Review - Sword and Salve

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Sword and Salve: Confronting New Wars and Humanitarian Crises
By: Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss
New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006

Sword and Salve: Confronting New Wars and Humanitarian Crisis by Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss is a comprehensive study which analyses the interdependent dynamics between modern warfare and humanitarianism. The authors attempt to answer why humanitarianism is in a multi-level crisis since it is confronted by "new wars" and offer a unique solution.

Hoffman and Weiss' argument that humanitarianism struggles to keep up with the context of contemporary violence is built upon an extensive historical study of the dynamics between war and humanitarianism. "Classical humanitarianism", it is argued, is a creative response to the principles, strategies and effects of interstate warfare in the late 19th century, and was, hence, founded in the context of Westphalian state-centrism. The early stages of the development of humanitarian are, thus, limited to its direct connection to increasingly powerful states and their military institutions. Hoffman and Weiss claim that contemporary 'new humanitarianism' still adheres to traditional principles and norms which were both necessary and appropriate during the original context of "classical

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humanitarianism", however not anymore, those being neutrality, impartiality and consent.[1] Thus, the key argument is that the humanitarian system shows significant shortcomings with regard to complex humanitarian emergencies due to its dated structure and thinking. "New wars" consist of an unseen combination of various elements of warfare. They effectively underline a new phase of the international state system that is dominated by state collapse, humanitarian emergencies and unconventional political actors. Although humanitarianism was always a response to suffering and the terrors of war, a culture of neglect and utopian spirit gives rise to a "gaping chasm" between humanitarian crises and responses.[2] Thus, Hoffman and Weiss' consequential ideas are based on the fundamental changes of the humanitarian stage of actors, agencies and themes.[3]

Throughout the book, four themes are conveyed as guiding the symptoms of change, as well as potential solutions: *bureaucratisation and coordination*, *marketisation and privatisation, politicisation* and *militarisation*. They all give rise to, as well as respond to, the increased emergence of numerous humanitarian actors as well as the significance of non-state actors (NSAs). Thus, these four themes penetrate the logic of war-related humanitarianism. They have a sustained influence on the presence and future of humanitarian action. Firstly, *bureaucratisation and coordination* are themes that arise from the sheer number of new actors and agencies in the humanitarian system. Lack of agreement on principles and goals recreate humanitarianism as an "atomised enterprise" which weakens the potential power of the whole where a lack of coordination consists.[4] It also gives rise to the next problem: *marketisation and privatisation*. Humanitarian actors have to be understood as forces of a market context because they are forced to compete against each other: 'The growth of the humanitarian industry has increased competition for profile and for funds in an unregulated market. As a consequence, the increased pressure to show results may also increase the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of performance'.[5] Problems such as aid abuse and humanitarian economies are related to these new trends. Thirdly, *politicisation* is both natural and new to humanitarianism. Whilst the state previously had certain leverage over humanitarian action, "new wars" develop conceptual confusion and security challenges for humanitarian operation. Humanitarianism can also be abused as political veneer to justify intervention and state interests. The last factor, *militarisation*, similarly describes the tendency of confusion between military goals and humanitarian objectives. For example, new projects such as humanitarian interventions challenge any former differentiation. Merging agendas of both politics and the military with classic humanitarianism, hence, lead to a perceived lack of difference between the three spheres. The result is the increased targeting of humanitarian staff to achieve political aims. This, nevertheless, reinforces motives of politicisation and militarisation. Hoffman and Weiss' two examples, namely Afghanistan and Iraq, serve to exemplify these multiple changes.

Having analysed these problematic discourses of a new humanitarian reality, Hoffman and Weiss identify the most intrinsic failure of humanitarianism: the inability or even the reluctance to deal with these new realities. Subsequently, they call for a more realistic and adapted thinking about the dynamics of war and the role of "new humanitarianism". A substantial reform is necessary to achieve effectiveness and accountability. They advance the significant idea of "strategic thinking" for a humanitarian context, which they deduct from the success of military adaption to changed contexts. Subsequently, they propose four techniques based on a fundamental relocation of the first-order principle of humanitarianism, the centrality of the *sanctity of life*.[6] The method to achieve this rethinking is an extensive and institutionalised agency learning process similar to military practices. Hoffman and Weiss imagine the current culture of learning to promote sensitivity, curiosity, flexibility and an enhanced degree of professionalization. This would stand in contrast to a culture of neglect.[7] In the same manner as the early years of the humanitarian project were marked by creativity, "new wars" call for renewed creativity and rethinking of the past.

