Two Cheers for Humanitarianism

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Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism, Michael Barnett (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), 312 pp., $29.95 cloth.

Humanitarianism Contested: Where Angels Fear to Tread, Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (New York: Routledge, 2011), 192 pp., $130 cloth, $29.95 paper.

A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis, David Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 400 pp., $24.99 paper.

Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa, Alex de Waal (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997), 256 pp., $20.95 paper.

Over the last two decades a spate of books, led by the ones cited in this essay, have illuminated and debated the bristly questions confronting contemporary "humanitarianism." The definitional or, one might say, foundational question is whether the adjective "humanitarian" should be limited to only those independent agencies that are engaged (without reference to a political context) in the impartial delivery of emergency relief to all those in existential need—or, in the unique case of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), engaged in monitoring the application of the Geneva Conventions to armed conflict. An answer in the affirmative could be considered the "classic" position of the humanitarian, and one still championed by the ICRC. Today, however, many NGOs, such as CARE, OXFAM, and Catholic Relief Services, which certainly regard themselves as humanitarian agencies, engage in a broad range of rehabilitative and developmental activities and continue to deliver emergency relief, and they are prepared to do so under circumstances where their work has conspicuous political implications. The same is true of such UN agencies as UNICEF, UNHCR, and the World Food Programme, which are not infrequently involved in complex peace operations that have clear political goals as specified by the Security Council. Further, well-known humanitarian activists and writers,

notably Bernard Kouchner and Samantha Power, also reject the ICRC's definitional canon. The unsettled boundaries of what properly constitutes humanitarianism brings a number of difficult questions to the surface, including:

- Should relief be provided even if it could prolong a conflict, or could indirectly assist a belligerent, or possibly identify the relief giver with a government's political ends? And should the nature of those ends influence relief efforts?
- Should relief agencies also assist in addressing the causes of humanitarian emergencies by joining in efforts to resolve a conflict, foster economic development, rebuild state institutions, and strengthen the protection of human rights?
- Should such agencies accept funds from governments where governments specify how the funds are to be used?
- Where necessary, should they advocate armed intervention to protect their personnel as well as the recipients of their aid?
- In terms of the way they organize and structure themselves, should nonprofit agencies dedicated to humanitarian relief follow private-sector models?
- Can organizations dedicated to the effective provision of emergency relief pursue that end without creating a culture of dependence, without discouraging local initiative, and without violating the liberal "right" to participate in life-shaping decisions?
- Finally, how does humanitarianism relate to human rights, the other leading expression of what I would call "the humanitarian impulse"?

A number of these questions—particularly the definitional one—began to seriously unsettle the community of nonprofit aid givers during the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War) of 1967–1970. The collective soul-searching that was triggered by this war, with its highly publicized famine, intensified and deepened in time with the post–cold war explosion of new internal conflicts that seemed to mock the efforts of humanitarian organizations to mitigate suffering. David Rieff's *A Bed for the Night* and Alex de Waal's *Famine Crimes* were arguably the most powerful critiques of the humanitarian aid effort during the period stretching from Biafra through the post–cold war era to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Michael Barnett's recently published *Empire of Humanity* and the book he has jointly authored with Thomas Weiss,

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Humanitarianism Contested, pick up key themes (but not the conclusions) of Rieff's and de Waal's work and confirm that the debate over how best to resolve humanitarianism's dilemmas has not concluded.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: HUMANITARIANISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Both *Empire of Humanity* and *Humanitarianism Contested* elaborate the two-century evolution of humanitarianism and, to a degree, its relationship to human rights—the other great discourse of cosmopolitan solidarity. Tracking the parallel and sometimes intertwined evolution of the two discourses (or projects) clarifies their similarities and differences and also, I think, sharpens our appreciation of the preceding questions.

Although resting on a common belief in the moral equality of human beings, human rights and humanitarianism have largely separate developmental narratives. The modern human rights movement is conventionally dated from the French and American revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, its core idea summarized in the assertion of the American Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal, [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Since human rights entered the political discourse of Western peoples at the same time as triumphant insurgencies against conservative power—the French monarchy and the British state—we might reasonably expect human rights to have become a powerful discourse in the political life of the West in the nineteenth century. If anyone once held such expectations, they were bound for a measure of disappointment—at least those celebrants, if any, who equated a regime of rights with more pacific and mutually respectful relations among peoples regardless of race or culture. The nineteenth century, after all, was marked by enlargement of the West's imperial project, primarily into north and sub-Saharan Africa and coastal China—a project conducted, where necessary, by pitiless violence and to the objective end of appropriating indigenous resources, human and material, for the greater good of metropolitan elites.

