last marxist prime minister; but this did not stop the civil war, and especially not the war against civilians. The Northern Alliance soldiers looted houses and raped women. Local chiefs demanded ransoms from lorries every 50 kilometres, transport became impossible, and corruption and disorder prevented application of the Sharia.

Certain Mujahidin, and especially the youngest, who took islamic ideas seriously, left in disgust to study in Pakistan. They were the students: the Taliban, the spiritual and sometimes physical sons of the Mujahidin. They were as anticommunist as their fathers but more disciplined, more earnest, and yet more fundamentalist: in short, good candidates for aid from the US, which handed out dollars to Pakistani madrasas (Koranic schools) via Saudi Arabia. And within a year, formidably armed Taliban had conquered a great part of the country and entered Kabul. When the Mujahidin beat a retreat in 1996, they left 50,000 dead in Kabul alone and the city was in ruins. Four years of inter-factional war had accomplished what six years of anti-Soviet war had not succeeded in doing.

⁶ Rahim Khushnawas, *Télérama* 2714, 16 January 2002, p. 50.

⁷ 'The Northern Alliance is advancing, meanwhile, with all its baggage of massacres and looting and rape intact. We have so idolised these gunmen, been so infatuated with them, supported them so unquestioningly, pictured them on television so deferentially that we are now immune to their history', (Robert Fisk, « What will the Northern Alliance do in our name now ? », *The Independent*, 14 November 2001).

And women in amongst all that?

So, has the US always fought for women's rights? No. Has it ever fought for women's rights? No. Has it, on the contrary, squarely trampled on women's rights? Yes. For women's rights were promoted and defended in Afghanistan between 1978 and 1992, but by marxist or pro-Soviet governments. It is from this period, that of Amin, Karmak, Taraki and Najibullah, that astonishing statistics can be drawn concerning the large number of women doctors, teachers, lawyers. But that was bad luck for Afghan women: for since they were being defended by governments allied to an enemy of the US, it was necessary to sacrifice them. One cannot allow people's rights, especially when those people are only women, to interfere with the pursuit of world hegemony. Women's rights are like Iraqi children: their death is the price of US power, and Americans pay that price all the more easily because in the end, they are not the ones paying it.

The fathers of the Taliban, the Mujahidin, this time armed by the Russians that they had chased out twelve years previously, returned under the shadow of American bombs; they had hardly changed, if one is to judge by their way of waging war: 'the Northern Alliance is advancing with its baggage of murders, rapes and lootings'.⁸ Why would they change with regard to women, why would they become feminist, these men who before fighting the Soviets, then amongst themselves, fought against women's rights? Like feminists the world over, who have waged an international campaign for more than two years against the fate of Afghan women at the hands of the Taliban, I hope that the government that is being put in place in Afghanistan will guarantee women's human rights, and that it will make sure at least some of these rights are respected.

Better status for women could be one of the unexpected results of a war: a collateral gain of sorts. One can hope. But without dreaming. The Tajik party led by Rabbani, who was president of the legal government and recognised by the international community until the Bonn accords, instituted the Sharia in Kabul in 1992. This is the party of Massoud, who was its military commander; its troops gave themselves over to an orgy of rapes and murders when it occupied the Hazara area of Kabul during the struggles between it and other factions in 1995.

But in February 2002, the American war is not over, the Northern Alliance is coming undone as the warlords that make it up reconquer the fiefdoms that they had lost. Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami, which was the first to enter Kabul, is, with every passing day, increasing its power on the ground. Supported by the Russians, who are once again in Kabul, the Jamiat-i-Islami has scooped up the majority of portfolios in the provisional government, in spite of the US. While the US has succeeded in having Karzai, a Pathan, rather than Rabbani, Russia's man, placed at the head of the provisional government, Karzai wields no real power.⁹ Two women are part of the provisional government, two exiles, one from the Hezb-i-Wahdat party and the other from the Parchami party, both of which – like the other components of the Northern Alliance – are contested by RAWA. RAWA activists have been working clandestinely for years with Afghan women refugees in Pakistan; in particular, they have provided schooling for the girls. They have also returned to Afghanistan, at risk to their lives, to make films on the state of the country under the Taliban. In the face of death threats from all