A discourse of a crisis of humanitarianism and projections of a foggy future are not novel ideas. Every change in warfare has given rise to challenges and subsequent creative thinking and revision. Now, confronted with a multipolar world and numerous violent as well as non-violent NSAs (non-state actors) it is widely accepted that 'the current international humanitarian regime is clearly in crisis'.[8] However, as contemporary and timely as these considerations seem, and truly are, David Forsythe already identified strikingly similar challenges in the 1970s.[9] So what is the actual value of Hoffman and Weiss' work? In the remainder of the review, we will see how and why they have enriched the general debate on humanitarianism, considering the depth of understanding regarding the "crisis", as well as offer an intriguing idea of solving the its dilemmas.

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The first relevant contribution to thinking about contemporary humanitarianism is their distinct focus on the interrelated dynamics of war and humanitarianism as the background theme of humanitarian thought and practice. Thus, unlike most discourses on humanitarianism, Hoffman and Weiss base their discussion on a completely different foundation: the nature and structures of war. Their analytical explanation of these stands in clear contrast to the work by others who concentrate their efforts merely on solutions and responses.[10] Naturally, to advance an understanding of humanitarianism as a response one has to analyse war itself. Hoffman and Weiss, thus, do not necessarily attempt to advance the debate in scope but rather increase its intellectual depth. Their theory of action and subsequent response is a significant contribution to the general understanding of the nature and structures of humanitarianism, which cannot be underestimated. The use of the two case studies, Afghanistan and Iraq, are crucial in strengthening this assumption: whilst also criticised for being too specific, the authors attempt to draw a timely and highly relevant comparison between two recent challenges for humanitarianism.[11]

Also, as a second contribution to the debate, Hoffman and Weiss propose a fundamentally different solution to humanitarianism compared to other thinkers in the field. Hoffman and Weiss challenge the *Classicists'* view of returning to the origins of humanitarianism by arguing that 'continuing business as usual' is simply not feasible anymore.[12] Whilst accepting common *Classicist* criticism they maintain a certain degree of pragmatism in their analysis; the idea of a continued corruption of humanitarian ideals by forces of politicisation, militarisation and marketization are clearly identified as great dangers. Yet, opposed to Rieff, they perceive these trends as incontrovertible facts which must be dealt with.[13] Crucially, they do not line up with the *Solidarist*s' camp either.[14] Their professional background allows us to understand why Hoffman and Weiss are able to offer such a significantly different point of view. The authors are not directly involved in humanitarian activities on the ground.[15] Arguably, this allows them to maintain a neutral stance and argue dispassionately about the problems and necessities of contemporary humanitarianism. Thus, they are able to provide 'clearheaded analyses'.[16] Their creative input from the "outside" provides, undoubtedly, a valuable addition to first-hand experiences from the "inside". Hence, the true value of Hoffman and Weiss' work must be understood in terms of *progressive coherence* and as an addition which contributes significantly to the wider field of thought.

