Humanitarian Action in International Relations: Power and Politics

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1 Introduction

Traditionally, humanitarians have often thought of themselves as shielding away from politics: neutral, independent and impartial in the delivery of the essentials to ensure the dignified survival of disaster victims. Power politics, many of those who set out to work in the humanitarian sector believe, is a dirty business—in contrast to the purer and nobler humanitarianism. Remaining outside politics, both at the national and international levels, is also, and crucially, a way for humanitarian organisations to ensure access to victims and to gain the respect and cooperation of different powerful groups and States. Consequently, for United Nations (UN) agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), for instance, taking sides politically goes against their mandates.

This anti-politics philosophy has been further reinforced by the fact that many humanitarian emergencies, such as interstate and intrastate conflict, famines and large-scale industrial disasters, are caused by politics, or political, economic and societal failures. Many other calamities result from a mix of natural and man-made causes, where, again, the inadequate use of power and a lack of political leadership are key explanatory factors. Thus, earthquakes, landslides, floods, tsunamis and volcanic activity are made worse by the pattern and quality of human settlements—the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster is a case in point. Likewise, anthropogenic climate change causes more extreme temperatures and meteorological conditions: droughts, wildfires, cyclones and hurricanes.

Hence, humanitarians have often tried to eschew the politics and power plays that create or sustain so much human misery for higher grounds, or what Michael

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Barnett calls 'a place of purity'.[1] Humanitarians are often seen as relatively powerless: traditionally entering scenes of conflict unarmed, they are at the mercy of government and non-State armed forces of various stripes. The only protection they rely on has traditionally been their reputation as protectors of human life and dignity, symbolised by their emblems and their status as organisations with a purely humanitarian mandate in accordance with international law. There are many poignant examples that seem to illustrate the point that humanitarians are at the mercy of—violent—State and non-State actors: humanitarian workers operating under fire for victims of violence and persecution with their only shield being the Red Cross or Red Crescent, the sky-blue UN family logos or the red-and-white emblem of Médecins Sans Frontières.

To any aspiring humanitarian wishing to work along these premises, the words of Sadako Ogata, long-term humanitarian civil servant and head of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), will appear unsettling. Implicit in her assertion that there are 'no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems'[2] is that, instead, humanitarian crises require political or perhaps economic or even military responses and are hence part and parcel of power politics.

This chapter aims to place humanitarian action in the context of international politics and to discuss the relationship between humanitarianism and international power structures. It addresses questions such as: are humanitarians powerless? Or do humanitarian agencies wield independent power in international relations? If so, what kind of power? How do they relate to other powerful actors in international politics? The chapter examines how humanitarianism can be, and has been, discussed in relation to political, economic and military power.

Many argue that such questions have taken on a new importance since the end of the Cold War and in the post-9/11 period as humanitarianism—or 'the new humanitarianism' as it has sometimes been labelled—has become increasingly central to power politics.[3] In this context, many humanitarian organisations working in the so-called Wilsonian tradition—i.e., humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) cooperating with governments that they see as pursuing compatible goals—have also become more implicated in wider human rights and peacebuilding political agendas in the last decades. Of course, this is a wide and complex question: the notion of power is one of the most debated in the social sciences generally and in international relations particularly. Scholars have been analysing various elements of power in relation to humanitarianism for decades. The aim of this chapter is thus much more modest: to briefly introduce to the student some of the main parameters of the discussion on humanitarianism and power.

[1] Barnett (2011), p. 237.

[2] Cited in Walker and Maxwell (2009), p. xiii.

[3] See for example Kent et al. (2013); Rieff (2002); Duffield et al. (2001), pp. 269–274.

2 Humanitarians as Subject to State Power

One long-dominant way of analysing humanitarian aid has been in terms of the interests and pursuits of powerful States. Here, humanitarian and development assistance is perceived as yet another tool that States can potentially use to gain influence and build alliances internationally. In this tradition, the debate is often not about whether humanitarian aid is subservient to State interests—which is taken for granted—but how useful a tool of statecraft it is, for instance in reinforcing alliances or buttressing military campaigns.[4] In this conception of humanitarian aid, it is thus States that are powerful, not humanitarian multilateral agencies or NGOs.

