

Review Essay: Transforming R2P from Rhetoric to Reality

Damien Rogers

Abstract.

Adopted in September 2005 by the UN General Assembly as part of the UN World Summit's Outcome Document, the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) principle has gained demonstrable traction during the first decade of the new millennium. It was first used and defined as the title for the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). R2P was also featured in the report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, entitled *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (2004). Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan also embraced R2P in his own report, *In Larger Freedom: Toward Development, Security and Human Rights for All* (2005), and in 2006 the UN Security Council reaffirmed R2P in Resolution 1674.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Rogers, Damien (2010) "Review Essay: Transforming R2P from Rhetoric to Reality," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1: Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol5/iss1/7>

This Document is brought to you for free and open access by the Tampa Library at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Review Essay: Transforming R2P from Rhetoric to Reality

Damien Rogers

Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All*. Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008. Pp. 349, cloth. \$29.95 US.

Alex J. Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Effort to End Mass Atrocities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009. Pp. 249, paper. \$47.90 US.

Richard H. Cooper and Juliette Voïnov Kohler, eds., *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Moral Compact for the 21st Century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. 271, cloth. £42.50.

Adopted in September 2005 by the UN General Assembly as part of the UN World Summit's Outcome Document, the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) principle has gained demonstrable traction during the first decade of the new millennium. It was first used and defined as the title for the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). R2P was also featured in the report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, entitled *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (2004). Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan also embraced R2P in his own report, *In Larger Freedom: Toward Development, Security and Human Rights for All* (2005), and in 2006 the UN Security Council reaffirmed R2P in Resolution 1674.

The international community's widespread recognition of Responsibility to Protect poses serious practical challenges to state makers holding the view that sovereignty is, or at least ought to be, inviolable. At the same time, R2P also poses theoretical and conceptual challenges to those practitioners of disciplinary international relations trying to analyze and make sense of the contemporary world affairs unfolding around them. The source of these challenges lie in three interrelated presumptions underpinning R2P: first, that the state bears primary responsibility for protecting its own population from mass crime and conscience-shocking atrocity; second, that the international community is responsible for assisting states to meet these duties; and third, that UN member states are also responsible for protecting at-risk populations when the host state fails to provide the necessary protection. In addition to recognizing the international community's responsibility to react to atrocity crimes—which include, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity—R2P recognizes the international community's responsibility to help prevent those atrocities from occurring in the first place as well as its responsibility to help rebuild governments, economies, and societies in the aftermath of mass crime. The

logic of R2P therefore represents a radical departure from the highly controversial muscular humanitarian interventions of the 1990s.

This review briefly examines three recent works, each of which responds to the practical, conceptual, and theoretical challenges posed by the emergence of R2P. While the authors of these works rely upon various approaches to deal with their topic, a consensus emerges around the need to complete the transformation of R2P from words into deeds, from concept into norm, from rhetoric into reality.

Gareth Evans' *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All* (2008) provides an insider's account of the emergence of the R2P concept. He is well known internationally for his former role as Australian foreign minister, and for his current post as president and chief executive officer of the International Crisis Group (ICG). Evans played an integral part in developing and articulating the R2P concept, not only as co-chair of the International Convention on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) and as a member of the UN High-Level Panel but also, and more recently, as co-chair of the International Advisory Board for the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, launched in early 2008. Indeed, Evans was so central to the development of this concept that the phrase he coined—the “Responsibility to Protect”—provided the title for the ICISS report, although the catchy acronym “R2P” was someone else's suggestion. Building on his personal involvement, the central purpose of Evans' latest book is to introduce, elaborate, and clarify the R2P concept for his readers, and to rectify some of the prevalent misunderstandings that accompany this concept which misinform much of the relevant discussion occurring within the academy, the media, and government circles. Evans writes that his book “is about understanding the responsibility to protect, how the concept emerged, and what it does and does not embrace . . . [it] is about what is necessary to operationalize the new norm, to make it work effectively in practice” (3). By educating his readership to that end, the book thereby seeks to mobilize a broad range of actors who are present on the international stage and who can help transform R2P from rhetoric into reality, enabling those actors to successfully navigate their way past key obstacles and overcome resistance to R2P's development and entrenchment.