⁸ Robert Fisk, « What will the Northern Alliance do in our name now? I dread to think... » *The Independent*, 14.11.01

⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Military Assistance to the Afghan Opposition*, October 2000.

fundamentalists, they denounce both the Mujahidin and the Taliban; they have also protested energetically against the US bombings of their country.¹⁰

The Jamiat-i-Islami, in response to urging by the international organisations that all the factions in Afghanistan still need, has made some concessions concerning women. Here is an indication of that. One week after the fall of Kabul, a spokesperson for Rabbani declared on BBC World: ‘The Taliban’s “restrictions” will be lifted [no details were provided], and the burqa will no longer be compulsory; the hijab will suffice’. The hijab will suffice: now there’s something to dream about.¹¹

But if it had been more, would this have justified a war? And if the defence of women’s rights had been the real reason behind the US bombings, would that have justified these bombings?

A tale (with a moral) and a question: does one have the right to bomb people for their own good?

Once upon a time there was a country where women still did not have the right to vote, despite thirty years of feminist struggle, years and decades after they obtained it in neighbouring European nations. How did these other nations treat this country? Did they declare war on it? Did they impose an embargo? Did they withdraw their confidence and their alliance? On the contrary, they defended this country when it was attacked; and following victory, in 1945, they gave financial assistance to its reconstruction, and asked it to go back to the drawing board and give women the vote, which it did.

The right to vote is fundamental. And yet, am I sorry that the USA, Great Britain and the USSR did not bomb France between 1918 and 1939? No. For however precious this right is, if it had had to be won at the cost of a war, I wonder whether its value would ever have equalled its cost. And I am all the less sorry because this example proves that there are peaceful and efficient means of putting pressure on States.

In the end, where women’s rights – that is, human rights – are concerned, the question to be asked with regard to a war is always the same one: what evils are worse than war for a population? At what point does a war become preferable? To say that war is beneficial for Afghan women is to decide that it is better for them to die from bombs, from hunger, from cold, than to live under the Taliban. Death rather than servitude: that is what Western public opinion has decided for Afghan women. A decision that was almost heroic. What would have been needed for it to be so? Well, Rumsfeld, for example, would have needed to say ‘I prefer to die rather than see Afghan women in the Taliban’s clutches for a minute longer’;

¹⁰ Contrary to this, Negar, an association of “Support for Afghan Women” based in France, is supportive of both the Northern Alliance and the US bombings. According to this association, a “Charter of the Fundamental Rights of Afghan Women” was supposedly signed by Massoud as well as, more recently, by Karzai. (cicg.free.fr: “Afghanistan: droits des femmes”, interview with Shoukria Haidar by Christine Delphy). This association attributes the horror of the situation of Afghan women only to the Taliban, and never mentions the Mujahidin (*Lesbia* 208, December 2001, p. 33). A possible explanation of this partisanship – which is, in the case of Negar, pro-Northern Alliance – resides in the fact that, according to Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghadam, technical advisor to the UN Commission on women and children refugees and specialist on the region, “women’s organisations are formed from the Pathan, Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups” (Sharon Groves, “Report from Afghanistan”, *Feminist Studies* 27:3, Fall 2001).

¹¹ In Afghanistan, ‘hijab’ means ‘Iranian chador’, that is, a cloak covering the entire body and head, including the face, and not just a headscarf.

Westerners would have needed to put their own lives at stake and not those of Afghan women.

A decision that would be heroic in the first case is, in the second, a morally repugnant way of playing with the lives of others. Here, we are dealing with the second case. The irresponsible tokenism of the Western take on 'the liberation of Afghan women' is an illustration of the fact that Western lives are worth more – infinitely more – than other lives, and of the fact of the West, not content with placing an extremely low price on these other lives, considers that it has the right to make use of these lives as it will.