Nevertheless, is the change of humanitarianism through the four new trends identified by Hoffmann and Weiss truly a 'new' phenomenon? An alternative view that this review suggests is to classify these trends as a mere 'multiplication' of an already common phenomena. If such an assumption is correct it would mark a fundamental weakness in the book's argument. Indeed, according to this theory *bureaucratisation and coordination* are the first trend most easily identified as results of a multiplication of humanitarian actors. Although we observe new non-state actors, those are not particularly 'new' either. The International Committee of the Red Cross, for instance, was already founded in 1863.[17] NSAs most certainly existed earlier as well. Yet, in an international system the only regarded units are states which competed with each other. NSA's were simply disregarded, as they were not the main focus of the politics of war and crises. The second trend of *marketisation and privatisation*, it is argued, arises out of the first trend above. Consequently, if the number of actors is only a multiplication of past actors, then the resulting trend can be argued to be new only to a limited degree. In fact, trends can be regarded as new due to their challenging status in contemporary humanitarian operations which only recently emerged. *Marketisation* is not truly new to the extent that during the origins of humanitarianism the military as actor competed for certain tasks which were only slowly transferred to non-military humanitarian actors. The third trend of *politicisation,* again, cannot be said to be truly new. According to the previous explanation, *politicisastion* is 'both natural and new to humanitarianism'.[18] Recognising it solely as 'new' regarding a contemporary conceptual confusion is an unconvincing argument. Security challenges arising from *politicisation* are also issues natural to the task of humanitarianism and the original reason to create the principles of neutrality, impartiality and consent. Thus, what is regarded as new might not always be what is truly new but instead what is new in terms of relevance. This review summarised these three trends as penetrating the logic of war-related humanitarianism in terms of the presence and future of humanitarian action. At this point, it must be added that these trends already possessed a level of influence in the past and, hence, are not completely new phenomena. Yet, militarisation as a trend is an exceptional case in this regard and demands further analysis. In fact, militarisation should be understood in an alternative way. In the next part of this review, it I will argue that a new phenomenon influences "new humanitarianism".

Hoffman and Weiss' proposal of a *learning culture* is clearly exceptional; nevertheless, several questions and doubts

arise.[19] Military and humanitarian structures are historically fundamentally different from each other – not only regarding their focus and area. Military institutions are structured, proactive and driven by pragmatism.[20] Humanitarianism, they argue, is not only in a state of uncoordinated disorder but is also, and in contrast to militaries, signified by its reactive and principle-driven nature.[21] Is it feasible to change this nature in order to achieve a high level of lesson learning? Institutional lesson learning for humanitarianism demands not only a rethinking of core principles but also of the understanding of the reciprocal relationship of war and war-related humanitarianism. Although this critical review cannot achieve a full examination of the feasibility of learning processes of humanitarianism, here, I will attempt two things; first, I will establish a basic understanding of what a "learning culture" entails in terms of organisational and instituational learning. Second, I will try to preliminary challenge the extent to which learning and 'proactive strategies of engagement' might be compatible with the reflective/responsive nature of humanitarianism.[22]

A Short Critique of Key Concepts

On the one hand, Hoffman and Weiss have already illustrated the historical dynamics of war and humanitarianism. The question of what came first – war or humanitarianism – is thus, easily answered: war triggered humanitarian suffering and, thus, gave rise to humanitarianism as a response.[23] Consequent upon the historical summary of Hoffmann and Weiss, I argue that early humanitarianism is characterised by a trend of *de-militarisation*, i.e. a process of both working against the humanitarian results of the military and slowly taking over tasks it traditionally performed. Yet, not only did humanitarianism emerge as a reactive force to the tragedies of human suffering during and after warfare, it also maintained this aspect of itself by responding to contemporary crises in a more extensive and faster manner, which is arguably one of its greatest weaknesses.[24] On the other hand, perhaps we can see a 'new militarisation' within Hoffman and Weiss' argument. Militarisation is not merely an observable trend of an increased use of military means to achieve logistics, security and a wider range of action but also an ideal type of a learning culture. The linking a humanitarian "learning culture" to military practices can be described as a revolutionary idea transforming our understanding of humanitarianism as well. Such a militarisation can be positive and should be welcomed. Throughout their work the authors show how, as two opposed dynamics assumed, the military and humanitarian spheres overlap. Whilst the idea of the military as a learning model for humanitarianism finalises this thought, does it also crush the 'eternal' validity of neutrality, consent and impartiality? According to these considerations, a fundamental change of humanitarianism is a necessity Nevertheless, a 'new militarisation' implies a conceptual dilemma as well. This conceptual dilemma is arguably one describing the dual trends of negating the military due to its resulting humanitarian disasters and, at the same time, affirming its structures. Moreover, equating military structures learning as a process should be seen in a critical light as we will see. Learning, in this case, has an automatic stigma of militarisation, which is often regarded as undesirable by humanitarian actors.