States, it is pointed out, are the primary financial sponsors of multilateral and non-governmental humanitarian action, as well as principal donors of bilateral humanitarian and development aid, going directly to recipient State coffers. As a consequence, it is primarily States that determine the size and scope of humanitarian efforts in various parts of the globe based on their strategic and wider political interests.[5] Humanitarian organisations, in this view, have relatively little independent agency. They are part and parcel of State power politics: powerless pawns of all-powerful States. When Colin Powell, United States (US) Secretary of State under President George W Bush, (in-)famously referred to humanitarian NGOs as 'force multipliers', an appendix to US fighting forces in Afghanistan, he gave expression to this view of humanitarianism as a supplementary means of projecting State power.[6]

The debate on the role and importance of political and strategic interests in humanitarian aid is ongoing. For instance, in an analysis of US disaster assistance data over three decades, A. Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson and Douglas A. Van Belle conclude that 'our results paint a picture of high U.S. foreign policy decision makers as realists at heart, seeing disasters as opportunities to enhance [national] security'.[7] In a study covering the wider global response in the wake of 270 natural disasters—which, at first glance, should be less likely candidates for politicisation than man-made armed conflicts—Günther Fink and Silvia Redaelli come to a similar conclusion: on average, 'donor governments provide aid more frequently to oil exporting countries, and give disproportionately more to geographically closer and politically less affine countries [as a means to create alliances], as well as to their former colonies'.[8] Conclusions such as these are in line with the long-noted problem of forgotten emergencies—emergencies in States that mostly are of little strategic interest to donor States, and which, as a result, receive a much smaller share of emergency assistance.

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[4] See for example Morgenthau (1962), pp. 301–309.

[5] Minear (2012).

[6] Cited in Kenyon Lischer (2007), p. 99.

[7] Cooper et al. (2005), p. 470.

[8] Fink and Redaelli (2011), p. 742. See also Rye Olsen et al. (2003), pp. 109–126.

This equation of humanitarianism with State action—particularly action by the most powerful States—is reflected in the interest generated by the concepts of 'humanitarian intervention' and the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P), i.e. entering into armed conflict with the purported aim to prevent or stop war crimes, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity or genocide committed by a State against (part of) its people. Although much less common than non-military humanitarian action, humanitarian intervention arguably receives the bulk of the interest in humanitarianism in the current literature on international relations.[9] Given the preponderant role of armed forces in such interventions, powerful States are, again, the main players with humanitarian agencies relegated to mere side shows. In this vein, humanitarianism is primarily an instrument in the hands of the great powers.

Others have noted that recipient States and non-State armed actors also can and do instrumentalise humanitarian agencies: they are able to determine which organisations receive access to specific populations in need or to particular areas of the respective State and under what conditions they may do so. Thus, recipient States and non-State armed groups, as well as donor States, use humanitarian organisations and the aid they provide for their own purposes: for instance, to punish or reward segments of the population in accordance with their degree of loyalty, to induce population movements and to nourish and arm their soldiers (through taxation of humanitarian agencies). Many examples have been used to illustrate how humanitarian organisations are subject to the power of recipient States and non-State armed groups, from Cambodia in the late 1970s,[10] Ethiopia in the 1980s[11] and North Korea in the 1990s[12] to Somalia over the last decade.[13] In cases where few other resources are available to belligerents, humanitarian assets become particularly valuable to gain a military advantage, and their misuse becomes particularly salient.[14]

To summarise, analyses based on Realpolitik or Realist thinking in international relations stress how humanitarian action regularly becomes part and parcel of a State's foreign and security policy, a—more or less useful—tool of statecraft available to States and, in many cases, non-State armed groups. It can be used in tandem with, in lieu or independently of, military action to achieve political goals.