The assumptions behind the tokenism of 'women's liberation', or the missionary paradox

Until recently, one could only deduce from the number of speeches and acts what decision had been made in the place of Afghan women. But some days after I had written the first version of this article, this decision and its colonialist assumptions were explicitly formulated by Peter Schneider: 'Can Franz Xaver Kroetz not conceive of Afghan women [...] seeing American soldiers [*sic*] as liberators rather than as hostage-takers? The idea that freedom can come at a high price, that it can even be worth risking one's own life, seems to be incomprehensible to more than one friend of peace'.¹² Contrary to appearances, the 'own life' of which Schneider speaks is not his. At the very moment when he says that the freedom of Afghan women is worth sacrificing their lives, he denies them this freedom: he is the one making that 'choice' for them. This contradiction is not only Schneider's; it permeates the whole Western attitude towards Afghan women, because it is, more generally, the organising principle of the attitude of the dominant towards the dominated.

I would like to suggest a simple rule for an international ethic which could also hold between individuals: one does not have the right to make decisions, especially heroic ones, when others apart from oneself are to bear the consequences. The only population that can decide that a war is worth the cost is the one that bears this cost. Here, however, those who decided on the war are not themselves subjected to it, and those who are subjected to the war did not make the decision to be.

For the moment, the humanitarian war has not kept its promises. Afghan women are on the roads, in tents, in camps, in their millions. Before the war, four and a half million Afghans lived in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Since the war, yet more have fled the American bombings. Their exact number is unknown, for many go into hiding for fear of being sent back, but it is estimated that 700,000 more have arrived in Pakistan and 300,000 more in Iran. But those most in danger, and the hardest to count, are the 'internally displaced persons', who, simply trying to flee the bombs, have followed the front line within the country and are now in improvised camps, without food and without protection against armed men. To this day, because of the partition of the territory into fiefdoms controlled by the warlords' underfed troops, 'soldiers by day and bandits by night', international aid is not getting to these people. When organisations don't give up on transporting it, it is hijacked by armed groups.

¹² *Le Monde*, 5 February 2002. The use by the press of the term 'liberation' probably evoked for Schneider the image of French women kissing American soldiers when Paris was liberated. But the action is not taking place in France in 1944. In 2001 and in Afghanistan, the American soldiers are not visible. It is the troops of the Northern Alliance, whose reputation is not exactly that of 'liberators', who entered Kabul. Sorry, Mr Schneider, it's not the same film!

Many refugees – especially among the ‘internally displaced’ and the populations of the high plateaux, who have, since September, been deprived of food aid because of the war and who are now isolated by snow – are dead or are going to die.¹³ As in all wars and all famines, these dead will include a disproportionate number of women. And without any guarantee that this ‘sacrifice’ will win them rights. Should we in any case be speaking of sacrifice, when they did not choose it? No. We should be speaking here of bad treatment imposed by others, and even of torture.

But this is temporary, we will be told; with the return of peace, food aid will recommence and the country will be rebuilt. We are still far from this, first because the reconstruction of the country would necessitate peace, and peace has not returned.

The US has used the warlords who had spread ruin in Afghanistan before 1996; 700,000 armed men now roam through a country that is even more ravaged than before. Ethnic divisions, already accentuated by the first civil war (1992-1996), have been further accentuated by the Taliban, who hold anyone who is not Pathan in contempt. Following their defeat, desire for vengeance on the part of the Hazara, the Tajik and the Uzbek has added itself to the traditional rivalry among warlords. On 10 January 2002, RAWA called for an international force ‘to protect the Afghan people against the criminals of the Northern Alliance’.¹⁴ Some days later, Karzai began to denounce reprisals against the Pathan in regions where they are in the minority. He then used the occasion of a visit to New York to request that the UN send an international police force, when he had previously only asked for money.¹⁵

The resumption of the civil war, already on the cards during the fight against the Taliban (for example, during the overthrow of Kunduz), is now being openly declared. Shirzai, the Pathan governor of Kandahar, backed by a force of 20,000 men, is fighting the Tajik Ismail Khan for control of Herat.¹⁶ Fighting has broken out to the north, in the Kunduz region, and to the south-east, in the Khost region. Confrontations have taken place at Mazar-i-Charif between the troops of Dostum (Uzbek) and Atta Mohammed (Tajik), while at Gardez, in the south-east, the governor appointed by Karzai, Pacha Khan Zadran, has been fighting the local chief, Haji Saifullah, resulting in 60 deaths.¹⁷ Even the most protected of the towns, Kabul, is prey to insecurity. A diplomat posted to the city has declared that residents no longer go to certain areas of the city because ‘kalashnikov culture reigns there’.¹⁸