The moral assumptions and the rhetoric associated with the core idea of universal human rights did not appear to inhibit either the appetite for domination and plunder or the violent means often required to satisfy it. Indeed, humanitarian ideas and sentiments arguably facilitated these acts by providing a conscience-easing rhetoric of disinterested idealism. Through their subordination, it was said, indigenous peoples would come to enjoy the benefits of civilization and be purged of ugly

primitive habits. They would, in other words, be "civilized." As Barnett and Weiss note, however, while the discourses of Christian compassion and civilizing mission often did little more than further justify colonial domination, missionaries themselves did not always collaborate with governments. Moved by their interpretations of Christian ethics, some missionaries even became open enemies of the colonial enterprise—particularly where, as in the case of the Congo under Belgium's King Leopold, it took peculiarly vicious forms. Some sense of a moral solidarity wider than the nation (though hardly universal) may even have influenced the behavior of state elites, at least in Great Britain. Such influence can be inferred from London's periodic efforts to restrain the Ottoman Empire's counterrevolutionary operations in the often restless Balkans, operations frequently conducted through exemplary massacres. Nevertheless, overall the auguries of the French and American declarations were premature. The major insurgent discourse of the nineteenth century was to be nationalism, not human rights, and arguably it remained hegemonic until the conclusion of the decolonization process in the second half of the following century.

Humanitarianism as we know it today, although springing from the same intellectual and moral roots as human rights,[1] acquired a distinctive trajectory, which began with the experiences of a young man from the Geneva haute bourgeoisie on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859. When Henry Dunant returned home from what had begun as a simple business trip to southern Europe, the young banker carried an indelible memory of mangled bodies, of a cacophony of unspeakable agony, of the human wreckage left by the conduct of politics by other means. Another man, one perhaps more romantic by inclination than this solid product of the Swiss merchant and financial classes, might have been inspired to pacifism by Solferino's Goyaesque scenes. But Dunant instead committed himself to humanizing war by mitigating its cruelty. Humanization for Dunant and the small group of Swiss compatriots who joined his institutional project, the International Committee of the Red Cross, meant in the first instance assisting soldiers who had been rendered hors de combat by sickness and wounds (and, at a later point, by capture).

Unlike human rights, humanitarianism as envisioned by the ICRC quickly achieved international legal expression. The ICRC itself was formally recognized in 1863 by representatives of sixteen European countries assembled in Geneva through the efforts of Dunant and his colleagues. And within a year of its founding, the ICRC secured the adoption by states of a "Convention for the

Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field," which declared that all wounded soldiers be accorded humane treatment and that medical personnel, whether military or civilian, be considered neutral and have an unimpeded opportunity to carry out their Samaritan purposes. The principles and rules adopted by diplomatic conferences at The Hague in 1899 and 1907 are a second tributary of what we now call international humanitarian law. By providing for the compassionate treatment of prisoners of war and for the protection of civilian populations in war zones, they extended the logic of the first Geneva Convention in 1864 and the moral insight of the ICRC's founders.

Out of the insensate cruelties of World War II, human rights finally emerged with legal form and corresponding distinction as a moral discourse. Heralded by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Four Freedoms address to Congress in 1941 and promoted in the UN Charter's statement of purposes, human rights became operational through the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal. In order to try the Nazi High Command for the virtual extermination of Jews in Germany and its allied states (the massacre of Jews in countries occupied by the Axis powers violated previously established laws of war), the Nuremburg Charter formally introduced "crimes against humanity" as a grave violation of international criminal law distinct from crimes against the laws of war and crimes against peace. In this way, humanitarianism (partially embodied in the laws of war) and human rights (whose grave and massive violation constituted a crime against humanity) came together for the first time as separate but morally and emotionally related legal projects driven by a shared sense of human solidarity.

Having achieved legal force, however limited, human rights quickly found an institutional home at the newly established UN Human Rights Commission, albeit one that initially functioned more to isolate and defang than to protect: the commission's first substantive decision at its inaugural meeting was to declare itself incompetent to investigate the accumulated claims of human rights violations that had begun streaming into the UN Secretariat virtually from the organization's birth in 1946. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted two years later, reinforced the Nuremberg Charter through its detailed enumeration of rights and its adoption by a huge majority of the General Assembly. The countries voting in favor did not, however, purport to be declaring extant legal norms. Evidencing the general belief at the time that the Universal Declaration heralded rather than recognized established legal doctrine is the coincident call for the embodiment of the declared rights in a formal international agreement. Negotiations quickly

began to that end, but more than two decades would pass before the International Covenants on, respectively, Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights were completed and widely accepted. This delay is consistent with the claim of the historian Samuel Moyn that not until the 1970s did human rights become a discourse capable of demanding attention in the halls of power.[2]

