

The far side: the meta functions of humanitarianism in a globalised world

Antonio Donini Senior Researcher, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, United States

This paper explores the meta functions of humanitarianism—that is, the functions that, as an ideology, a movement and a profession, it performs, wittingly or unwittingly, in the early twenty-first century.¹ The term humanitarianism is used as shorthand to encompass a complex set of currents of thought, actions and institutions of which the boundaries are unclear. The focus is on mainstream humanitarianism, the dominant Northern/Western enterprise. The paper first discusses the relationship between humanitarianism and globalised power. It goes on to examine three types of functions that humanitarianism and humanitarian action perform: ‘macro’ functions—the deep undercurrents, power relations and values that humanitarianism articulates and transmits; ‘meso’ functions—those that relate to the political economy of humanitarian action and to the mechanics (rather than to the ideology) of globalisation; and ‘micro’ functions that relate to the motivations of the individuals who devote their energies to humanitarianism.

Keywords: humanitarian action, humanitarianism, globalisation

Introduction

The concept of humanitarianism is fraught with ambiguities. It connotes three separate but overlapping realities: an ideology, a movement and a profession. Together, they also form a political economy. What unites the various facets of humanitarianism is a broad commitment to alleviating the suffering and protecting the lives of civilians caught up in conflict or crisis. Beneath this common goal, however, the ideology, the movement and the profession are themselves deeply fractured. Like other ‘isms’—communism and Catholicism come to mind—humanitarianism propounds lofty aims that serve to hide deep contradictions, conflicting alignments and power plays, manipulations and instrumentalisations, personality cults, struggles over resources and, sometimes, shady financial transactions. It includes Soviet-style card-carrying defenders of orthodoxy, heretics, fellow travellers, revisionists and extremist fringes. It now even has for-profit and military wings.

Moreover, and to complicate things, there is not one humanitarianism, albeit riven by competing claims and crosscurrents, but several. The Northern/Western humanitarian movement, rooted in various traditions of charity and philanthropy and in the civilising impulses of the Enlightenment, as well as their subsequent manifestations in the expanses of what we now call the Global South, constitutes the dominant, multi-billion dollar, visible face of humanitarianism. It dictates the language and the

rules of the game off humanitarian action. But in parallel, or in its shadow, other humanitarianisms—Islamic, for example—also save and protect lives, as do communities and a variety of formal and non-formal institutions that are on the frontlines when disaster strikes. The blindness of the dominant discourse to the workings of this informal humanitarian sector is a telling indicator of its strong isomorphism.

Saving and protecting the lives of people affected by conflict and crisis is a fundamentally necessary and worthwhile activity. Humanitarian action is a safety net for the most vulnerable in times of disaster, whether man-made or not. As such, it deserves to be protected and nurtured despite its obvious limitations and imperfections. At the same time, before one gets carried away by unrealistic expectations, it is useful to start unpacking and unscrambling the multiple realities that hide behind the benevolent façade of humanitarianism.

What follows is speculative in nature but informed, at least in part, by evidence-based research on local perceptions of humanitarian action in 12 crisis settings conducted at the Feinstein International Center (Donini et al., 2008). The findings highlight some of the biases, baggage and contradictions inherent in humanitarian action. They echo the outcomes of similar endeavours undertaken by others.² The analysis below is offered therefore principally to raise issues and to stimulate discussion among humanitarian practitioners and others concerned with the evolution of humanitarianism and the values, interests and motivations that underpin it.

Setting the stage

In addition to being an ideology, a movement, a profession and a compassionate endeavour to provide assistance and protection to populations at risk, humanitarianism is also a set of institutions, a business and an industry that employs hundreds of thousands of individuals,³ in which actors compete for market share (Cooley and Ron, 2002). Humanitarianism, in its various facets, witnessed dramatic growth and transformation over the last two decades of the twentieth century. Much of this growth was related to the diminished inhibitions on waging war and the privatisation of social services that accompanied the end of the Cold War. From a marginal and non-intrusive activity—its effectiveness being a function of its acceptability to primarily interstate belligerents—it has become central and salient in North–South discourse and practice. As the world moved beyond Cold War strictures, humanitarian action also expanded, accordion-style, into new territories (advocacy, development, human rights and peacebuilding), further complicating the task of circumscribing the realm of its activities.

From annual disbursements of less than USD 1 billion and a percentage share of less than four per cent of overall official overseas development assistance (ODA) 10 years ago, disbursements for humanitarian action from private and public sources reached USD 18 billion in 2005, roughly 15 per cent of ODA. The year 2005 was atypical—skewed by the massive response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004—but it showed nonetheless the extraordinary appeal of humanitarian response

to both governments and citizens in the North (and to some outside of the North as well). Since the tsunami, funding has remained in the USD 15–18 billion range (Development Initiatives, 2006, 2009).

