Is Humanitarianism Merely a New Name for Old Forms of Violence and Domination?

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Aiming "to provide assistance unconditionally, wherever and whenever it is needed", humanitarian organizations have long been guided by the fundamental principles of "humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality" (Schweizer, 2004, pp. 548-550). Besides the orientation towards providing unconditional relief, these principles served to insulate humanitarianism from politics (Barnett, 2005, p. 724). While humanitarian organizations, like the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), still claim to operate on the basis of these principles (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018a), humanitarianism has been accused of "sleeping with the enemy" since its politicisation in the 1990s (Barnett, 2011, p. 5).

Simultaneously, states began to abandon the strict compliance to the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention and have cited humanitarian concerns as 'legitimate' reasons for intervening in numerous humanitarian crises. Aiming to create a legal basis to intervene in the wage of genocide and mass killings, the so-called 'Responsibility to Protect' was formulated as a new international norm that legalised military intervention under certain conditions and was officially adopted by the UN General Assembly at the 2005 UN World Summit. While some refer to the post-Cold War period as a "golden era for humanitarian activism", some states, especially in the global South, have raised concerns that humanitarian intervention is a 'Trojan horse', that legitimises "the forcible interference of the strong in the affairs of the weak" by disguising such actions as humane gestures (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, pp. 480-484).

As mixed-motives behind many of these allegedly 'humanitarian' interventions have been discovered, attempts to Westernise the places of intervention have become more evident, which supports comparisons between humanitarianism and old forms of domination such as colonialism, or missionaries (Barnett, 2011, pp. 162-163). In this context, voices have arisen that present humanitarianism itself as nothing but a new name for old forms of violence and domination. Throughout the following four sections, I argue that whilst it is crucial to shed light on the abuse of humanitarian claims, one should not demonise humanitarianism entirely. Although the fundamental idea behind humanitarianism has been heavily undermined by its recent politicisation and abuse for state-interests, fractions of the once noble approach still exist and should not be overlooked.

To illustrate this claim, I will first, examine the origins of humanitarianism and its seven underlying principles, to show that humanitarianism was not intended as a political tool for dominant states. Then, I will focus on its post-Cold War politicisation and how this new understanding of humanitarianism conflicts with the original concept. In the third section, I will demonstrate how old forms of violence and domination have indeed been committed in the name of humanitarianism. Finally, I will demonstrate why the focus on the utilisation of humanitarianism should not undermine the term as a whole.

Origins and Fundamental Principles

Today, humanitarianism is largely "viewed as the latest in a series of imposition of alien values, practices, and lifestyles". While humanitarianism is now often presented as nothing but a door-opener for Westernization (Barnett, 2005, p. 734), it was once promoted to serve humanity. On his journey from Geneva to Italy in 1859, the Swiss entrepreneur Henry Dunant witnessed how injured soldiers, who fought in the French and Austro-Hungarian battle at

the Italian village of Solferino, were left on the battlefield. Appalled by their misery, he and a small group of locals gathered to provide them with aid. Upon his return Dunant published his experiences and proposed a solution to limit the suffering of injured soldiers in his book *A Memory of Solferino (Barnett, 2011, p. 2)* . To put his ideas into actions, Dunant formed a working group in 1863 that eventually became the International Committee of the Red Cross (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2010). Furthermore, Dunant's, by then best-selling, book had wide-ranging consequences. His ideas led to the adoption of the original Geneva Convention in 1864, which not only defined the limits of warfare, and promoted the creation of voluntary medical aid providers by allowing them to assist injured soldiers (Schweizer, 2004, p. 548), but also made it mandatory for armies to treat all wounded soldiers, regardless of their side (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2010).

Guided by the Geneva Convention, the ICRC and other humanitarian agencies have based their actions on the seven principles of "humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality" (Schweizer, 2004, p. 548). These principles have two purposes. On one side they express the ethical foundation of humanitarian organizations as they promote unconditional life-saving relief (Schweizer, 2004, p. 548). At the same time, they render humanitarian agencies apolitical, which enables action. The principles of impartiality and neutrality, for example, require humanitarians to assist anyone in need of aid, regardless of their background. Additionally, the principle of independence demands the unconnectedness to any conflict party. Following these principles, humanitarians show that they are not trying to influence outcomes or post-war structures. This is crucial to their success because if they appeared to be political, states might hinder the provision of relief by refusing humanitarians to enter. Unfortunately, these principles have been heavily undermined since the concept's transformation in the 1990s (Barnett, 2011, pp. 2-4), which will be analysed in the following section.

