Abstract

Behind an apparent consensus on humanitarianism among politicians, soldiers, diplomats, intellectuals, and artists, and while public aid has become an important element of the Western response to contemporary tragedies, numerous voices are questioning the role of humanitarian aid in conflict situations. This article provides a historical perspective of humanitarianism, from the emergence of basic concepts in the eighteenth century to modern times. The post-World War II era witnessed intellectual critiques of humanitarian action, and, in the 1980s humanitarian aid became, consciously or not, an important instrument of the antitotalitarian struggle. The end of Soviet communism and the evolution of international relations have profoundly changed the work of humanitarian organizations. Today, the gap is immense between proclaimed humanitarian principles and values, and the actions undertaken to defend them. This article examines how humanitarian action has attempted to keep humanitarian aid from contributing to aggravation of the victim's fate rather than to their relief.

Derrière le consensus apparent qui réunit politiciens, militaires, diplomates, intellectuels et artistes, tous voués à l'unisson au culte de l'humanitaire, et alors que les aides publiques sont devenues un élément important de la réponse occidentale aux tragédies contemporaines, de nombreuses voix s'interrogent sur le rôle de l'humanitaire dans les conflits. Cette article retrace l'histoire de l'humanitaire, depuis l'énoncé de ses principes fondamentaux, au XVIII éme siècle, jusqu'à nos jours. La période qui a suivi la deuxiéme guerre mondiale a été marquée par la critique intellectuelle de l'humanitaire qui, dans les années 80, devient, consciemment ou non, un puissant instrument de la lutte anti-totalitaire. La fin du communisme soviétique et l'évolution des relations internationales ont modifié en profondeur le travail des organisations humanitaires. Un décalage immense sépare est aujourd'hui les principes et valeurs humanitaires proclamées et les action entreprises pour les défendre. Cet article montre comment, l'action humanitaire a tenté d'éviter que l'aide humanitaire ne contribue à aggraver le sort des victimes qu'elle a la mission de soulager.

Detrás del consenso aparente entre políticos, soldados, diplomáticos, intelectuales, y artistas acerca del humanitarismo y, mientras la ayuda pública se ha convertido en un elemento importante de la respuesta occidental a las tragedias contemporáneas, numerosas voces se preguntan acerca del papel de la ayuda humanitaria en situaciones de conflicto. Este artículo provee una perspectiva histórica del humanitarismo, desde la emergencia de los conceptos básicos en el siglo dieciocho hasta los tiempos modernos. El período posterior a la segunda guerra mundial fue testigo de críticas intelectuales a la acción humanitaria, y este tipo de ayuda se volvió en la década de los ochenta, conscientemente o no, un instrumento importante en la lucha contra el totalitarismo. El fin del comunismo soviético y la evolución de las relaciones internacionales han cambiado profundamente el trabajo de las organizaciones humanitarias. Actualmente, la brecha entre los valores y los principios humanitarios proclamados, y las acciones tomadas para defenderlos es inmensa. Este artículo examina como la acción humanitaria ha intentado prevenir que la ayuda humanitaria contribuya al empeoramiento del destino de las víctimas en vez de a su alivio.

From Solferino to Sarajevo

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Politicians, soldiers, diplomats, intellectuals, and artists all belong to the cult of humanitarianism which, following the proclaimed end of ideologies, is being gradually exalted into a new utopia. However, behind this consensual façade, while public aid has become an important element of the Western response to contemporary tragedies, numerous voices are questioning the role of humanitarian aid in conflict situtations. Could it be but a cover for political impotence? Does it needlessly draw out conflicts at the cost of thousands of additional victims? Other, older questions re-emerged on the occasion of the Somalia intervention: are these "new barbarians" truly capable of governing themselves? Would it not be better to leave them to their wretched fate (to their "savagery"), or to place their country under international trusteeship in their best interest?

None of these questions are really new, even if media infatuation with humanitarian action and the emerging international context have renewed their poignancy. Humanitarian agents who act in conflicts, thereby changing their course, or who confront governments and ruthless totalitarian parties, have always faced a recurring and linked question: how to help the victims without playing into the hands of the oppressors? Or, in the words of W. Shawcross, how to nourish the victims without overfeeding the executioners? How to keep humanitarian aid from contributing to aggravation of the victims' fate rather than to their relief?

Using a few historical anchors, this article seeks to examine how humanitarian action responds to those questions.

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Before the Red Cross

Before the creation of the Red Cross, a specific international humanitarian framework did not exist. With a few exceptions, humanitarian aid was limited to a nation's own territory and, sometimes, to its colonies. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nonetheless, numerous wars and natural disasters led to a combination of private and public efforts to assist victims.