[9]For a variety of perspectives on the responsibility to protect doctrine, see for example Chomsky (2011), Evans (2009) and Pommier (2011).

[10]Terry (2002).

[11]de Waal (1997).

[12]Flake and Snyder (eds) (2003).

[13]Jackson and Aynte (2013).

[14]Terry (2002) and Maxwell (2012).

3 Humanitarianism as Part of Western Hegemony

A second way of analysing humanitarian action in international relations also stresses the relative powerlessness of humanitarian actors, but this time in relation to a North-South politico-economic system that leaves relatively little room for humanitarians to act autonomously. That today's international humanitarian order has its roots in the Western hemisphere is not controversial among those that have attempted to trace its emergence and evolution.[15] The towering historical figures of humanitarian action—Henri Dunant, Florence Nightingale, Eglantyne Jebb, Fridtjof Nansen, Herbert Hoover, Folke Bernadotte, Mother Theresa, Bernard Kouchner—while very different in character, nevertheless have one thing in common: they are all of European or North American origin. More importantly, Western States, which dominated the international system after World War I and World War II, set up the intergovernmental institutions forming the basis of the present-day humanitarian system. The key international NGOs in the sector, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, Save the Children, and World Vision International, also mostly originate in Europe and North America.

While the Western origins of the current humanitarian system are hardly disputed, the consequences of this historical development are. Traditionally, it has been argued that the origins of humanitarian organisations matter little since the UN system is now global in reach and humanitarian action is firmly linked to universally accepted humanitarian and human rights law. Moreover, it is argued, while the foundations may be Western, humanitarian ethics and impulses are universal, found for example in all major religions.

For other analysts, these origins have a much stronger—and more problematic—bearing on how the international humanitarian system functions. They see traces of previous colonial and post-colonial practices reflected in current humanitarian action. In particular, they perceive the broader peacebuilding agenda within which a number of humanitarian agencies operate as a modern-day variant of colonial paternalism or *mission civilisatrice*. For instance, according to Roland Paris, '[w]ithout exception, peacebuilding missions in the post-Cold War period have attempted to "transplant" the values and institutions of the liberal democratic core into the domestic affairs of peripheral host states'.[16] This has been the case most conspicuously in, but not restricted to, Kosovo and East Timor, where the UN has taken on proxy governance functions in the absence of local authorities in the aftermath of humanitarian interventions. While authors such as Paris are ambivalent vis-à-vis this agenda, perceiving its intentions as mainly benevolent, others are more critical.

Thus, authors such as Antonio Donini perceive the Northern/Western 'dominant, multi-billion dollar, visible face of humanitarianism'[17] as part and parcel of

[15]See for example Davey et al. (2013), Walker and Maxwell (2009) and Barnett (2011).

[16]Paris (2002), p. 638.

[17]Donini (2010), pp. S220–S237.

globalised power structures dominated by the global North. According to Donini, 'humanitarianism in its Northern and Western incarnations is increasingly consubstantial with and functional to processes of economic, social and cultural globalisation, and, more often than not, to world ordering and securitisation agendas'.[18] In other words, even if individual humanitarian organisations strive to oppose an unjust global order, they in reality help perpetuate it, or as Roberto Belloni puts it, 'humanitarianism is at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive'.[19]

The reason is that humanitarians cannot escape a system in which humanitarian assistance is distorting the realities of unequal North–South relations, so that the humanitarian management of crises across the globe captures attention and resources while the long-term, structural inequalities and the realities of violent conflict persist without serious questioning or action. Moreover, humanitarian actors, by taking over State functions, weaken States in the global South and hence serve privatisation and wider liberal economic agendas emanating from the North/West.