Simplifications are arbitrary, but the many components of the *humanitarian internationale* can be grouped into two broad groups.⁴ First, the established institutions—also known as the Northern/Western tip of the iceberg—with their own different and sometimes overlapping roots and ideologies, including:

- ‘Dunantists’, who recognise themselves in the founding principles of the Red Cross;
- ‘Wilsonians’, who by and large see their role as an extension of, or at least compatible with, their country’s worldview and foreign policy;
- faith-based, in their Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and other hews; and
- ‘Solidarists’, who pursue a range of advocacy, development, human rights and/or justice objectives in addition to humanitarian assistance.

These distinctions are not always clear-cut. Many organisations have multiple agendas and seek to fulfil humanitarian as well as development or social justice goals. Moreover, new players and institutions are increasingly crowding the field and are pushing to be part of the humanitarian community, such as private companies and, increasingly, the military. The latter occupies a special place both as an extension of foreign policy through armed intervention and related hearts-and-minds activities and because of its mandated role under the Geneva Conventions to protect civilians facing military occupation.

Second, the other ‘humanitarianisms’: the grey and black political economy of those actors who provide succour to people in crisis and save countless lives but which do not necessarily function on the basis of our (read: Western) established principles and standards of accountability. This humanitarianism comprises a variety of formal and informal organisations and even individual approaches, including:

- the contributions of governments, societies, and especially, local communities in countries affected by crisis, which are often the first line of defence for the most vulnerable;
- non-traditional donors (such as China, India or the Gulf States) that do not normally make it on to the ODA hit parade;
- Islamic charities, *zakat* and other forms of tithing, which are largely unseen (and uncounted); and
- remittances from migrants and diasporas and other individual transfers, which allow millions of people in extremis to survive.

These two universes—and it is unclear which one contributes more to saving and protecting lives—do not necessarily meet. And when they do, misunderstandings and friction abound. Thus, humanitarianism is in the eye of the beholder. It is self-defined and self-referential. The term is ambiguous in that a diverse range of actors claims to operate under a banner that is used to justify a multitude of interventions.

There is no formal universal standard to which organisations, which see themselves as ‘humanitarian’, can be held to account.

Moreover, the motivations of the individuals and the overall aims of the organisations can be quite different. In broad-brush terms, humanitarianism is about three ‘Cs’: compassion, change or containment (Walker and Maxwell, 2009, p. 21). Traditionally, there were two ‘souls’ in the humanitarian ethos, one focusing on the universal values of compassion and charity and the other on change and transformation of society. In Europe, these traditions are represented, for example, by the work of religious orders going back to the Middle Ages and the transformative message of the Enlightenment with its aspirations for justice and rights. In the last two decades, however, a third motivation has appeared: humanitarianism as containment. Containment itself can take two forms: the provision of a minimum of assistance to ensure that crises do not spin out of control (and threaten the citadels of the North) and the deliberate incorporation of humanitarian action in the world ordering and security strategies of the North. The so-called global War on Terror presents many examples of the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action in the service of such objectives (Donini et al., 2006; Donini et al., 2008; Duffield, 2007b; Keen, 2008).

The manipulation of humanitarian action in support of political aims is nothing new. What is new is the breadth and depth of the manipulation as well as the tightening web of connections with global political agendas.⁵ The point here is that regardless of the definitions one adopts and of the personal motivations of those involved, 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. This humanitarian–globalisation nexus is the subject of the next section.

The imperial connection

The linkages between the processes of economic and social globalisation and humanitarian action are well documented (Rieff, 2002; Rufin, 1986; Duffield, 2001). What deserves to be explored is the extent to which the variegated humanitarian enterprise has now become an integral part of global governance (Kennedy, 2004), if not directly of government, and, in short, how it has now become part of Empire.

What does ‘being part of Empire’ mean? Certainly not that individual humanitarian players, whether rosy idealists or hard-nosed pragmatists, wittingly align themselves with the designs of the remaining superpower and its lesser epigones. As we have seen, humanitarianism’s roots extend into the Enlightenment, various traditions of charity, colonial administration, military logistics and in many other directions. It is neither of the Right nor of the Left. It reflects a range of fundamentally cosmopolitan views of the world, including some that espouse anti-Empire positions. Its polarity is geographical: it is structurally, economically and culturally ‘of the North’ (Donini, Minear and Walker, 2004, p. 264). Nevertheless, the ideology and the practice of humanitarian action coexist in parallel and are sometimes

functional to the logic of Empire, that is, not the imperial reach of one state or even an alliance of states, but a new form of sovereignty, or 'network power' (Grewal, 2008).⁶ The dominance of standards, technologies and processes developed in the global North shapes the order in which nation states, global institutions, corporations and even civil society organisations function according to established hierarchical divisions and genealogies (Hardt and Negri, 2001, p. xiv, 2004, p. xii).⁷ From this perspective, humanitarian agencies are the 'mendicant orders of Empire' and the 'capillary vessels' of globalisation. As such, and whether they like it or not, they function as the 'powerful pacific weapons of the new world order' (Hardt and Negri, 2001, p. 36), or, in the words of another analyst, 'the laboratories of the new liberal imperium' (Duffield, 2007b, p. 135).⁸ For some, this 'Empire Lite' is 'ostensibly humanitarian' in that it intervenes to rebuild state order 'for the sake of global stability and security' (Ignatieff, 2004, p. 19, quoted in Duffield, 2007b, p. 8).