The modern concept of humanity emerged from the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who stated that all men are equal in rights and members of a universal community. Humanitarianism thus became the modern, rational form of charity and justice. In the eighteenth century, in his *Memorandum for Perpetual Peace in Europe*, Abbot Saint-Pierre proposed the creation of an organization of united nations. As for the "savage peoples," it was the "philanthropic mission" of enlightened men to bring them out of darkness. By the next century, however, this generous conception of the Enlightenment had become tainted with racism: for Jules Ferry, "the superior races have the right and duty to civilize the inferior races."[1] The colonial conquest was to be carried out under the banner of humanitarianism and civilization.

While dominated by the surge of nationalism, the international order of the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of a legal category that infringed on the principle of sovereignty: "humanitarian intervention." At the time of the Concert of Europe, sovereign states felt offended when Europeans or certain communities were threatened. At that time, legal interventions against "governments that violate the rights of humanity through excessive injustice and cruelty...in defiance of the laws of civilization" were considered legitimate when "the general interest of humanity is jeopardized by barbarians or a despotic government." The legal framework for these interventions was relatively well defined: the reality needed to be particularly atrocious, the strict objective of the intervention had to be to end the suffering of the victims, and it needed to be carried out on behalf of the international community. The humanitarian motive then justified the exception to the principle of sovereignty.[2]

This discourse, while tainted with racist statements, is somewhat similar to that used recently to justify interven-

tion in Somalia. Today, of course, such interventions are no longer driven by powerful political or economic interests. The West would rather forget that Africa exists and nobody pretends any longer "to civilize barbarians." Nevertheless, when directed toward peoples considered inferior, humanitarianism elevated to the rank of ideology reveals its profound ambivalence:

> In the humanitarian relation, the power one holds over the other is absolute. It is this which allows the immediate transformation of the life machine into a death machine, and vice versa....For the master, the punishment is inseparable from the gift. The providential function of the humanitarian ideology is profoundly ambiguous, as only Providence, as its name indicates, has the transcendental power to feed and to kill, to lose and to save, to starve and to nurse, to destroy and to uplift.[3]

In the nineteenth century, with its faith in continued progress and the blessings of economic liberalism, the terrible Irish famine (1845-1850) occurred. The dominant ideology of the era further aggravated the fate of the victims: the liberal discourse was put forward, in total good faith, to justify the refusal to act; food should not be distributed to the hungry, since this would disturb the free play of the market, whereas it was thought the market would soon end the disaster thanks to the simple mechanism of supply and demand! The scarce relief offered to the hungry was construed as the main problem. This ideology overlooked the simple fact that human response to tragedy cannot wait for supply and demand adjustments to occur. During the famine, more than a million Irish died of starvation, and another million emigrated to the United States. Adam Smith's liberalism offered no relief to the hungry.

The press played only a marginal role in the famine. However, newspaper circulation exploded in the second half of the nineteenth century and the invention of the telegraph enabled editorial offices and war correspondents to be in touch. Circa 1885, Gustave Moynier, President of the Red Cross, wrote: "Every day now, we know what happens in the entire world; information on any war development travels at the speed of lightning...bringing those dying on the battlefield under the eyes of the readers."[4] The Crimean War saw

the emergence of a troublesome but inseparable couple: the press and humanitarian aid. Thanks to newspaper coverage, the British public discovered the sad fate of its soldiers: for each soldier killed by bullets, seven perished due to illness (especially cholera). In the hospitals, mortality reached 39 percent per month. The government was forced to take energetic measures aimed at fighting the epidemics. During the last six months of the campaign, after the French government had imposed rigorous censorship of the press, mortality among French soldiers became 10 times higher than for British soldiers, even though both groups lived under the same conditions.

The Red Cross and the Dilemmas of Neutrality

In 1859, having arrived almost by chance on the battlefields of Solferino where Napoleon III was confronting the Austrians, Henry Dunant proceeded to define the principles of an institution that outlived him. The first Geneva Convention and creation of the Red Cross constitutes a landmark in the history of humanitarian action. First, the principle of neutrality was inscribed in an international convention with wide recognition. Second, the Geneva Committee gradually became an impartial organ universally recognized as such. Finally, the Red Cross underwent an extraordinary expansion and, with its three components—national Red Cross offices, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (FRC/RCS), and above all, the International Committee (ICRC) in Geneva—it constitutes today the oldest humanitarian movement in the world.

Neutrality was not invented by Dunant. Since ancient times there have been numerous examples of neutral conduct in conflicts, and of bilateral agreements aimed at respecting civilians, the injured, and prisoners. The genius of Dunant, however, was in stating this principle in a convention that he hoped would be, and which ended up being, universal. The four Geneva conventions, signed in 1949, have been ratified by over 170 countries—the quasi-totality of nations. The Red Cross stands for charity supported by law and for the will to force belligerents to respect, even in the heart of war, certain elementary rules with regard to the injured, prisoners and civilians.