The headquarters of the largest international NGOs and humanitarian agencies in global centres such as New York and Geneva reflect their considerable—and growing—financial resources as compared to, for instance, small developing countries: the largest of the humanitarian NGOs report yearly expenditures larger than the yearly gross national income of States such as Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Djibouti and Guatemala. From this point of view, humanitarian aid is mainly about control and containment.[20] Just as (limited) humanitarian aid and public works programmes were used in the colonial period—for example, in British-ruled India—to prevent mass uprisings of colonial subjects during periods of extreme food scarcity, so humanitarian aid in today's world is about securitisation or containment of peripheral areas and peoples of the globe.

To summarise, to those that perceive humanitarian action as part and parcel of Western hegemony and fundamentally unequal North–South relations, humanitarianism is powerful—but vis-à-vis those at the receiving end only (individuals and States in the global South). In contrast, humanitarians hardly ever manage to change the way that an unjust international system, of which humanitarian crises are a recurrent feature, operates. Instead, they in fact assist in perpetuating it.

4 Humanitarianism Wielding Normative Power

More recently, international relations scholars of the so-called Liberal school have become interested in how principled actors, i.e. non-governmental actors basing their agenda on normative concerns—and, in this case, primarily humanitarian

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 223; see also Duffield (2007).

[19] Belloni (2007), p. 454.

[20] For a discussion of the '*three Cs*' of humanitarianism: compassion, change and containment, see Walker and Maxwell (2009), p. 21.

organisations—have wielded power over States. In so doing, such scholars argue, advocacy-oriented organisations have shaped the evolution of international politics in a positive direction.[21] Such principled actors base their advocacy on ideas of a common humanity and the inherent and equal worth of every human being. An additional—and arguably equally important—basis, particularly in the case of humanitarian action, is the human impulse of assisting those in extreme need, coupled with a growing sense of obligation, of both individuals and States, towards distant strangers beyond their borders.[22] In pushing governments towards a more moral and human-centred approach, advocates of humanitarian and human rights principles make use of the fact that people generally wish the foreign policy of their country to be based not only on self-interest but also on some form of ethical standards and values.[23] The lobbying of such principled actors has resulted in norms and institutions that restrict States' behaviour and ability to project power in various ways.

Humanitarian actors, especially those striving to remain independent of States—for example, the Red Cross movement and several international NGOs—are acutely aware of the political power field in which they are operating and have attempted to resist and reshape it at various levels through advocacy. One of Henri Dunant's main actions was to (successfully) lobby for the First Geneva Convention of 1864. In so doing, he advocated in favour of respect for what in today's vocabulary would be labelled a 'humanitarian space', a space that makes it possible to resist the power of States and operate in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.[24] Such lobbying for normative change enabling humanitarian actors to operate more freely of State power has continued ever since.

Hence, if we look back at the evolution of humanitarian action, we see, in parallel to the humanitarian activities on the ground, the evolution of an international legal and normative framework establishing humanitarian principles and rules (the relevant humanitarian, human rights and refugee law are described elsewhere in this volume). Not least through the successful persuasion efforts of humanitarian actors or norm entrepreneurs, this framework has been strengthened over time, often in response to particularly blatant failures of the international community to prevent or alleviate large-scale human tragedies. For example, the Genocide Convention followed the horrors of the concentration camps targeting Jews, Roma and other 'undesirable' groups during World War II, and the Sphere standards and other quality and accountability codes were developed after the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

The extent to which such normative developments have changed international relations is still debated. One of the main criticisms levelled against this approach is

[21] See for example Keck and Sikkink (1998).

[22] Barnett (2011).

[23] Barnett (2012) and Walker and Maxwell (2009).