Foregrounding both his own travels through Cambodia in the late 1960s, before Pol Pot's regime unleashed its genocidal nightmare on the Cambodian people, and his efforts to confront the aftermath of that atrocity during the late 1980s and early 1990s as Australian foreign minister, Evans reveals his own personal motivations for advocating R2P. This personal background provides a useful context in which to situate the urgent need for the world's policy makers to respond effectively to atrocity crimes irrespective of the locations in which they occur. While this highly personalized approach may well appeal to, and resonate strongly with, a wide readership—through either their own personal encounters with such atrocities or their reflection on, and repugnance for, conscience-shocking mass crime that occurs within an international culture of impunity—it tends to preclude the book's potential status as an authoritative account of the topic at hand. Put simply, the narrator is too close to the events he depicts. Yet even though Evans has first-hand insights into key personalities involved in developing R2P, such as former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Mohamed Sahnoun, co-chair of the ICISS, the book does not dwell on them. Nor does the book read as the self-congratulatory vehicle I half expected it to be. To be sure, Evans does highlight, with some degree of regularity, his own role in recent and contemporary politico-historical trends and events. But the book is more than

part memoir and, if anything, his self-emphasis might prove useful as the basis for assessing Evan's potential role as a norm entrepreneur.

Writing from a unique and well-informed perspective, Evans organizes his argument into two main parts. Part one contains three chapters, the first of which provides useful legal and political definitions of mass atrocities before offering what is essentially a statement of the problem for which R2P is designed as a remedy. To do this, Evans traces the problem of atrocity crimes from the earliest moments of human history right up to the 1990s, ending with examples drawn from Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo, each of which ought to be familiar to his readership. The second chapter treats the reader to some very good background material covering the emergence of R2P, its first articulation in 2001, its subsequent evolution, as well as pointing out some major obstacles to its full development. The contention surrounding the precise status of R2P as a norm in international affairs, the lack of institutional preparedness, and the lack of political will to fully implement R2P are obstacles that, if left unchecked, could erode the consensus forming around R2P, perhaps foreshadowing the degree to which R2P's transformation from rhetoric to reality is resisted. Particularly useful here is Evans' treatment of humanitarian intervention within the broader, ongoing debate between muscular intervention and respect for the sovereign state's prerogative of non-interference. The final chapter of part one seeks to rectify several key misunderstandings of R2P—foremost of which is a misconception that R2P is another means justifying the coercive use of military force—and to clarify the situations to which R2P does and does not apply. Taken together, the chapters of part one will prove valuable to readers wanting to strengthen a basic appreciation of R2P or looking for a first-hand account of the kinds of thinking which influenced the emergence of this important concept.

Part two contains a total of seven chapters, the first four of which give focus to three major aspects of R2P: namely, the responsibility to prevent atrocity crimes from occurring; the responsibility to react to atrocity crimes when they occur; and the responsibility to rebuild in the aftermath of atrocity crimes. Using two chapters to examine the responsibility to react—one focusing on non-coercive means, the other on the circumstances necessary for the use of military force—demonstrates that the coercive use of force lies at the extreme end of a broad range of policy options available to the international community. Evans analyses each of the major aspects of R2P in terms of policy makers' conceptual toolboxes, which include various political/diplomatic measures, economic/social measures, constitutional/legal measures, and security sector measures. The analysis here is generally wide-ranging but, by corollary, somewhat cursory, though Evans emphasizes "that each situation has its own characteristics and that one-size spanners don't fit all, but that each situation is likely to require a complex combination of measures, with the balance between them bound to change, and to have to change, over time as circumstances evolve" (85).

Building upon the analysis mentioned above, the remaining three chapters of part two examine the extent to which existing organizations can play a role in transforming R2P from rhetoric into reality, what is required to build the diplomatic, military, and civilian capabilities needed to assist this transformation, and how the prerequisite political will might be mustered and sustained. Evans favors a survey approach to these chapters instead of a formal analytic framework, focusing his argument on a range of pragmatic concerns. In his chapter on promoting and mobilizing political will, for instance, Evans writes that it "is not a missing ingredient, waiting in each case to be found if we only had the key to the right cupboard or lifted the right stone. It has to be painfully and laboriously constructed, case by case, con-

text by context” (224). The elements required for constructing sufficient political will—namely, disseminating knowledge of mass atrocity, building compelling arguments, generating a strong desire for action, demonstrating that taking action can make a significant difference, highlighting those processes which can help manage that action, and searching for, or supporting, leadership appropriate to this challenge—are each in turn explored in this final chapter. He continues to express this pragmatic approach to the book’s very end when he remarks, “You don’t get to change the world simply by observing it” (241). The last third of the book, then, is a call to action to operationalize R2P’s concepts and to further strengthen its status as an emerging norm. To that end, Evans’ book includes a couple of additional features that warrant brief mention here: appendices containing apt excerpts of instruments of international law that define genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes; references for a selection of works that will interest the general reader; and various Web site addresses of advocacy groups sufficiently concerned by the R2P issue to take action in some way.