There are two ways of conceptualising the relationship of Empire and humanitarian action in the 'borderlands'—that is, those areas of the world that are on the fringes of global governance and capitalist development. Both are useful for theorising the role of humanitarian action in North–South relations and, ironically, both come from now largely discredited political-economy traditions, namely, dualism and dependency theory. The first stresses the separateness of developed and underdeveloped areas and, in a sense, sees the latter as *pathological* in terms of their limited prospects for economic development (Gunder Frank, 1971). In the ungoverned spaces that lie beyond the reach of development and globalisation, what Mark Duffield calls 'savages' and 'barbarians' challenge the imperial project and threaten the solidity of the North's security barriers (Duffield, 2005; also see Rufin, 1991). As such, the realm of humanitarian action is not 'without' borders, as claimed by the proponents of the *sans frontières* movement. Rather it is 'beyond' borders as it takes place in those areas where development encounters the pathology of underdevelopment, an encounter that, when the curative intervention fails, takes the form of conflict. From this vantage point, the conflict in Afghanistan can be read as a struggle between the West and local Westernising elites on one side, and, on the other, an assortment of under-globalised 'savages' and 'barbarian' antibodies to globalisation on Western terms.

The second theoretical position analyses what is happening in the borderlands not as pathological but as a *physiological* requirement for the development of globalised capitalism and world ordering. Many 'dependentistas', such as André Gunder Frank (1971) and Immanuel Wallerstein (2006), debunked dualism for its failure to see underdevelopment in the periphery as functional to the development of the metropolises and attendant exploitative North–South relations. Building on this perspective, it is simpler, perhaps, and less mechanistic, to understand Empire as the *tendency* towards the total incorporation of the borderlands, and the conflicts they embody, into the new global political order. Peace, equilibrium and democracy are to be built on the terms of the network power emanating from the citadels of Empire. Not *imperium*, but 'governance without government' (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992) as the structural principle that incorporates all actors within the order of the whole.

The point here is that economic globalisation and political or military interventionism in the South have historically operated as parallel processes. Rosa Luxemburg's intuition that the capitalist system had a functional need of a non-capitalist 'exterior' in order to conquer progressively new areas, expand and reproduce itself—and that when the limits were reached the system would crumble—deserves another look (Luxemburg, 1968, p. 443; Duffield, 2007b, p. 10). The countries at the bottom of the pyramid have nowhere to go to appropriate surpluses or to export the dysfunctions of market growth going on within them. It should be no surprise, therefore, that it is where the market has reached the limits to its expansion, where the structural obstacles to its penetration and to its homogenising force are strongest, where the state and civil society are weak, that we find a positive correlation between aid dependency and military and/or humanitarian interventions. Consider Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia. While the causes and circumstances of crisis differ, the common factor is the extent to which the society, rather than the state (which in some of these countries has withered away), is dependent on external life-saving assistance with or without intervention for some measure of functioning.

Whatever the individual or collective motivations of those involved in the provision of humanitarian action, the totalising context described above is inescapable. Humanitarianism is intrinsically linked to network power and Empire. Proof? To be accepted at the humanitarian table, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the South have to mimic the behaviour of their Northern counterparts, adopt their language and their *modus operandi*. Moreover, life-saving activities that do not conform to the Western humanitarian canon, such as *zakat*, remittances or contributions from communities in the South, do not make it to international statistics of ODA (Cooley and Ron, 2002; Donini, 2006; Le Sage, 2004). This isomorphism not only acts as a filter for those who wish to join the club, but also it colours the way in which conflict and crisis are conceptualised. In other words, seen from below, humanitarian action reflects the expectation that humanitarian theatres should adapt to it, rather than the reverse (Donini et al., 2008).

Does this mean that the nature of humanitarianism is to be instrumentalised or corrupt or both? Not necessarily. Trade unions need factories; that does not mean they identify with captains of industry. In the same way, civil society organisations are part of Empire but have roles and functions that are not necessarily aligned with its global design. Humanitarians and human rights groups may well be uncomfortable with the workings of Empire, and many openly proclaim as much, but they cannot function outside of it. Being part of governance, they are in a dialectical relationship with Empire.

Humanitarian action per se does not challenge the status quo, nor should it, many of its proponents would argue. In any case, while an ideological de-linking from Empire is always theoretically possible, the structural and sociological realities (read: funding, careers) are such that mainstream humanitarianism cannot ever disengage significantly. Of course, at the margins or in the borderlands, unrecognised streams

of support and succour for the war and disaster-affected do exist but they are hardly in a position (for now?) to challenge the dominant humanitarian discourse.

Meta functions

The following paragraphs propose, and briefly discuss, some of the key meta functions of humanitarian action. These are the functions behind the official or declared functions. They are not necessarily the ‘ulterior’ functions, as this would imply that they are designed as such. They are the functions that humanitarianism as an ideology, a movement and a profession *objectively*, and often unwittingly, performs. The list, which is divided into macro, meso and micro functions, is not exhaustive. Rather, it is a first approximation.