Post-Cold War Transformation

During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union were extremely concerned about maintaining and increasing their power. To gain as many allies as they could, the superpowers were willing to pay significant sums to Third World regimes. After the Cold War, the money ceased to flow. Consequently, already-struggling regimes failed to keep their societies together which led to the emergence of failed states, civil war, and genocide (Barnett, 2011, p. 162). In the wage of such extensive suffering, many humanitarian organizations, that were once "satisfied with keeping alive the "well-fed dead"", shifted their objectives towards eliminating the root causes of conflict and began to widen their agenda to include new goals, like human rights, or democracy promotion (Barnett, 2011, p. 4). This development contradicts to the fundamental principles and original identity of humanitarianism that separated the concept from politics (Barnett, 2005, pp. 723-724).

Understandably, many humanitarian organizations are concerned about the ethical consequences of this shift (Schweizer, 2004, p. 563). Additionally, the willingness of organizations to work alongside states and the extreme increase in official state funding intensified the politicisation of humanitarian organizations. In fact, states began to outbid private donors, and aid levels increased from 2.1 to 5.9 billion US-Dollars between 1990 and 2000 (Barnett, 2005, p. 727). This generosity came at a high price. Because the priorities of donor governments are not primarily based on humanitarian concerns, but much rather stem from political considerations, state donations restrict the ways in which humanitarian organizations can use funds (Schweizer, 2004, p. 551). In this context, 'earmarking', which refers to the practice of donors dictating how their donations will be allocated, has increased since the 1980s. Between 1996 and 1999, for example, half of all bilateral assistance that went to the top 50 recipients, was spent on Iraq, former Yugoslavia, as well as on Israel and Palestine. Had these funds been distributed based on needs, Sudan, Angola, or Congo should have received the most (Barnett, 2005, p. 731).

Humanitarian principles, such as neutrality and independence, were furthermore undermined, for example in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, where aid agencies were financed by governments that were actively involved in the fighting (Barnett, 2005, pp. 724-725). As if all of this was not enough, donors additionally restricted humanitarian organizations by demanding evidence of their effectiveness. As the tragedy of the Rwandan genocide raised questions regarding aid agencies' effectiveness, their huge donor-dependency forced them to give in to their donors' demands, which meant standardizing their conduct and measuring their results. This institutionalization undermined their humanitarian aims further, as organizations began to worry about self-preservation rather than focussing

exclusively on the provision of relief. Yet, the transformation of humanitarian organizations is not the most worrying post-Cold War development of humanitarianism, since states soon began to use the concept as a justification to intervene militarily in foreign countries (Barnett, 2005, pp. 725-727), as addressed in the following section.

Humanitarianism As a 'Trojan Horse'?

Humanitarian intervention is highly controversial as it goes against the internationally acknowledged principles of sovereignty and non-intervention which are supported by the UN Charter. For a long time, the only accepted reason for a state to use armed force against another was self-defence (Nardin, 2002, p. 57). Whereas these norms were once adhered to and humanitarian crises, for example in Biafra, were ignored by the Security Council, humanitarian interventions occurred increasingly during the post-Cold War era (Barnett, 2011, p. 163). In the light of the humanitarian crises of the 1990s, the international community made sovereignty conditional as it began to question how to respond to states treating "sovereignty as a license to kill". Soon, the idea emerged that, irrespective of international law, "there is a moral duty to intervene to protect civilians from genocide and mass killing" (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, pp. 480-481). The NATO countries, for example, claimed that the legitimacy of their intervention in Kosovo may not have stemmed from the legal sphere but from the moral one (Fassin, 2007, p. 510).

While humanitarianism has been frequently used to legitimize military intervention since the 1990s, it is worth mentioning that the practice of using 'moral' justifications for intervention has a long tradition. In the medieval context, for example, Christian rulers, with the pope's authorization, had the right to wage war to enforce 'natural law' (Nardin, 2002, p. 60). While humanitarian interventions became quite popular with Western countries, Third World states, recalling the imposition of "humane gestures during colonialism" (Barnett, 2011, p. 163), feared these interventions to be 'Trojan horses' (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 480). Referring to the idea of addressing root causes, humanitarian interventions are often followed by state-building projects in which Western countries use themselves as blueprints (Barnett, 2011, p. 164). This practice supports the claim that "this type of intervention looks more like colonialism than disinterested humanitarianism" (Tusan, 2014, p. 84).