Inspiring as this call to action might be, the book is not without fault. The most immediate deficiencies concern the organization of the argument and its uncritical approach to the topic. Given that part two contains seven of the book’s ten chapters, and that the subject matter of the first four chapters of part two are closely interrelated, the reader would be forgiven for thinking that these four chapters would have been better placed in their own part. This would have almost certainly given the argument greater analytic clarity. More problematic than the book’s structure, however, is Evan’s uncritical approach, which characterizes R2P as part of a problem-solving paradigm. Evans writes, for instance, that for “all its problems, the UN system—with the Security Council at its heart on issues of war and peace and civilian protection—is the only credible international institution we have, or are ever likely to have, with the necessary combination of legitimacy and authority. The task is not to replace or bypass what we have but to make it work better” (180). Passages such as these left me wondering if the argument would have been stronger had it seriously considered systemic reform. However, it is likely such reform would be unattractive to Evans due to its potential to undermine not only his own role in helping implement R2P but also ICG’s future role and status. Evans draws heavily upon ICG reports for evidence to support his general narrative and arguments. However, by the time the reader reaches the end of this book, the heavy reliance on ICG reporting is unimportant since the ICG reports, generally speaking, contain information, analysis, and conclusion of a high standard.

Overall, this is a unique, well-informed, and fairly comprehensive account of the R2P concept. The book demonstrates an excellent understanding of its topic and conveys that to its reader in an easy-to-comprehend manner. Despite the minor issues mentioned above, the reader is provided with solid information about R2P and the history surrounding its evolution, as well as some of the critical strengths and weaknesses of the concept. Given the moral power of his argument and the passionate prose of the text, it will be difficult for the uncritical reader to not share Evan’s “fairly unquenchable sense of optimism; a belief that even the most horrible and intractable problems are soluble; that rational solutions for which there are good, principled arguments will prevail” (7).

Based at the University of Queensland, Australia, Alex J. Bellamy is a professor of Peace and Conflict Studies and has an impressive breadth and depth of expertise in international security matters. His recent book, entitled *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Effort to End Mass Atrocities* (2009), is well researched and well organ-

ized, and presents a compelling argument. Unlike Evans, who draws heavily on his personal experiences as ICISS co-chair and member of the UN High-Level Panel, Bellamy writes from a perspective one step removed from the emergence of R2P at the international level although he acknowledges that he enjoyed close contact with those who were “actively involved in creating, selling, and operationalizing the R2P” (viii). The fact that Bellamy writes from a distance about R2P provides him with the opportunity to critically approach the topic, which he does well. This is not to say that Bellamy is unconcerned with transforming R2P from rhetoric into reality; in addition to this book and scholarly articles on the topic, he is also editor of the new journal *Global Responsibility to Protect* and executive director of the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. Rather, Bellamy’s book does not exhibit the same level of optimism and enthusiasm as Evans’ does. It is, first and foremost, a scholarly contribution to the existing pool of knowledge on what he describes as the “single most important recent development” (2) in the world’s response to atrocity crimes.

Bellamy’s book begins by introducing a useful analytic framework that illustrates how R2P first took shape as a concept before evolving into a principle that can guide collective action. This distinction matters, as “it determines whether the R2P is subordinate to traditional principles of sovereignty and non-intervention or whether—as a principle in its own right—it has the effect of altering the meaning of sovereignty itself” (6). At the same time, but not as part of this continuum, R2P also develops as an emerging norm.

The book is divided into six main chapters, the first of which provides a sophisticated discussion of sovereignty and intervention. Bellamy suggests that sovereignty was never absolute and has never acted as a forceful barrier to intervention, but instead has always included a right to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states and was grounded in, and sustained by, human rights, particularly the right for people to determine their preferred form of government. He dismisses the dichotomy of sovereignty and human rights, which is commonly understood as the rights to non-intervention, territorial integrity, and political independence enjoyed by modern states. The latter, human rights, are described as “the idea that individuals ought to enjoy certain fundamental freedoms by virtue of their humanity” (8), Bellamy demonstrates the “need to move beyond thinking in terms of a struggle between sovereignty and human rights” (14). The opening chapter also surveys the ongoing public policy debate that set the scene for the Canadian government to establish the ICISS, recasting the debate so that “the whole concept of the R2P rests on the idea that sovereignty and human rights are two sides of the same coin, and not opposing principles locked in interminable struggle, as is often portrayed” (33).