Macro functions

The first set of meta functions relates to the big picture—the macrocosm that defines humanitarianism’s DNA and the values that humanitarian action transmits. These *macro functions* are deep and hidden and many aid workers may choose to be oblivious to them. They are nevertheless part of the baggage that aid workers bring with themselves. This baggage colours the cultural exchange between outsiders and insiders and the connections that link donors and agencies to the vulnerable groups that are the objects (and rarely the subjects) of assistance.

First, humanitarian action works as a powerful vector for Western ideas and modes of behaviour. It acts as a conveyor belt for Western rationality. It is a powerful mechanism for shaping the relationships between the ‘modernised’ and ‘insured’ and the multitude of the ‘uninsured’ (Duffield, 2007a, p. 243). It can act as global demonstration effect or cargo cult. Technical knowledge and expertise—the nutritionist, the camp manager, the protection officer—are never neutral. Nor is the technology they bring. Try as they may, they come with baggage, practice and ideology that shape the relationships they encounter (Donini et al., 2006, p. 12). Even those who reject it—the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who claims that humanitarianism is a bourgeois concept, the Taliban ideologue who waxes about the superiority of his Islamic values—have to come to terms with it. The *Humanitarian Agenda 2015* case studies (Donini et al., 2008) document the all-pervasive tension between outsiders and local communities not only in terms of the values that humanitarian action transmits but also in terms of the power relationships, technical baggage and personal behaviour that accompany it.

More prosaically, humanitarianism functions as the thin edge of the wedge of the market. It thrives on the presence of humanitarians: a cottage industry catering to the needs of weary aid workers was quick to establish itself in Goma, eastern DRC, after the Rwandan genocide (Terry, 2002); a similar fever gripped Kabul, Afghanistan, after the fall of the Taliban. When Barilla pasta and Lavazza coffee reached Kabul in early 2002, another barrier to the incorporation of the borderlands into global capitalism’s net was breached (Ignatieff, 2004; Donini et al., 2004).

Second, humanitarianism is a dominant discourse. The Northern/Western humanitarian enterprise has positioned itself as the central vehicle for relief and protection in crisis. It is deceitfully participatory, but in fact imposes pre-designed terms of engagement. Humanitarianism promotes Western forms of organisation, concepts of management, standards of accountability, and the like. It brings the values, food, clothing and music of the North to the last corners of the Earth. The encounter between MTV-generation humanitarians and the ‘savages’ is not always easy (as when the Taliban discovered, with a disbelief that confirmed their worst suspicions about the ‘moral decay’ of the outsiders, body piercings, pornography and group sex when raiding an aid agency residence in Kabul⁹). To be fair, the encounter is not always negative: for more than a decade NGOs working in rural Afghanistan, during the anti-Soviet jihad period, provided solidarity, succour and a window on the world to hundreds of war-affected communities on the brink of survival. Even when the outcome is positive, however, the encounter takes place according to the terms and power relationships of the penetrators.

The increasingly oligopolistic nature of the humanitarian enterprise results in more institutionalisation and standardisation of humanitarian action and thereby greater difficulties for entities that do not conform to the canon or are rooted in other traditions to emerge and be counted.¹⁰ As with other aspects of globalisation, the nature of the processes of humanitarian action and the standards that guide them are decided by outsiders and imposed through network power (Grewal, 2008). Moreover, the top-down nature of the enterprise affects not only the response but also, and perhaps more importantly, the conceptualisation of crises. As humanitarians, we address those vulnerabilities that we recognise and that fit our schemas, we speak to the likeminded and reproduce our institutions, we impose our mental models for assessment and response, we tend to shape reality in our image rather than trying to see it from the ground up.

As noted above, humanitarians perform functions inherited from colonial administrations and religious institutions, sometimes reproduced with similar missionary zeal. Even stronger parallels can be drawn with the era of ‘native administration’, which allowed a level of autonomy to local administrative structures within the colonial framework (Duffield, 2005). Sometimes, when states fail and institutions break down, humanitarians substitute for the state. In places such as post-11 September 2001 Afghanistan, donors, international financial institutions, the United Nations (UN) and NGOs are so closely involved with key ministries that ‘it would be more useful to conceive of them as part of the state itself’ (Harrison, 2001, p. 669, quoted in Duffield, 2007a). Sovereignty is meaningless in a situation where primary governmental functions—security, economic management, the selection and implementation of public policies—cannot be guaranteed or undertaken unless externally negotiated and financed. This state of affairs is bad enough in the context of a ‘normal’ development situation; it is much worse in crisis countries where the state is failing or barely recovering.