Barnett's book, which spans two centuries, is organized into three "ages," each "distinguished by a global context defined by the relationship between the forces of destruction (violence), production (economy), and protection (compassion)" (p. 9). In the first age, which he dates from 1800 to 1945 and labels "imperial humanitarianism," the destructive force is colonialism; production and protection assume the forms, respectively, of commerce and civilizing missions. Their counterparts in the "age of neo-humanitarianism" are the cold war and nationalism (destruction), development (economy), and sovereignty (protection). In the current age of "liberal humanitarianism" the counterparts are the liberal peace, globalization, and human rights. The three ages and three shaping forces survive in Barnett and Weiss's book, but in slightly modified form, with the beginning of the first age moved to 1864 (the first law-of-war convention). In addition, "salvation" replaces "protection," while the intent of both the old and the new label for the category is helpfully clarified as "moral discourse, religious beliefs, ethical commitments, and international norms to help distant strangers" (p. 21).

In their conventional account, by the 1970s human rights and humanitarianism were established sources of normative authority, more or less distinct institutionally and operationally,[3] but expressing common moral assumptions and impulses. Ironically, hardly had humanitarianism acquired the normative authority to expand its activities beyond traditional interstate armed conflict and civil wars waged by regular armed forces ("Geneva Convention conflicts") than the dilemmas enumerated above became evident. Theory encountered the severities of practice in post–cold war intrastate conflicts where paramilitaries treated civilians and humanitarians as exploitable resources or simply prey.

The ICRC's Problematic Canon

If we believe, whether as the result of a moral epiphany or what feels to us like a coolly rational deduction from the premise of human solidarity, that we possess a transcendent duty to relieve human suffering wherever possible, then, if we aspire

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to do humanitarian work, the ICRC's canon says we should deliver relief impartially and unconditionally. This view rejects a priori any consequentialist argument for conditioning relief or allocating resources on any basis other than relative need. Pragmatically, the neutral stance of humanitarian organizations also minimizes the risk of offending ruthless governments able to deny access to threatened populations.

The canon of neutrality and impartiality championed by the ICRC stemmed naturally from its seminal experience: an interstate war in which neither side could persuasively claim angelic motives. Interstate wars between amoral states being the paradigmatic context in which Dunant and company envisioned themselves operating, and compassion for the soldiers on both sides being their animating impulse, neutrality and impartiality must have seemed morally uncomplicated, a view that could without robust self-deception survive World War I, despite the horrific slaughter. Thereafter, however, complications arose.

Following World War II, investigators discovered that the ICRC had been aware of the Nazi project of exterminating Jews and Gypsies and had witnessed the systematic murder of prisoners on the Eastern Front, and yet had remained mute. In the face of furious indictment, the ICRC's leaders defended themselves on the grounds that bearing public witness to Nazi atrocities would not have halted them, while silence allowed the organization to fulfill (on the Western Front, at least) its responsibility to protect sick, wounded, and imprisoned soldiers. Like the Vatican, which was also notably silent about the Nazi killing machine, the ICRC managed to continue relatively unharmed by this controversy, and endured—indeed, it continued to grow in influence and resources. However, the canon of neutrality and impartiality, with its corollary of public silence even in the face of atrocities, was no longer sacrosanct.

For humanitarian relief organizations, the canon's next great challenge was the Nigerian Civil War. In a rare cold war coincidence of perceived interest, NATO and Warsaw Pact states rallied to the side of the Nigerian federal government, arming it and respecting its blockade of the Igbo-dominated insurgent regime in the eastern part of the country, which the latter called Biafra. Food stocks in the shrinking insurgent-controlled territory rapidly dwindled. And, as always, leaders and fighters enjoyed privileged access to what little there was as hunger among the civilian population descended into famine.

While denying (not very persuasively) that starvation was part of its strategy for ending the conflict, the Nigerian government insisted that all supply efforts be

regulated by its officials to ensure that they did not contribute to the insurgent force's capacity to resist. The ICRC and other relief organizations accepted this constraint despite the fact that in practice it appeared to slow the flow of resources into insurgent-held territory, an appearance the insurgents, it is now generally agreed, manipulated and managed to exploit. Pictures in the mass media of skeletal Igbo children failed to move the U.S. and UK governments to alter their positions. What the reality of famine did accomplish was to impel a few elements of the humanitarian aid community to defy the federal government and begin delivering aid directly. Among the dissidents were a group of French doctors who would morph into *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF).