The second chapter provides an excellent account of the emergence of R2P as a concept within the work of the ICISS, including insightful passages dealing with the commission’s abandonment of humanitarian intervention rhetoric, its adoption of the victim’s perspective, its broadening of intervention beyond the scope of the coercive use of force, and its emulation of the Brundtland Commission report of 1987, which conceived the notion of sustainable utilization as a way of resolving the tension between the seemingly irreconcilable impulse for commercial exploitation and conservationists’ concern for natural resources. Significantly, Bellamy notes that:

The commission’s adoption of language focusing on the rights of endangered civilians rather than on the rights of potential interveners help to illuminate a broad constituency of states and civil society actors prepared to acknowledge that sovereignty entailed responsibilities and the legitimacy of the international involvement in protecting people from genocide and mass atrocities. (65)

The chapter also introduces and explains the key aspects of the ICISS concept of R2P, and engages the main contemporary responses to that report.

The third chapter focuses at length on the 2005 World Summit, and to the various efforts to generate a consensus on R2P among the international community. Bellamy notes that, at certain times, the R2P concept looked like it might never reach the international security agenda. He also points out that, despite its common name, the principle of R2P adopted by the UN General Assembly differed in some key respects from the concept advanced by the ICISS. For example, “tying non-consensual force under the banner of the R2P *exclusively* with Security Council authorization—rather than *primarily*, as proposed by the ICISS—became a key part of the R2P [principle] and was an essential component of the 2005 consensus” (73; emphasis in original). This difference reasserted the Security Council’s claim to be the only legitimate body authorizing the use of force in international affairs, distanced R2P from the stigma attached to the unlawful US interventions in Kosovo and Iraq (both of which were without Security Council authorization), and probably helped ease some of the concerns surrounding R2P’s potential to justify or disguise neocolonial interference in the developing world. Also provided is an intriguing description of the tactics deployed by US Permanent Representative to the UN John Bolton in an attempt to disrupt and derail the negotiation process leading up to the World Summit—an attempt that was ultimately unsuccessful. As with the previous chapter which focused on the ICISS report, Bellamy considers the major responses to the Outcome Document. Taken together, chapters two and three present a well-researched and thoughtful narrative conveying this very recent history, giving focus to the evolution of R2P from concept to principle and to important dimensions that have changed as a result of that evolution. It will be of interest to those readers concerned with the diplomatic processes and structures used for developing norms or advancing a novel concept on the international community’s security agenda.

A close reading of chapters two and three reveals that one of the book’s key strengths lies in its critical approach. As Bellamy traces the development of R2P from concept to principle, he points to where the evolution of R2P has resulted in important weaknesses. For example, he argues that

the [ICISS] report is conceptually confused about the nature, scope and place of prevention and adds little new to the way we think about the practice of prevention. Much the same can be said of the commission’s finding on rebuilding. There is a vast gulf between the commission’s sophisticated and nuanced treatment of intervention and its brief, confused and unoriginal take on prevention and rebuilding. (52–53)

He also notes that, despite claims that prevention is the key aspect of R2P, the report devotes only nine of its eighty-five pages to it. In fact, “the responsibilities to prevent and rebuild received only sixteen pages, compared with thirty-two pages on the question of intervention” (64). So while Bellamy’s book covers much the same ground as Evans’, it offers wide-ranging insight of R2P’s emergence, and the reader is left with a more analytically sophisticated, critical understanding of the principle. This important difference will appeal to advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as to scholars and researchers wishing to keep abreast of important recent developments within the field of international security.

In turn, the three remaining chapters examine the main aspects of R2P. Focus is given, first, to identifying the circumstances in which the responsibility to prevent ought to apply, and the practical steps, measures, and initiatives that will need to be considered if that responsibility is to be fulfilled by the international community.

Next, a range of measures short of the coercive use of force are discussed in the context of the responsibility to react before the coercive use of force is discussed, including the conditions that ought to exist and the practical steps, measures, and initiatives required to offer immediate protection to those at risk on the ground. Bellamy frequently stresses, correctly, the importance of having a broad range of options, extending from total inaction to dispatching armed forces. Finally, Bellamy examines different approaches to post-conflict rebuilding, focusing on the Peacebuilding Commission as a key initiative in this respect. Throughout his detailed treatment of these major aspects of R2P, Bellamy is mindful of the conceptual and practical difficulties of implementation. Too many passages, however, left me wondering if the discussion, which was very interesting, had entered a level of detail that could be considered “off topic,” particularly during the discussions of sanction regimes and of peacekeeping operations. The space used here might have been better used on providing a statement of the problem to which R2P is a response, which struck me as a significant omission in this book. Nevertheless, Bellamy’s was my pick of the three books subject to review here. It is well researched and informative, written in lucid prose, and compellingly argued, and its bibliography will prove a useful guide to the key literature concerning R2P.