Third and more fundamentally, humanitarianism has become an important and powerful mobilising myth for the conceptualisation of North–South relations, a key

lens through which such relations are to be read and reproduced.¹¹ Given the failure of earlier mobilising myths—decolonisation, modernisation, development—to deliver structural change, this is particularly important. Northern governments use humanitarian action to distract attention, consciously and/or unconsciously, from structural issues. It distracts and distorts. In this, it is similar, if not subordinate, to another mobilising myth of our times, the global War on Terror (Donini et al., 2006, p. 19). Relief efforts earn politicians and even armies kudos. The band-aids get all the media attention while the structural sores continue to fester. Usefully, it can be presented as virtuous. In the wake of the Iraq invasion of 2003 in which humanitarian action was largely embedded in the Coalition Provisional Authority, many Iraqis viewed the UN and NGO aid personnel as representing ‘the smiley, duplicitous face of globalization’ rather than functioning as independent actors in their own right (Hansen, 2007). The humanitarian cover has been used repeatedly to excuse political inaction, in addition to the more obvious rationale for military intervention. However, in some cases, ‘failure is actually functional’, when, for example, denying assistance to needy groups fits with donor geopolitical agendas (Keen, 2008, p. 116).

The instrumentalisation of humanitarian action in the service of globalisation and securitisation agendas is not always clear-cut. As such, globalisation is a substitute for modernisation, that is, a process of radical transformation and development, which, as Mark Duffield notes, aimed to narrow the differences between the developed and underdeveloped worlds rather than reproduce them: ‘As heirs of the liberal tradition, international NGOs played an important part in contesting state-led modernization’ (Duffield, 2007a, p. 233) and in shaping the technologies to expand globalisation in the borderlands. Thus, the emergence of humanitarian action as a durable leitmotif in North–South relations runs parallel to the gradual transition from concepts that implied radical change (national liberation, decolonisation, modernisation) to concepts of management in international relations (structural adjustment, governance, sustainable development). Conflict ‘management’ and humanitarian handouts both help to contain the borderlands, but more often than not function as smokescreens that distort and hide structural issues and force the conceptualisation of complex issues into simplistic boxes.

New concepts such as *ingérence* or ‘humanitarian intervention’, and the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P), are operational constructs that, for better or for worse, dilute national sovereignty (Bettati, 1996; Rufin, 1986). R2P in particular has been used to advocate military intervention on Northern terms. Its proponents argue that it is no longer acceptable for governments to ignore their responsibility to protect their citizenry as this is inherent in their claim to sovereignty. This is seen as a deeply suspicious neo-colonialist approach by abusive and democratic Southern countries alike. Humanitarian intervention was declared ‘illegal’ because contrary to the UN Charter by the Havana Summit of the G-77 in 2000. Recent years have seen a backlash first against R2P and now the International Criminal Court. When humanitarianism is instrumentalised to advance political agendas under the cover of R2P and so-called humanitarian intervention, it becomes a partisan act and is no longer

humanitarian. This points towards a paradoxical ‘secret solidarity’: ‘Between terrorism and counter-terrorism, a curious complicity exists in which each needs the other for its own existence, whether as a legitimisation of its own violence or a justification for the draconian methods it requires for defending society’ (Duffield, 2007b, p. 232; Agamben, 1998, p. 133). A refrain often heard from ordinary Afghans is ‘the Americans need Al Qaeda and the Taliban in order to be here’. Some even believe that the Americans ‘create their own Taliban’.¹²

The extent to which humanitarianism, as a dominant discourse linked to globalisation, also creates its own antibodies is unclear. For sure, it can create disillusionment and disaffection in the borderlands when it is seen as functional to outside agendas or does not deliver the goods (Donini et al., 2006). There is some rejectionism in certain ‘barbarian’ quarters—both al-Qaeda and the Taliban have at times rejected ‘morally corrupt’ Western assistance and have attacked aid workers—but it has not (yet?) generated any significant alternative anti-humanitarian position from within civil society movements. Unlike their Marxist predecessors, who developed sharp arguments against ‘charity’, current anti-globalisation movements, while often critical of large or business-oriented NGOs, are generally supportive of principled humanitarian action and of community-based movements (Klein, 2005). They lament that NGOs have become the ‘scapegoats of disaster capitalism’ (Klein, 2007, p. 403). To be fair, though, the humanitarian enterprise has also functioned historically as an important vector for the dissemination of new and sometimes irreverent ideas and approaches in the South. It has nurtured and strengthened civil society, with mixed but often positive results, in areas where civil society was weak (Uvin, 1998; Goodhand, 2006). In addition, it has strengthened local coping mechanisms in crisis situations and enabled communities to protect themselves against abuse.

Meso functions

Let us consider now some of the *Meso functions* of humanitarianism. These relate to the political economy of humanitarian action and to its links to the mechanics (rather than the ideology and the objectives) of globalisation and world ordering.