As MSF grew, it adopted a kind of intermediate position among relief NGOs. Relief, it declared, must be accompanied by "witness." Silence in the face of atrocity was morally repugnant. So even as it carried out its relief work for any group of persons in desperate circumstances (by this time, like other relief organizations, it had moved beyond the original focus on armed conflicts), if it witnessed large-scale violations of basic human rights, it would state so publicly. It would not, however, suggest what should be done. This limit to witness proved too constraining for some leaders, including one of the founders of the organization, Bernard Kouchner. After losing the policy battle within MSF, Kouchner left to form a new organization animated by his view that the task of the community of aid givers is to activate state power—including, where necessary, military intervention on behalf of suffering strangers. For the humanitarian international could not by itself address the causes of the catastrophes it sought to mitigate. Thus, during the Bosnian slaughterhouse of the 1990s, Kouchner and others, revolted by what they perceived as a Western and UN policy of protecting relief shipments but not their recipients from Serb paramilitary forces ("fattening people before they die," as one practitioner observed), called on Western governments to intervene for the defense of human rights.

The emergence over the past fifty years of a broad array of national and international human rights organizations, public and private, supplemented by individual humanitarian activists now networked to the world through their cell phones and all committed to exposing atrocity, makes it easier for relief workers to defend a policy of calculated myopia in order to secure access to the world's desperately needy. But a refusal to bear witness is not the only moral difficulty associated with a blinkered, single-minded vocation of relief. Silence in the face of evil is one thing. Facilitating evil, however incidentally to one's humanitarian

purposes, is another. And this, arguably, is what humanitarian relief organizations did in the eastern Congo in the wake of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Triggered by the killing of the country's Hutu president, Hutu military units, militia, and civilian mobs—organized and directed by local militants—methodically set about exterminating their Tutsi neighbors in a carefully prepared massacre. It was a task they had largely completed when a Tutsi army from across the Ugandan border burst into Rwanda and quickly broke the resistance of the genocidal regime's forces.

Large remnants of those forces, including their paramilitary and civilian accomplices, and a vast crowd of ordinary and presumably terrified Hutu civilians piled into the misleadingly named Democratic Republic of the Congo, whose own citizens could barely sustain themselves. Seeing a mass of humanity threatened with famine and already ravaged by cholera, humanitarian relief organizations, both nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies, swarmed to their rescue, bringing food, medicine, and shelter. In a short time the agents of the Rwandan genocide assumed political and military control of the relief camps and used them as a base for attacks on ethnic Tutsis in the Congo itself and for armed probes into Rwanda. When the relief organizations failed in their efforts to secure an international force able to wrest control of the camps from the *genocidaires*, most of them resolved to stay and continue their work even though it included feeding and housing (and possibly even funding) the perpetrators of a great crime against humanity.[4] MSF was almost alone in choosing to leave. The rest remained until the Rwandan army stormed across the border, smashed the camps, herded many of their occupants back into Rwanda, killed some of their political leaders and fighters, and dispersed the rest.

Politics, as the case of the Rwandan refugees reminds us, is the process that determines who gets what when, who wins and loses, who lives or dies. In pursuing their humanitarian ends, relief organizations bring relatively large additional resources into the midst of processes that are often characterized by their life-or-death stakes. Among those resources is their presence as credible interpreters of events for the media and through the media to the wider world. All in all, the goal of avoiding any impact on the play of domestic forces, including their relationship with external ones, seems unattainable. Each complex emergency, each killing ground, implicates the Samaritans in its singular way.

In the eastern Congo implication took the excruciating form of direct assistance to murderers. In Bosnia the implication was more subtle. Delivering relief to besieged Bosnian Muslim communities had two toxic by-products. By feeding inhabitants of

these communities, humanitarian organizations incidentally encouraged them to remain stationary rather than flee to areas with larger and more concentrated (and somewhat better armed) Muslim populations or across international boundaries. In doing so the organizations were, to be sure, obstructing the ethnic cleansing strategy of the Serbians, and in that sense incidentally defending the Muslim Bosnians' human rights. However, because UN peacekeeping troops in Bosnia had a mandate only to facilitate the delivery of relief rather than to protect the population being relieved, these isolated communities were in perpetual danger of being killed by Serb paramilitaries—which is what finally occurred in Srebrenica. This, Rieff reminds us, was a risk European states were quite prepared to have the Bosniaks assume because it helped the former to minimize the potential flow of asylum seekers (p. 130).