According to Brabant, learning is 'the steering of the practices of an organisation on the basis of ongoing, collective and interactive, inquisitive review, by deliberately well informed staff, of one's own and the available institution-wide experiences and current practices, and their underlying assumptions, models and beliefs'.[25] He distinguishes two elements of learning: organisational learning and institutional learning which both can be referred to as part of a "learning culture" as Hoffman and Weiss proposed it. 'Organisational learning (OL) refers to collective learning within an organisation. Institutional learning (IL) to system-wide learning, i.e. between and across agencies".[26] The aim of learning is greater accountability, effectiveness, coordination and cooperation – all, of course, leading towards an overall improved performance.

To understand the dynamics between the military, humanitarianism and learning processes better, it is indispensable to analyse the "learning model" of the military and see how it could be applied to humanitarian organisations. It is argued here that, in this case, the military can be seen as treated as a mere example of a successfully applied learning model that aims to achieve the above mentioned goals of learning. However, due to different organisational and bureaucratic structures, as well as different core principles, a military learning model is not necessarily suitable for humanitarianism. Organisational learning structures from the military can be utilised only to a limited extent if learning involves "scanning programs existing elsewhere".[27] Therefore, a learning model must adapt to the organisational structures of an organisation and that different agents require different types of learning.[28] Bennett and Howlett argue that learning theories remain "overtheorized and underapplied". Nevertheless, the project of

humanitarianism clearly requires learning as a conscious activity of a policy-oriented outcome.[29] Such a model should be based on learning lessons from their own past, and learning is then only truly achieved when results of either awareness or action can be detected. The question for humanitarian organisations should be how to translate the core belief of helping others into practice without getting entangled in structures of violence and aid abuse. Hence, "learning is for the most part learning about techniques and processes by which to 'improve' policy; that is, to have that policy encompass and effectively implement core values".[30] How exactly such a learning model would look goes beyond the scope of this review. Nevertheless, what can be said is that, according to Bennett and Howlett, this requires a learning type of 'lesson drawing' where learning is focused on 'instruments' and results in 'program change'.[31] Only if the core idea of humanitarianism gives rise to problems must ideas themselves change.

The question that future research should attempt to answer is whether humanitarianism has reached its limits: is it capable of changing its nature to such an extraordinary and historically unprecedented extent? And if so, would it still be what we have come to know as 'humanitarianism'? The understanding of 'change' that Hoffman and Weiss put forward serves as a valuable starting point for renewed discussions about what the nature of humanitarianism was, is and should be.[32] The proposed 'slowing down' to rethink seems to be just the right strategy to kick off a 'new humanitarianism' by applying the most appropriate learning model.[33]

Their clear assessment of humanitarianism as reaction is an important contribution. Nevertheless, was their aim to merely examine numerous shortcomings and failures of the humanitarian adventure in light of new wars, or did they attempt to confront these and find a viable blue print solution?[34] On that critical note, we see an almost weak structure of Hoffman and Weiss' work. Compared to the available literature of humanitarianism, its crisis and its future, their extensive historical discussion is not original. This review would suggest that their intrinsic idea should have been addressed more thoroughly to answer outstanding questions, as this report attempts to do. This would have elevated Hoffman and Weiss' work from the ordinary field of work on humanitarianism and instead allowed them to use an even stronger analytical and theoretical critique.

Overall, *Sword and Salve: Confronting New Wars and Humanitarian Crises* is an extensive study of the foundations of the so-called humanitarian crisis and advances into the structural and ideational dimensions. Rarely is a book as well suited to introduce students and academics into a wide-ranging topic as this. Yet, the two weaknesses that this review has identified hamper the book's usefulness for future research. I would see it as beneficial to the field if a more extensive work working more extensively on the idea and relations of agency learning in the context of the military and humanitarianism was written.