The first point that needs to be stressed here is that humanitarian action makes countries safe for capital. Humanitarians are often the only (foreign) civilian actors on the ground in countries in crisis. They perform essential functions to prepare the terrain for the return of international industry and finance. The gold-rush feel of Kabul and Baghdad in the months after the US-led interventions had little to do with the human security of ordinary Afghans or Iraqis and everything to do with the (re-)integration of these two rogue states into globalised capitalism. Because humanitarian action has replaced many state-like services in countries in crisis, it contributes to the fallacious notion that such countries can pull through with imposed donor-driven strategies that are fundamentally at odds with an indigenous logic of modernisation. Once state functions have been privatised, it is next to impossible to roll back the process. Naomi Klein laments ‘the rise of a predatory form of disaster capitalism that uses the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to

engage in radical social and economic engineering' (Klein, 2005, p. 9). Areas devastated by the tsunami in Sri Lanka and Thailand are conveniently emptied of their coastal communities and face a 'second tsunami of corporate globalization and militarization potentially even more devastating than the first' (Klein, 2005, p. 9).

Thus, unlike disasters of the past that tended to weaken undemocratic governments—the Nicaragua earthquake of 1972 hastened dictator Anastasio Somoza's downfall—early twenty-first century disasters seem to be having the opposite effect. From Aceh to Sri Lanka to Kashmir, disasters serve to further the incorporation of remote stretches of sovereignty previously beyond the reaches of Empire into globalisation. In many cases, the militarisation of these hinterlands is not far behind. Even in countries such as Iran, where the response to the Bam earthquake of 2003 did not result in any particular globalisation effect, it served to strengthen the established power and controls of the state. The same can be said of Myanmar after cyclone Nargis.

Humanitarian action provides the oil for the capitalist machine. To survive in an increasingly competitive marketplace, NGOs in crisis countries or in countries recovering from conflict have to 'act like a business' and/or 'act like a government' (Cooley and Ron, 2002). As mentioned above, humanitarian assistance and early recovery activities promote the privatisation of the state and its externalisation. Such erosion of sovereignty in the South is itself an essential ingredient in world ordering. Once peace is imposed—Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo—with little or no concern for justice and rights, capital, in the form of Brown & Root, Halliburton or private security companies, is never far behind.

The second meso function relates to the fact that the humanitarian organisations are also part of governance, if not of government (Kennedy, 2004, p. xx). Major NGOs can be powerful vectors in shaping public opinion and government policy. They are integral to the reproduction and circulation of elites. There are revolving doors between the highest ranks of global governance and civil society organisations: many chief executive officers (CEOs) of major Western NGOs come from business or government or leave for business or government. Andrew Natsios moved from CEO of World Vision to Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development; three of the founding members of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have become ministers in French governments (one in a Leftist government, one in a Rightist government, and one in both Leftist and Rightist governments). In many crisis countries, humanitarian agencies have trained and groomed ministers and senior officials, teaching them the technology of aid and its power dynamics.

Third, and because of the above, humanitarianism is a form of power. Humanitarian advocates, policymakers and decision-makers are 'rulers' who allocate resources and have stakes in society. They have the power to fund or not, to decide which crises deserve attention and which can be forgotten, which categories of 'victims'—usually the most visible—should be prioritised. They utilise technologies of control and, sometimes, of disempowerment. Camps for refugees or the displaced induce powerlessness and despair but are functional to the control strategies of aid agencies

as well as, of course, to those of abusive authorities (Keen, 2008, p. 129). Aid agencies' arrogance and their propensity to shape reality according to their institutional biases and business models are a refrain that occurs repeatedly in the perceptions of disaster survivors (Listening Project case studies¹³; Donini et al., 2008). Senior aid workers, in the North and in the South, wield the power of knowledge and speak the language of statecraft. At the same time, because they personally identify with virtue, they are in denial that they have 'crossed the threshold of power' (Kennedy, 2004, p. 329).

This ability of aid workers and their leaders to see themselves as outside the tent of global governance and world ordering while being for all intents and purposes fully embedded in it must sometimes border on schizophrenia. At the time of the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, many US-based NGOs were torn down the middle between their desire to remain faithful to established humanitarian principles and the political pressure, accompanied by a substantial carrot of readily available funding, to act as 'force multipliers' of a world ordering design (Donini et al., 2004; Donini, 2006).

Humanitarian action, therefore, is an integral element in the advancement of what Mark Duffield calls 'liberal peace' (Duffield, 2001). It promotes Western standards of human rights and democracy, regardless of whether 'democracy', as in Afghanistan today, results in viable and accountable institutions. There is no clearer example of the blowback of allowing the liberal peace agenda to trump rights and justice than Afghanistan, where the return of the warlords after the Bonn Agreement of 2001 and the failure to put the issue of accountability for human rights abuses on the agenda has allowed the crisis to fester and provided an opening for the Taliban to re-emerge.

Micro functions

Micro functions relate to the individuals who devote their energies to humanitarian action and to their personal motivations. Humanitarian action gives us meaning, not to mention interesting careers. It substitutes for revolution and other 'isms' of the past. It acts as a conscience pacifier—'I have done my bit for mankind and don't need to bother with structural inequalities'. There are as many explanations of joining a profession that is frequently frustratingly difficult and at times exceptionally dangerous as there are individual aid workers. Motivations range from the personal (a life of adventure), to the universal and ethical (the cosmopolitan desire to participate in meaningful change, the promotion of democracy and rights), to the religious and the accidental. A thorough sociological research study of the motivations of aid workers has yet to be conducted. This author, though, suspects that one would discover sizeable proportions of lapsed revolutionaries (several of the leaders of MSF and other European NGOs were former Maoists or otherwise orphans of 1968), many individuals with religious callings or backgrounds (sons and daughters of missionary families as well as current or former clergy), a number of former military personnel, typically in logistical and security positions, a few former academics and researchers, and any number of accidental humanitarians who, like this scribe, stumbled into a challenging and demanding profession by chance.