The second toxic by-product was to facilitate the evasive strategy of Western governments coming under increasing public pressure to "do something." The "something" they chose to do was to emphasize the need for relief, an evasion welcomed by a UN leadership reflexively hostile at that historical point to "taking sides" in internal conflicts (possibly reinforced by its disastrous 1993 experience in Somalia). This coincidence of national interest (as defined by heads of state) and UN Secretariat reflex explains the limited character of Security Council action. Even the authorization to protect the delivery of relief in part by providing so-called safe havens was diluted when both UN officials and troop-supplying governments generally interpreted it as a mandate to negotiate (on a case-by-case basis) rather than to deliver relief at the point of a bayonet. It was further diluted by only lightly arming the international force and imposing on it very restrictive rules of engagement. In short, the activities of relief organizations and their evident need for financial help, which the United States and Europeans provided under the UN mandate, arguably prolonged the daily butchery until the massacre at Srebrenica precipitated the brief Western aerial assault on Serb forces in Bosnia, which in turn forced negotiations and finally put an end to Bosnia's bleeding.

The Future of Humanitarianism in Light of its Past

In the course of the past several decades, humanitarian emergencies have acquired a more than episodic place on the policy agendas of important states and have become a central concern of the United Nations—most of whose specialized agencies are now dedicated to relief and protection (primarily of displaced persons), conflict resolution, rehabilitation, and development. The jihadi-terrorist

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phenomenon has reinforced the growing conviction that, apart from their appeal to the conscience, these emergencies constitute or at least augur threats to international peace and national security. In addition, the rise of such terrorist networks has caused the United States and the West generally to become engaged in a whole series of counterinsurgency campaigns, a frequent facet of which is humanitarian assistance to the affected civilian populations.

One result of these intersecting phenomena has been a striking increase in the public resources pouring into humanitarian projects, including those directed by the nonprofit community, which—together with surging private donations—has fueled dramatic growth in the size of the assistance community. (Growth, however, has been largely concentrated in a few well-known organizations, such as the ICRC, MSF, CARE, Catholic Relief, and World Vision.) Between 1990 and 2008 official assistance for humanitarian relief rose from $2.1 billion to an estimated $18 billion (Barnett and Weiss, p. 29). While these figures include assistance given directly by governments as well as assistance channeled through UN agencies and NGOs, it is clear that the impact on NGOs has been substantial. For instance, Barnett and Weiss point out that on the eve of the Nigerian War in 1967, the ICRC's budget was only a half-million dollars, whereas by 2010 it was over $1 billion (p. 30).

Recent increases in government funding have underscored old dilemmas. States have not suddenly become altruism machines. They give to advance parochial interests, which means directing the allocation of these funds largely according to state interests rather than human needs. As Barnett and Weiss note:

> When wars [of special concern to the NATO countries] were raging in the Balkans, for example, in per capita terms it was 10–20 times better to be a war victim there than in Africa. . . . In 2002 nearly half of all funds given by donor governments to the UN's 25 appeals for assistance went to Afghanistan (where the US-led coalition was already deeply if insufficiently engaged) (p. 31).

So much for impartiality and independence, or for avoiding identification with the ends of states and assisting some belligerents at the expense of others, though as Barnett and Weiss continuously remind us, the change is one of degree—a large degree, to be sure, but still a degree.

How has growth and deepening involvement with national governments affected the humanitarian NGOs as institutions? All the authors agree that it has made the main beneficiaries of public and private largesse more like business organizations. In their higher ranks, the passionate amateur has yielded to the

credentialed and experienced manager expecting comfortable pay and stable professional opportunities. At the operating level, engineers, public-health specialists, and others with technical skills are preferred over enthusiastic volunteers, although there is always some need for the hewers of wood and the haulers of water, as it were. Still, in the field the latter now tend to be local hires rather than English majors from metropolitan capitals.