[24] For a discussion of humanitarian space see for example Collinson and Elhawary (2012).

that it has focused mostly on formal norms, procedures and institutions but has failed to properly examine how and to what extent these actually affect State policy and action. Another point of criticism advanced against humanitarian actors rather than the liberal theoretical framework is that humanitarians have been reluctant to take on the responsibilities that come with the new-found normative power. As noted by David Kennedy:

> Humanitarians have come into rulership. They have become, in a word, political. Yet modern humanitarianism remains a Gordian knot of participation and denial, willful blindness posing as strategic insight. Just when we have gotten in the door and found them speaking our language, we turn back. Drop this bomb, here? Kill those people, there? No, we prefer to think of ourselves as outside power, judging the powerful, opposing government, speaking to it with the truth of law or ethics.[25]

To summarise, in this liberal line of thought, humanitarian actors are far from powerless. In fact, through their successful, piecemeal advocacy, they have over centuries managed to change the normative environment in which States operate, so that States now have to take international laws and norms into account and must contend with moral arguments when deciding on their line of action in the global sphere.

5 Humanitarians and Power

The theories analysed so far—boiled down to their essential parameters in the preceding paragraphs—try to situate humanitarian action in the broader matrix of international politics and form part and parcel of three of the main broad schools of thought in international relations: realism, dependency perspectives and liberalism. A number of analysts have either contested the conclusions arrived at or focused more squarely on the relationship between humanitarian actors and the particular settings in which they work.

This section very briefly reviews a couple of conclusions that such analysts have drawn regarding the relationship between humanitarianism and power. It has no pretence of completeness and merely aims to illustrate that the relationship between humanitarianism and political power is even more complex than the previous paragraphs, with their focus on international relations, were able to demonstrate.

A growing body of literature on humanitarian action focuses on the relationships between humanitarians and beneficiaries in the field. It explores the reluctance of humanitarians to assume that this is indeed an unequal relationship and that they have power over individuals in extreme need. Several authors have stressed that humanitarian actors are more comfortable discussing the power that other actors—States, non-State armed groups, corporations—wield over them than their own power vis-à-vis vulnerable populations. Yet the discrepancy in power is obviously wide. Humanitarians retort that they base their action on selfless values and on the

[25]Kennedy (2005).

stated goals of humanitarianism. However, as noted by Michael Barnett, '[a]ny "-ism" that arrives with promises of progress must be closely watched for signs of domination over those whose lives are supposed to be bettered'.[26]

Another, by now classical, analysis examining the relationship between humanitarian actors, local populations and governments focuses on humanitarianism and the particular problem of famine prevention, a core humanitarian concern over the centuries. In *Famine Crimes*, Alex de Waal's assertion (itself based on Amartya Sen's classic work on the causes of famine and famine prevention) is that famine is best prevented through a political contract between the government and the population. Such a political contract is a 'result of a popular movement successfully articulating a new right [not to have to suffer from famine]'.[27] However, because it weakens political accountability, humanitarian aid can counter the emergence of such a contract between rulers and ruled. Famines become a technical, professional, institutional issue rather than a political one, and thus the power of those suffering from famine is eroded. De Waal's conclusions are severe: 'the intractability of famine is the price that is paid for the ascendancy of humanitarianism'.[28] According to De Waal, the solution, echoing Ogata's statement cited at the outset of this chapter, is that 'non-humanitarian means are needed to meet humanitarian goals'.[29]

To summarise, a focus on international politics and power dynamics can easily obfuscate the more national and local power dynamics involved in the delivery of humanitarian aid. It is thus important to complement general theories with theories more grounded in the various individual contexts.

6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to review how the relationship between humanitarianism and power is discussed in international relations. Although humanitarianism has never been a core concern of any of the three main schools of thought within this discipline (and sometimes sits rather uncomfortably with the main assumptions of each school—a discussion that is beyond the scope of this chapter), all three manage to throw a different light on the aspects of the humanitarian system and its workings. Does that mean that they are sufficient to elucidate humanitarian action? Those devoting their careers to the study of humanitarian action would mostly argue that they are not, as they fail to discuss, for instance, the complex power relationship between those individuals and groups affected by disasters and the humanitarian actors or how State–society relations are affected by humanitarian aid. With their focus on the level of the international system, they clarify some issues while obfuscating others.

[26] Barnett (2011), p. 13.
[27] de Waal (1997), p. 11.
[28] *Id.*, p. 5.
[29] *Ibid.*

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