For some, and these are not always the best, the profession is at the crossroads of exhibitionism and voyeurism. For those in search of adventure, or, worse, disaster tourism, it provides the adrenalin of war without being at war. As such, it is a substitute for a military career (hence the obsession of many aid workers with logistics, multi-pocket military-style garb, hand-held radios and assorted gizmos) or a career in colonial administration. The introduction of professional standards and more transparent recruitment procedures has reduced the prevalence of the swashbuckling humanitarian that nonetheless remains a fixture in all crisis situations. He/she is slowly being replaced by the technically competent but often culturally insensitive professional and manager.

A career in the humanitarian enterprise is often a stepping-stone to politics or to senior positions in government or business. Many UN agency or NGO leaders in Europe have become members of their national parliaments or of the European Parliament. A few have become ministers. Others have joined the private sector, the media and academia. Others still have become specialists in humanitarian punditry. Thus, humanitarian action contributes to the circulation and reproduction of elites in the North (as well as, but perhaps less visibly, in the South).

In addition, of course, humanitarian action provides employment—to at least 250,000 people worldwide (Stoddard and Harmer, 2006). The vast majority are national staff from affected countries. A small but very influential minority are from the North and, as illustrated above, set the standards and terms for the functioning of the enterprise. Many of these Northerners are young and inexperienced—some of the thousands of educated middle-class folk from the North join up for a kind of ‘gap-year’ experience. Observers at the receiving end tend to be unimpressed: a frequent refrain heard in Afghanistan and elsewhere is that these young people ‘can’t find jobs at home’ or ‘come and take the jobs of our qualified engineers’.¹⁴ At the same time, the importance of the social benefits of the employment, training and capacity-building provided to aspiring elites in the South through their association with Northern humanitarians should not be underestimated. Work in the humanitarian sector can be a stepping-stone for them as well. The terms of the humanitarian trade are such, however, that, for now, there is scant opportunity for these national staff to influence the functioning of an industry that remains essentially dominant and vertical. Increasingly, though, voices outside or on the margins of the dominant discourse, particularly in Southern NGOs and community-based organisations, are starting to challenge the roots and functions of Northern humanitarianism. Whether they will be heard is a different matter.

Reading the tea leaves

Looking ahead, how might humanitarianism—as an ideology, a movement and a profession—evolve? Will it remain embedded in, and subsidiary to, global economic and political governance? Will it fissure and fragment allowing space for different and non-Western expressions of the imperative to save and protect lives? Will it

recreate itself and become more inclusive, more cross-culturally sensitive and more rooted in local approaches to dealing with conflict and crisis?

This paper argues that mainstream humanitarianism is self-defined by those who practice it with little or no consideration for alternative approaches or traditions aimed at assisting and protecting those affected by disasters. Reinventing a globally acceptable notion of 'humanitarianism' is therefore a tall order. As in the human rights arena, it is far from clear that reopening discussions on the foundations of the humanitarian discourse would actually advance the overall humanitarian cause. Then again, trying to universalise our own particularistic blend of humanitarianism, inextricably linked as it is with Western history, thought and values, is unlikely to sway doubters and rejectionists in the South, whether these be insurgent groups that attack aid workers or governments and political entities bent on protecting their sovereignty with nationalistic rhetoric.

Given the overarching context of globalisation, is 'universality' an attainable goal for humanitarianism or is it just an ideological and naive proposition? Humanitarian action has always been beset by political manipulation. It inescapably conveys values and types of behaviour that are often alien if not hostile to its purported beneficiaries. If such is the case, would it not be logical to accept that the world is a messy place and that while the task of alleviating suffering is a just and urgent cause, humanitarians have to accept reality, occasionally hold their nose, and get on with the job, even if it means working in sync with, or under the protection of, the forces of globalisation and Empire? This is the road chosen by some in the pragmatist or 'Wilsonian' wings of the humanitarian movement.

But even for purists, the stakes are high. Eschewing military protection and affirming fidelity to core principles is no longer sufficient to guarantee the safety of staff working in fraught or hostile environments such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka (Stoddard, Harmer and DiDomenico, 2009). In these areas, where it used to be 'taboo' to attack aid workers, the social contract that made humanitarian action acceptable to belligerents no longer holds. Aid workers are seen as lucrative soft targets or vectors of an imperial crusade, or both. In certain contexts, it may no longer be possible to mend the relationship: shadowy insurgent forces no longer see advantages to maintaining a relationship with the likes of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or MSF, let alone the UN. This is because these agencies no longer provide those services—care for wounded fighters and prisoners, return of mortal remains, communication with fighters' families—that militants used to value. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the UN and the vast majority of aid agencies are seen as partisan and guilty by association. They have paid dearly as a consequence. Most agencies have recoiled, become risk-averse or embedded themselves even further with the US-led coalition forces. The ICRC and a few 'Dunantist' agencies have chosen a different route and have put a premium on talking to all the 'non-likeminded', regardless of stripe, colour or weaponry.