Steep increases in public funding also affect the beneficiaries by imposing much more elaborate obligations to demonstrate operational effectiveness. Like so many things that on their face seem like unqualified goods (who could be opposed to perpetual self-assessment, whether or not coerced?), on reflection there may be a downside to this proliferating obligation. In this case, the ever-perceptive Barnett and Weiss suggest that it is the exclusive emphasis on what can be measured: so many persons fed and sheltered at X dollars per person, for instance. What cannot be measured easily, if at all, is the contribution that relief workers may make to the sense of dignity and security of beleaguered people or to their personal empowerment or to their actual physical safety. The emphasis on the easily measureable can also complicate the nominal liberal goal of empowering beneficiaries to help shape the specific dimensions of relief projects. Even to an inexperienced, uncredentialed amateur, much less a professional in the relief business, a sprawling camp in the middle of nowhere filling up with desperate people in need of food, water, shelter, and medicine seems to dictate its own agenda. Faced with indisputably exigent needs, and possessing the experience to address them, relief professionals have powerful incentives to attend to these needs, and only largely theoretical or formal ones for consulting with the objects of their concern about how the job should be done. Thus, as all four authors point out, paternalism is implicit in humanitarianism. And where, as is generally the case, the principal managers of relief are Westerners, the relationship, as Barnett notes more than once, bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the colonial one.

It is not just or even primarily culture and color that resonate from the past. In many cases (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sierra Leone, to name only some) humanitarian emergencies stem from the clash of local interests. Since addressing the causes of conflict cannot fail to have an impact on the existing distribution of power, it is dangerous and difficult for humanitarians to do so without foreign military backing (the British in Sierra Leone, for instance), or a U.S.-led coalition (as in Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo), or the peacekeeping troops of the United Nations or some regional organization (for example, the ECOWAS forces,

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which were primarily Nigerian, in Liberia). The conjunction of humanitarianism with armed intervention constitutes one striking resemblance between the first and third ages of humanitarianism. A second resemblance is that the template for addressing the causes of conflict—that is, for restructuring society and government—is made in the West. This template's name, Barnett and Weiss insist, is neoliberalism, which they identify with a market-driven economy, minimal barriers to cross-border trade and investment, a relatively small state, impersonality in the application of law, competitive elections, and constitutional protection of individual rights. Their point, I take it, is that whatever the virtues of neoliberalism, it is not the form of political economy that has hitherto grown naturally out of conditions in much of the rest of the world.[5] Hence, even if it is not carried on the back of a tank, it still feels like and is an imposition, just as missionary-driven Christianity was during the first age of humanitarianism.

A further institutional development of the past two decades has been the very sharp increase in the risks associated with humanitarian work. After reviewing the figures, Barnett and Weiss conclude that "it is now more dangerous to be a civilian aid worker than a military peacekeeper" (p. 3). Does this fact powerfully reinforce the ICRC's prudential insistence on neutrality and independence as necessary, even defining features of humanitarianism? That depends, say the authors, on the specific causes for the increase in fatalities. A disproportionate number of such fatalities have occurred in Afghanistan and Iraq—countries where alien armies have been conducting intense counterinsurgency campaigns. In the "struggle for hearts and minds," which is the essence of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine, relief work (even if it does not slide over into development work) objectively contributes to the dominant force's goal, however subjectively and rhetorically neutral the relief agency may be. Consequently, a relief agency will be targeted by insurgent forces unless it pays them off so generously in currency or kind as to make itself more of an asset to them than it is to the occupying force. Even generous payoffs may not suffice, however, because killing aid workers still has shock value, so it is a way of terrorizing actual and potential collaborators with the counterinsurgent force, not to mention the relief organizations themselves.

What is to Be Done?

If we take the view, as I and the authors do, that humanitarianism came to political maturity in the 1970s, we have roughly four decades of experience on

which to draw for purposes of prediction and prescription. By "experience" I refer not simply to that of the disaster relief organizations but more broadly to the global response to humanitarian crises, including the behavior of important states and the United Nations. None of the authors recall that experience with happy complacence. Barnett and Weiss write:

> In Bosnia-Herzegovina aid agencies provided relief to those trapped in so-called safe havens . . . which proved to be some of the least safe areas on the planet. . . . In Rwanda humanitarian workers were absent during the genocide but began attempting to save hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in camps militarized and controlled by the architects of the mass murder. In Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, humanitarian organizations were funded by and operated alongside the invading armies and then were surprised that they were treated as combatants or occupiers by the belligerents (p. 1).