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, which has damaged humanitarianism's image further, illustrates this perfectly. The US and UK partly used humanitarian concerns to justify the intervention. When they failed to discover the weapons of mass destruction that they previously declared to be in Iraq's possession, the real intentions behind the intervention were questioned widely (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 492). The state-building attempts that followed illustrate how the US attempted to impose its own values and ideas on the country, as they, for instance, replaced the toppled Saddam Hussein with a US-friendly, democratic regime (Bridoux, 2011, p. 62).

The huge differences in responses to humanitarian crises raise further questions regarding the real motivations behind interventions. The interventions in Kosovo or Iraq cannot have been based purely on humanitarian concerns, as the same actors did little to address other humanitarian catastrophes (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 482). The international community failed, for example, to respond timely and decisive to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, during which over one million lives were lost within two months (Wheeler, 2000, p. 16). This reluctance to act exemplifies states' unwillingness to sacrifice the lives of their own soldiers without self-interested reasons (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 482). Nevertheless, under certain conditions, humanitarian interventions were given a legal basis when the UN General Assembly adopted the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) in 2005 (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 480). Originally proposed to provide a guideline for actions in response to grave humanitarian crises, it equipped states with a responsibility to protect suffering populations whose governments failed to protect them in the first place (Evans & Sahoun, 2002, pp. 99-101). Despite its dependency on United Nations Security Council authorization, which has not been given until the 2011 crisis in Libya, the concept continues to be extremely controversial (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 480), especially since it has been largely influenced by liberal ideals and institutions (Tusan, 2014, p. 84).

Beyond Abuse

As the previous two sections have demonstrated, the original understanding of humanitarianism has been largely undermined by its transformation and consequent utilization since the 1990s. Yet, one should not reduce the term to

such practices, which arguably resemble colonialism rather than the relief of human suffering. In terms of the complicity of humanitarian organizations themselves, it is noteworthy that not all of them support this development. Wilsonian organizations, named after former US president Woodrow Wilson, who saw the attacking of root causes and political, economic, and cultural transformation of societies as desirable, are clearly political. Nevertheless, Dunantist organizations, named after "the patriarch of modern humanitarianism", Henry Dunant, believe in the segregation of politics and humanitarianism. Concerned about the politicisation of the concept, these organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) and the International Committee of the Red Cross attempted, although unsuccessfully, to hinder the concept's politicization (Barnett, 2011, p. 728).

In this spirit, the President of the ICRC has recently expressed his concerns about donor-driven, standardized operating procedures and stated that "[w]e must listen and act, not impose" (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018c). Furthermore, in terms of humanitarian intervention, former ICRC Deputy-General Beat Schweizer, for example, has advocated for the humanitarian space to be "kept clearly distinct from "humanitarian" military interventions" (Schweizer, 2004, p. 563). To this day, the "ethical, operational and institutional framework to the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", is based on the fundamental principles of "[h]umanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality" (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018a). The ICRC's crucial and life-saving work in regions that are not usually discussed in mainstream media, such as Lake Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Yemen (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018b), exemplify this ongoing goal.

Conclusion

As this essay has shown, it is undeniable that humanitarianism has been utilised to serve states' self-interested goals. States have found various ways to undermine the ""humanitarian imperative" […] to provide assistance unconditionally, whenever and wherever it is needed" (Schweizer, 2004, p. 548). Whether through shaping the actions of humanitarian organizations financially, or through humanitarian military intervention, states have abused the concept to pursue self-interested projects resembling old forms of violently imposed domination such as missionaries, or colonialism. Yet, humanitarianism is not *merely* a new name for old forms of violence and domination.

Throughout this essay I have put forward that it is totally right to condemn humanitarian interventions as 'Trojan horses', used to promote Western interest and ideals in the global South. I have also acknowledged that it is correct to point out that many humanitarian organizations became willing accomplices to such practise during the allegedly "golden era for humanitarian activism" (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2014, p. 480). However, while it is crucial to point the finger at such gross abuses of power, one should not demonise humanitarianism entirely. After all, humanitarianism was once created on the basis of seven fundamental principles that rendered it apolitical and promoted the noble goal of unconditional, life-saving relief. Not all humanitarian organizations have abandoned these principles. In fact, Dunantist organizations like the ICRC continue to serve humanity in compliance to these principles, which should be respected, not ignored. While their noble work may just seem like a drop in the ocean compared to the various abuses of humanitarianism, I would like to borrow Mother Teresa's words and conclude that "the ocean would be less because of that missing drop" (Brainy Quote, 2011-2018).

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