The assumption of these actors is that even if communities are unable to protect aid workers now, if a solid relationship is established, it will be possible to do so later.

At the same time, a more visible separation from outside intervention forces and a constant reaffirmation of the principles of neutrality and impartiality may in the longer term help to ensure humanitarian access, space and a modicum of security. This may require some non-orthodox thinking, including a departure from current top-down, supply and expatriate-driven approaches and the ability to work flexibly when opportunities permit.

For now, the humanitarian enterprise is likely to continue to muddle through, buffeted by attempts to instrumentalise it further and aspirations for a more independent space in an extremely politicised and militarised international context. The choice seems to be between integration or 'coherence' within the West's stabilisation and world ordering agendas and some form of secession or insulation. Secession would only be possible through a return (for some) to a more rigorous Dunantist position. From this perspective, humanitarianism, now blemished by its engagement with transformational agendas, if not sullied by its association with military interventions, would, in order to redeem credibility and access in particularly fraught environments, need to retreat from its current centrality in conflict management to the margins, that is, to purely lifesaving and protection functions. Focusing on the core traditional humanitarian functions would, perhaps, allow for better acceptance by rejectionists, anti-humanitarians and assorted 'non-likeminded' who might be swayed by the clarity of the humanitarian ambulance and fire-truck functions.

A choice is open here: will more lives be saved and protected in the crises to come through alignment with the imperial liberal peace agenda or, on the contrary, through maximum separation and insulation from it? There are no easy solutions. The way in which the question is answered will shape the architecture of the humanitarian movement in the years to come.

Given current trends, and the polarisation that shapes the 'with us or against us' ethos, it is likely that contemporary humanitarianism will be less welcome and less present where Empire wields its military muscle to effect regime change. The recent surge in attacks against NGOs and UN staff in Afghanistan is an indicator of this. Moreover, the welcome mat is already being rolled up by the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) countries. These countries increasingly see external relief as unnecessary if not an affront to their dignity. At the same time, they are becoming actors in their own right in the humanitarian arena, as are some states in the Persian Gulf. The parameters of humanitarian action are likely to change as these new players gather force. For now, it is in the forgotten and woebegone borderlands, where the strategic interests of Empire are less urgent, that humanitarian space is still accessible. This is where humanitarians will continue to set up camp and where they stand a better chance of being able to do their work in a principled and non-intrusive manner.

Correspondence

E-mail: Antonio Donini (antonio.donini@tufts.edu).

Endnotes

- ¹ This paper expands on Donini (2008).
- ² For example, the 'Listening Projects' of the Collaborative for Development Action (see http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_home.php) and the ongoing work of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) Switzerland on beneficiary perceptions (see <http://www.msf.ch/>).
- ³ Estimates are problematic as there are no agreed criteria as to what constitutes a 'humanitarian worker'. One study (Stoddard, Harmer and Domenico, 2009) puts their number at 250,000.
- ⁴ Typology adapted from Stoddard, 2003.
- ⁵ The case studies that form part of the Feinstein International Center's *Humanitarian Agenda 2015* research programme (Donini et al., 2006; Donini et al., 2008), particularly those on Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, and Palestine, provide evidence of this shift.
- ⁶ 'Network power' refers to the global dominance of standards that have achieved critical mass in language, technology, trade, law, and in many other areas. The dominance of a successful standard involves a form of power. Thus, while these new standards allow for global coordination, they also eclipse local standards, incompatible with dominant ones. Therefore, many of the choices driving globalisation are only formally free because the network power of a dominant standard makes it the only effectively available option. As such, it reflects a new imperialism.
- ⁷ This definition of 'Empire' is from the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In their books *Empire* (2001) and *Multitude* (2004), they dissect contemporary forms of power. While they do not deal with humanitarian action per se, they do provide an intriguing analytical framework in which such action can be usefully conceptualised.
- ⁸ Colin Powell, Secretary of State at the time of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, appealed to US non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to act as 'force multipliers' and to be part of 'our combat team'. See *Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations* at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/5762.htm> (26 October 2001).
- ⁹ Various sources, including conversations with Taliban Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, Kabul, early 1999.
- ¹⁰ Extrapolating from Development Initiatives estimates, it can be said that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all recorded humanitarian assistance is provided through the United Nations (UN) system, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a cartel of five consortia of transnational NGOs (CARE, Oxfam, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, Save the Children and World Vision).
- ¹¹ On the concept of mobilising myth as applied to development and international activities, see Murphy and Augelli (1993).
- ¹² Fieldwork interviews in Bamiyan and Kabul, spring 2009.
- ¹³ See endnote 2.
- ¹⁴ Interviews by the author, Afghanistan, 2006–09.

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