But the US is busy flattening the Bora-Bora mountains, and has on several occasions reiterated its dislike for ‘nation-building’; clearly, the US destroys but does not repair the damage. An international force that might be enough to protect the whole country will thus not see the light of day: there will only be a force of 4,500 stationed around Kabul and only for six months.¹⁹ An estimated 30,000 are needed, but the US neither wishes to immobilise soldiers within Afghanistan nor leave it up to other countries (which would necessarily include Russia) to do it. The Taliban, now ‘ordinary citizens’ (they only need to tie their

¹³ There is no more information on the numbers of these dead than on the numbers of direct victims of the American bombings.

¹⁴ Letter on RAWA website: www.rawa.org

¹⁵ BBC World, 30 January 2002.

¹⁶ *Globe and Mail*, 22 January 2002.

¹⁷ AP and *Time Magazine Newsletter*, 1 February 2002.

¹⁸ *Hindustan Times*, via AFP, 25 January 2002.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 20 January 2002.

turbans a little differently, as an Afghan man showed a Western reporter), will go back to serve the Pathan lords to whom they will bring their taste for war – all they know – and their hatred for the Uzbek and the Tajik.

The West has not brought peace and prosperity: it has destroyed what was left to destroy, it has caused even more people to flee from a country already bled white, it has finished off the job of starving a people already dying from hunger, and it has re-armed tribal leaders who dream only of conquests, emoluments and massacres. Before the war, it was inconceivable that Afghanistan could fall into an even worse state than it was in already: but it is possible, we have done it.

The new ‘duty to intervene’ and the old ‘white man’s burden’

The smallest modicum of decency would have necessitated that the Allies cease to proclaim that it is for their own good that Afghan women (and men) are being made to suffer, and above all that they abstain from claiming that it is in the name of the Afghans’ freedom that their right to choose their fate, and even the right to life, is being taken away from them. But it is the contrary that is happening: indeed, one may well fear that this little ditty will become a smash hit; the Coalition of Allies against evil already has a long list of countries to which it has promised to bring good through the sword.²⁰ And of course, any resemblance with past historical events (so far past that even to refer to them seems old hat), any resemblance, that is, with colonial wars is pure coincidence.

War waged in the interests of control and exploitation will never progress human rights. For, apart from the men and women of Afghanistan, this war in the name of civilisation has in two months sent a sizeable parcel of that civilisation into oblivion. The Geneva Conventions have been declared invalid by the Allies, who were first accessories to the crimes of the butcher of Mazar-i-Charif (‘General’ Dostum, Vice-Minister for Defence in Karzai’s government) and the others²¹, and are now accessories to the manoeuvres of the Americans, who are inventing new pseudo-legal categories: the ‘illegal fighters’ of Guantanamo, that are covered by no law, either national or international, common or of war!²² Public freedoms, the pride of our democracies, are thus wiped out, and international law is mortally wounded — the great dying body of the UN is there to testify to this.

Only true and peaceful cooperation among nations will progress human rights. But this is not on the agenda. Not only do the real goals of the war have nothing to do with the arguments used to ‘sell’ it to public opinion, but these ‘humanitarian’ or ‘humanist’ arguments are themselves vitiated at the outset. Those of P. Schneider, for example, are typical of those used by Spanish monks towards the Indians of the New World: they postulate that we

²⁰ On 31 January, George Bush reiterated for the fifth time since 11 September his assurance that the US would wage war worldwide, and named new countries: Iran and North Korea, along with Hamas, Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad, three groups resisting Israeli occupation. Two days previously, the first American soldiers arrived in the Philippines. The media and western public opinion had for three months brushed aside these declarations as so much hyperbole. No doubt another country will have to become the target of a bombing campaign (which is no doubt imminent), for Bush’s declarations to be taken for what they are: the announcement of a program, and not mere rhetorical devices.