Rieff, looking back and, by implication, ahead, writes: "This book [was] begun in despair and completed . . . well, in whatever state of mind that lies beyond despair" (p. 1). In one respect his book is an assault on the Whig interpretation of history. For Rieff, the claim of writers such as Michael Ignatieff that there has been a revolution of moral concern sufficient to influence the behavior of states is false. Yes, there has been an explosion of norms, but the cruelty of the world, never more starkly demonstrated than in the response to the unhurried methodical Rwandan genocide, is undiminished. In Africa, where the line between quotidian misery and crisis is most obscure, "the criminalization of the state" (p. 11) continues even as the attention of Western powers, no longer fixed by the threat of Communist expansion, is largely elsewhere. His despair springs not primarily from the behavior of humanitarian organizations, but from the acts and omissions of the Western powers. Even in the exceptional instance where a truly humanitarian motive seems to direct them, he insists, insufficient knowledge aggravated by fickle national interest leads to disaster, as he contends happened in Somalia in 1992–1993. His understanding of the past leaves him without reason to expect more generous or wise behavior in the future, whether from governments with the power to intervene on behalf of desperate people or governments in the impoverished lands where despair finds its natural home. In the graveyard of hope, he seems to be saying, the only moral option for persons infused with the humanitarian spirit is to provide unconditionally a bed for the night. In doing that, they bring "a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist."[6] That, Rieff concludes, is humanitarianism's specific

moral gravity. To make it a means for promoting human rights is an ironic "retreat from the universal right to relief based on human need" (p. 315).

De Waal's deepest concern with heavy foreign involvement in a crisis is its tendency to diminish the target population's latent capacity to, first, respond to the immediate threat and to, second, develop political understandings between rulers and civil society that could reduce the likelihood of future disasters. In theory, he acknowledges, foreign actors could assist local ones in cultivating the requisite understandings and building the needed political structures. But given the paucity of outsiders with the necessary cultural knowledge, language skills, benign intent, and political sensibility; given the selfish interests that fuel interventions by foreign governments; and, finally, given what he sees as a record of sustained failure to intervene effectively in complex emergencies, de Waal holds out little hope for the translation of theory into practice. Consequently, his default position seems, like Rieff's, to be a preference for unconditional relief: "It is morally unacceptable to allow people to suffer and die on the grounds that relieving their suffering will support an obnoxious government or army" (p. 220). However, this moral absolute is only robust enough to survive until the following page, where he declares that "aid should not be provided where there is a reasonable chance of a belligerent party obtaining substantial material advantage" (p. 221).

The futility of a search for iron rules is one central theme of Barnett and Weiss's *Humanitarianism Contested.* "We cannot offer . . . directives regarding what should occur," they write in the introduction. "[What we can do is] provide a sense of the choices, trade-offs, and stakes" (p. 7). About the past they are no more sanguine than de Waal and Rieff. Without demurral, they cite Philip Gourevitch's doleful conclusion that "in case after case, a persuasive argument can be made that, overall, humanitarian aid did as much or even more harm than good."[7] But Barnett and Weiss are relatively optimistic about better balancing the effects of humanitarian aid, in part because the humanitarian community feels itself in crisis and is capable of learning from its mistakes.

Barnett and Weiss also recognize that there are multiple "humanitarianisms." While these humanitarianisms can be categorized in various ways, including, for example, according to religious or secular affiliation, they locate the main distinction between "an emergency branch that focuses on symptoms, and an alchemical branch that adds the ambition of removing the root causes of suffering."[8] The authors then go on to imply that this simple dichotomy is actually more like a continuum. Even the ICRC and like-minded organizations that

trumpet their aloofness from politics "spend a fair amount of time trying to change how states, militaries, militias, and even corporations understand their responsibilities; in doing so, they are not only trying to change behavior but also how individuals and institutions see themselves in relationship to the vulnerable" (p. 107). However, they seem to say, those efforts are incidental to the effort to save lives that are immediately at risk, and are therefore sharply distinguishable from active involvement in efforts to reconstruct states in order to make them more humane and less susceptible to humanitarian crises.

While they concede that "each side has its talking points" (p. 106), Barnett and Weiss seem far more uneasy about ambition than restraint. We presumably know something about treating symptoms, "whereas [presumptively] we do not have a clue how to eliminate the causes of violence" (p. 108). At the same time, however, they warn against "a too limited version of humanitarianism [which] may very well downgrade what is possible." After all, "we see great strides over the last several decades, including silent successes like an impressive reduction in the rate of maternal death during childbirth and more educational opportunities for girls" (pp. 108–09). So, they conclude, we do not want to aim too low.

How then do we improve the way we select goals and strategies in the face of a particular crisis? In each case, Barnett and Weiss propose, there will be a different configuration of the forces of destruction, production, and salvation. Appreciating the unique interplay of these forces in each instance of existential need will help agents of emergency relief decide on the best trade-offs among the dilemmas that confront them: whether to bear witness, to allow diversion of some relief to militias or pay them for protection, to work in a way that may identify the humanitarian project with a military intervention, how extensively to consult with beneficiaries and how to identify their representatives, whether and how extensively to become involved in rehabilitation and development, what form of development to promote, and so on.