Edited by Richard H. Cooper and Juliette Voïnov Kohler, *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Moral Compact for the 21st Century* (2009) is a volume of fourteen essays that will appeal to advanced undergraduate and graduate students as well as university-level teachers, although the inclusion of a consolidated bibliography would have further enhanced its scholarly appeal and value as a teaching aid. The foreword by Samantha Power sets an appropriately sober tone for the essays that follow by warning that “[s]upporters of R2P should expect more, not less, pushback in the international system as they try to mobilize support for diplomatic, economic, or military intervention” (xi). The essays are divided into three sections, the first explaining the roots and rationale of R2P, the second exploring conflict situations in Iraq, Northern Uganda, Darfur, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in light of R2P, while the final section examines some of the experiences of, and practical concerns confronting, members of the international community seeking to implement R2P.

However, this collection of essays offers a mixed bag, some stronger and better written than others. The best among them are David Scheffer’s essay, which gives greater clarity to defining “atrocities crimes” by examining various sources of international law, a broad-ranging essay on philanthropy by Adele Simmons and April Donnellan, and the editors’ own contribution describing the urgent need for an International Marshals Service to support the international justice system. The case studies are worthwhile reads in and of themselves, particularly Herbert F. Weiss and Mary Page on the DRC and Northern Uganda, respectively. The more disappointing contributions include Evans’ essay, which covers much the same ground as his 2008 book, while Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, could have focused his essay more closely on the topic at hand, rather than arguing that “the invasion of Iraq fails the test for a humanitarian intervention” (110).

Despite offering various perspectives and approaches, the inclusion of more voices of those directly impacted by mass atrocity or of more marginalized perspectives on the R2P topic would have significantly improved the entire collection. Page’s essay, for example, does capture children’s perspectives on the Lord’s Resistance Army to disturbing effect, but more of this kind of writing would have made the collection’s arguments even more engaging in human terms. While the essay by Aaron

Dorfman and Ruth Messinger, which gives focus to R2P in light of the Jewish tradition, produces some interesting insights, it also begs the question of how other important sacral vantage points and analytic frameworks, such as those belonging to Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism, might complement the more mainstream commentaries and analysis provided in this volume. However, this collection of essays does give sharp focus to powerful states and their pursuit of self-serving interests.

Each of the books reviewed here recognize that powerful states are prone to intervening in the domestic affairs of less powerful states when it is in their vital interests to do so: Kosovo and Iraq are common, recurring examples. Each of the books, moreover, describes various ways in which powerful states have impeded multilateral discussions seeking to further develop the rhetoric of R2P. John Bolton's attempts to frustrate the UN's machinery receives treatment, as do Russian and Chinese diplomatic maneuverings. The collected essays, however, go further by giving sustained analytic treatment to the practical means of curtailing the options available to powerful state makers wishing to prevent R2P's realization. In particular, a very good essay by Lee Feinstein and Erica De Briun traces recent US foreign policy in this respect before providing a range of practical recommendations that will enable the US government to act in accordance with, rather than merely agree to, the R2P principle. The lack of sustained analysis of the realpolitik dimension among these texts is not so much a limitation as it is an opportunity for future scholarly research.

Notwithstanding the significant differences among the three works reviewed above, each demonstrates an emerging consensus around R2P as a key policy response for the international community to confront the ugly existence of atrocity crimes. They all highlight the important, though in some cases nascent, links among sanction regimes, peacekeeping operations, and the international criminal court. An even stronger consensus emerges in these books over the need to build on the traction achieved over the past decade in order to traverse the difficult terrain of transforming R2P from rhetoric into reality. As Evans points out in *The Responsibility to Protect*,

The immediate objective must be to get to the point where, when the next conscience-shocking case of large-scale killing, or ethnic cleansing, or other war crimes, or crimes against humanity comes along—as is all too unhappily likely—the immediate reflex response of the whole international community will be not to ask whether action is necessary but rather what action is required, by whom, when, and where. (53)

It will be highly regrettable and a condemning indictment of humanity if the world's policy makers need to bear witness to yet another mass atrocity in order to enable this much-needed transformation.