²¹ Robert Fisk, ‘We are the War Criminals Now’, *The Independent*, London, 29 November 2001; Coalition Internationale Contre la Guerre, cicg.free.fr, 29 November 2001. <http://cicg.free.fr/diraafghna/news11.htm>, <http://amnesty.org>, memorandum to the government 15/04/2002

²² hwr.org, 21 January 2002; *lettre de la cicg*, cicg.free.fr/directu/lettres.htm, 23 January 2002; <http://web.amnesty.org>, 11/01/2002, <http://amnesty.org>, memorandum to the government 15/04/2002

Westerners know what is good for everybody, and we have the right, and perhaps the duty, to suggest it to or impose it on others. These others, who are intellectually and morally inferior to us, do not have the same value as we do: consequently, their lives are also less valuable than ours.

Civilian populations in the alliance countries have no direct interest in imperialist wars. The real motives of their governments do not motivate them: as soon as economic motivations are invoked, the legitimacy of wars immediately diminishes in the eyes of the public. Governments always provide impartial and even noble motives for wars, if not as the only reasons for the wars, at least as an adjuvant or excipient. The Gulf War was perceived by public opinion as a war 'for oil', but also as a war for 'right' – the latter making the former easier to swallow. The Serbian war – the most popular one – is reputed to have prevented genocide. It is possible that public opinion is duplicitous, that it is really in agreement with the self-interested and selfish motives for war. But what is certain is that it is not this that is pushed to the forefront of public opinion: this cynicism is left to governments.

As concerns the Afghan war, French public opinion has accepted an assortment of reasons, including some that are hardly ethical, such as vengeance. But this shameful motivation needs to be 'balanced' by something else. It is impossible to provide as the sole reason for this war the increased torture of one of the poorest and longest-suffering populations in the world; the war needs to carry a promise of good, or at least of something better, for the Afghan people, in order to 'compensate' it, as it were, for its suffering.

Which is why the motive of Afghan women, which appeared late on the scene, is nonetheless crucial, for it gives the conflict its necessary 'altruistic' and 'moral' dimension. But, as we have seen, this motive in fact conceals the denial of free will and even life to the people it targets. To what ethical structure does this 'moral' motive belong, then, and to what extent is it truly 'altruistic'?

The moral motive — in this case, the 'liberation of Afghan women' — calls on values which appear to be progressive; but they only appear to be, for on closer examination, they consist of a more or less conscious belief in the West's 'mission'. We only consider ourselves to have such a mission because we consider ourselves to be the carriers of 'civilisation'. No journalist, politician or intellectual criticised the equating of the West and civilisation by George W. Bush and his epigones following the attack on the World Trade Center — on the contrary, a complete consensus emerged concerning 'attacks on civilisation'. The action of Western powers in the non-Western world relies on the opinion of a public whose vision of the world has hardly changed in depth since the end of colonisation. The belief in Western superiority is intact. This more or less stated racism is today allied with a type of paternalistic compassion; their combination produces a potentially very dangerous ideology for non-Westerners and more generally for all dominated groups, for it provides as much justification for military intervention as for humanitarian action, and sometimes justifies them both at once, as we saw when American public opinion approved both parachuting in of parcels and dropping of bombs. Feed and punish, such is the definition of the role of parents in relation to children. The vocabulary used by George W. Bush is very revealing; whether it is to his allies or his enemies, he speaks the language of a father who is strict but fair, who, in function of the behaviour of his children, distributes gold stars and black marks, punishments and rewards. Equally revealing is the fact that Western opinion does not seem to have been shocked by this condescension, which would appear to indicate that it identifies with the position taken by Bush.

Without attempting for the moment to link these attitudes to the concrete actions of Western governments over the last fifty years, one has to note that the ideological changes heralded by decolonisation, the UN Charter, the right of peoples to self-determination, and all the other international conventions, seem neither to reflect nor to influence commonly-held feelings in the slightest. The words have changed, but it is not difficult to recognise behind this new phrase, 'the right to intervene', the same old white man's burden, still as lethal, for it incorporates the missionary's paradox: 'we will save their souls (their freedom) even if we have to kill them to do it'.