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[1] Hoffman, P.J. and Weiss, T.G. *Sword & Salve* (Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), Chapter 2, pp. 25-52

[2] *Sword & Salve* , p. 89

[3] Henceforth, I will only refer to the book as "Sword & Salve".

[4] *Sword & Salve*, p. 121

[5] Brabant, Van Koenraad 'Organisational and Institutional Learning in the Humanitarian Sector: Opening the dialogue', *Overseas Development Institute (ODI)*, October 1997, p. 16, ll. 7-9

[6] *Sword & Salve*, p. 209

[7] This culture is arguably a product of "a tendency to avoid looking ahead". Ibid, Chapter 7, p. 197, l. 21

[8] Hyndman, J. *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (London, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 169, l. 1

[9] In fact, he refers to the International Committee of the Red Cross and already considered major changes such as in the structures of war and new emerging actors that still seem to baffle humanitarians of today. The challenge of self-identification and the crisis of humanitarian identity are not as new as some authors make us think they are. In: Forsythe, D. P. *Humanitarian Politics – The International Committee of the Red Cross* (London, John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 227-231

[10] Reference to these 'others'

[11] Schmitz's criticism of the choice of case studies, in: Schmitz, H. P. 'A Science of Humanitarian Action?', *International Studies Review*, 8/3 (2006), p. 502

[12] Classicists promote neutrality, impartiality and consent. Solidarists "take sides of selected victims", "skew distribution of resources" and "override sovereignty". *Sword & Salve*, p. 84, figure 4.1

[13] Rieff argues that humanitarianism should not be more than delivery of need based on the three principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Summarised in: Barnett, M. 'Review Essay: What is the Future of Humanitarianism?', *Global Governance*, 9 (2003), p. 403

[14] See footnote 7

[15] Barnett, M. 'Review Essay: What is the Future of Humanitarianism?', *Global Governance*, 9 (2003), p. 403

[16] *Sword & Salve*, Foreword by Michael Barnett, p. xvi

[17] ICRC, History. Available from: http://www.icrc.org/eng/who-we-are/history/index.jsp (Accessed 16 March 2013)

[18] Refer to p. 1 of this review

[19] Unfortunately their proposal remains vague and both fail to outline what exactly a "learnin

culture" is and how humanitarianism can adopt such.

[20] *Sword & Salve*, p. 193

[21] *Sword & Salve*, Chapter 5

[22] Schmitz, H. P. 'A Science of Humanitarian Action?', *International Studies Review*, 8/3 (2006), p. 502, l. 17

[23] *Sword & Salve*

[24] Hoffman and Weiss evaluate this as a contemporary problem. Nevertheless, we see the consistent theme of action and reaction in the war-humanitarianism relationship.

[25] Brabant, Van Koenraad 'Organisational and Institutional Learning in the Humanitarian Sector: Opening the dialogue', *Overseas Development Institute (ODI)*, October 1997, p. 2, ll. 12-15

[26] Brabant, Van Koenraad 'Organisational and Institutional Learning in the Humanitarian Sector: Opening the dialogue', *Overseas Development Institute (ODI)*, October 1997, p. 2, 1l. 3-5

[27] Bennett, C.J. and Howlett, M. 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change', *Policy Sciences*, 25/3 (1992), p. 284, l. 37

[28] Bennett, C.J. and Howlett, M. 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change', *Policy Sciences*, 25/3 (1992), p. 289

[29] Bennett, C.J. and Howlett, M. 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change', *Policy Sciences*, 25/3 (1992), p. 288

[30] Bennett, C.J. and Howlett, M. 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change', *Policy Sciences*, 25/3 (1992), p. 286, ll. 36-38

[31] As identified on p. 289, box

[32] *Sword and Salve*, Chapter 4, pp. 81-88

[33] *Sword and Salve*, Chapter 4,, p. 209

[34] A similar concern is raised by Siri Aas Rustad: Rustad, S. Aa. 'Sword Ó Salve: Confronting New Wars and Humanitarian Crises by Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss', *Journal of Peace Research*, 44/1 (2007), p. 127