Conclusion

What one takes away from these four fine books depends on the experiences and normative preconceptions one brings to them. To me and, I wager, many other people who feel that there is no higher aim in life than to combat unjust suffering, disaster relief is simply one form of action driven by that intense cosmopolitan empathy that I would call "the humanitarian impulse." Relief work is not unique

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in being concerned with immediate, unambiguous threats to life, for the same is true of armed interventions to preempt or terminate genocide and other crimes against humanity; and it is true of publicity campaigns waged by human rights organizations in response, for instance, to the detention of a human rights activist in a country governed by persons notorious for torturing and murdering their critics. Nor, as all four authors concede to varying degrees, is a fierce campaign for massive and unconditional emergency relief always the optimal way of responding to a conflict that generates great suffering. After all, among other things, such campaigns can prolong wars (as in the case of Biafra), or facilitate the evasion of responsibility by powerful states (as in the case of Bosnia), or provide the rationale for ham-handed military intervention (as de Waal and Rieff argue occurred in Somalia), or provide a base camp for *genocidaires* (as in the eastern Congo). In other words, like humanitarian military interventions, the unconditional effort to provide humanitarian relief can in certain circumstances cause serious collateral damage.

Since relief is not always a morally immaculate activity, it seems that it is as susceptible to a metric of consequences as humanitarian intervention or, for that matter, traditional wars. To be sure, relief as a first response to a natural disaster, such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake or the Asian tsunami of 2004, may be so likely to pass a retrospective test of consequences that advocates of immediate action should enjoy an exemption from any duty to attempt an initial moral assessment. On that assumption, relief officials should not, as in the case of Haiti, have to consider whether the humanitarian effort will, for example, effectively relieve an authoritarian government of its obligation to protect its citizens or facilitate removal of the poor from areas of a city adjacent to the rich or the tourist industry. But surely once imminent risks to life are addressed, an indifference to side effects is less justifiable, particularly side effects that threaten human rights.

Nine years after the publication of his book, Rieff's pessimism seems overstated. His anguish over the chasm between declared rights and their enforcement unbalances his judgment. Seemingly in order to make the strongest case for a blinkered humanitarianism, he unreasonably disparages the human rights project, reducing it to a futile—even pretentious—exercise in crafting norms for which there is no hope of implementation. Tell that to the architects of state terror in Argentina now moldering in the country's prisons. Were he alive today and reading Rieff, the former Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza would no doubt mutter, "if only." In explaining his sudden resignation and flight from Nicaragua in 1979,

Somoza cited as one of two impelling forces the human rights report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. That said, one can still identify with Rieff's rage about "the cruelty of the world" that allowed the Rwandan genocide to occur and that makes the 5.5 million deaths in the eastern Congo over the past fourteen years a blip on the global media radar screen, hardly more visible than the criminalization of governments in Zimbabwe, Angola, and other countries—a long vista of misery invoked by de Waal as well.

Still, Mubarak no long rules Egypt, Qadaffi is dead, Tunisia is democratic. So there are victories for human rights in part—smaller or larger, depending on the case—because some portion of those who already have rights feel an impulse to help strangers who do not. But given the world as it is, there will be many defeats, and the vanquished will desperately need relief. Humanitarians will go on trying to provide it, their efforts always shadowed by the dilemmas so acutely analyzed by these four authors. Perhaps we will do better. The struggle continues.

NOTES

[1] One of many indicators of a common root is the fact that nineteenth-century antislavery activists sometimes referred to themselves as humanitarians.

[2] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[3] To be concerned about human rights means in most instances to be critical of a government's behavior. "Like many international humanitarian agencies, the UNHCR [disavowed] human rights work, which was inherently political because it was impossible to monitor and report on human rights violations without challenging the state in some capacity." (Barnett, p. 208.)

[4] By controlling the camps the *genocidaires* could siphon off supplies for black-market sale.

[5] Barnett makes the point summarily by calling the final piece of his three-phased history "The Age of Liberal Humanitarianism."

[6] Rieff, p. 171, quoting Philippe Gaillard, a senior official of the ICRC.

[7] De Waal, p. 2, citing Philip Gourevitch, "Alms Dealers," *New Yorker*, October 11, 2010, p. 105.

[8] Barnett, p. 10; and see generally the discussion in Barnett and Weiss at pp. 9–17. Since the authors regard the ICRC as the purest expression of the former, and since refining and supporting the application of the humanitarian laws of war was its original, and remains a central, function of the organization, and since that function is obviously not directed at "root causes," it must fall in the "emergency category."

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