Despite such undeniable progress, the principles of the Red Cross have raised questions from the beginning that remain relevant today. What does neutrality mean if these principles apply only to battles between European armies and become null and void when white men attack "barbarian peoples" in the name of civilization? In the Sudan in 1898, 30 years after signing the first Geneva Convention, the British did nothing to help 15,000 wounded Sudanese, abandoning them after the battle of Omdurman. And what does neutrality mean in the face of a war of aggression or a systematic genocide like that which happened in Armenia? Chateaubriand had already remarked on this: "When the warring parties are unequal in power, this neutrality is nothing but a derision, an act of hostility toward the weaker party and of complicity with the stronger one. It would be better to join forces with the oppressor against the oppressed, because then at least hypocrisy would not be added to injustice."

Moreover, even though the Red Cross is a private institution, it has always put itself in the hands of states, if only to allow for the enforcement of humanitarian law. Consequently, it has had to remain silent so as not to embarrass signatory States. Discretion has been the hallmark of the "Red Cross spirit." And in their respective countries, the Red Cross Societies, far from being apolitical or neutral, have in fact become devoted auxiliaries to the government.

The Red Cross developed at the time of triumphant liberalism. With Lenin, and even more so with Hitler, it was confronted with régimes that rejected the values upon which it was founded. Between respect for its principles and preserving the universality of the movement, the Red Cross has always chosen universalism because it was convinced—and not without reason—that this was the only way to continue to act as a neutral intermediary in the heart of conflict. It never burned its bridges, neither with Lenin, nor with Mussolini, nor with Nazi Germany, even when Jews were thrown out of the German Red Cross.

Thus it was confrontation with the "final solution" that clearly showed the limits of humanitarian action. Like the Allies, the Vatican, and others, the Red Cross knew of the terrible reality of Nazi extermination camps. Today it is reproached for not having denounced their existence and for

its silence in the face of the largest genocide of the twentieth century. What is worse, it sought, despite everything, to help the deportees by giving German authorities care packages for the Jewish camp prisoners. Whatever the reasons brought forward to justify this silence, this chapter remains the darkest of the Red Cross' history—especially because it obscured ICRC's role in other areas, such as with prisoners of war and search agencies. Later organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) drew on this lesson: the inhuman is not to be humanized, it is to be denounced and opposed. For them, speaking out will occupy a central place, side-by-side with action.

1945-1979: The Revolution Against Humanitarian Action

The period 1945 to 1979 marked the intellectual discrediting of humanitarian action. Similar to British liberals in the last century who viewed free market mechanisms as the remedy for the Irish famine, progressive intellectuals, for whom one was either the oppressor or the oppressed, affirmed that all energy must be devoted to the world revolution. From the perspective of the Manichean confrontation that divided the world, humanitarian aid was considered at best a waste of time. In *Esprit*, Bertrand d'Atorg criticized Camus' *The Plague*: "The ethics of the Red Cross are solely valid in a world where violence against mankind comes only from eruptions, floods, crickets or rats. And not from men." Sartre, in *Les temps modernes*, gave Camus a final blow: "We are closer to Madame Boucicaut and the giving of alms."[5] Neither the drama of East Pakistan, nor that of Biafra—the first televised famine in history (1968-1970)—succeeded in shaking these certainties. The democratic opposition of the Awami League in Bangladesh and the Ojukwu régime in Biafra certainly did not incarnate "the forces of progress."

The Biafra crisis was a milestone in the evolution of the humanitarian movement. On the one hand it once again underscored the limits of the Red Cross approach. Despite the force of its neutrality, the Red Cross did not manage to obtain an agreement between the two parties to allow passage of food to the encircled Biafran enclave. It was a group of churches which ultimately decided, against the objections of

Nigeria and the Red Cross, to launch an airlift to help seces-
sionist Biafra in defiance of Nigerian sovereignty. In doing
so, these precursors of MSF invented the modern concept of
humanitarian intervention.

The Western powers played the humanitarian card with-
out looking for a political solution. France, for example,
openly encouraged Biafra's secession without recognizing the
Ojukwu government or supplying the arms needed to com-
pete with Lagos. One major, perverse consequence was that
Biafra quickly understood that images of Biafran children re-
mained its best weapon to bring about international mobili-
zation. Ultimately, humanitarian aid, derisive given the mag-
nitude of the disaster, maintained the illusion of international
commitment—the world was convinced that it flew to the
rescue of Biafra. Already, TV images were stronger than real-
ity.

1979-1989: The Zenith of the "Without Borders" Movement

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the combined
effects of the work of Solzhenitsyn, the invasion of Afghani-
stan, developments in Vietnam (including the drama of the
Boat People) and the discovery of the crimes of the Khmer
Rouge, a veritable intellectual turnabout took place. The great
cause of the 1980s became the fight against totalitarianism.
The dynamic of democracy versus totalitarianism supplanted
the antagonism between capitalism and socialism. Guerilla
forces lent themselves very well to the actions of organiza-
tions "without borders," by intervening secretly in most con-
flicts in defiance of international law and haughty sovereign-
ties. Unlike the Red Cross, they were not founded on hu-
manitarian law but on public opinion, which they wanted to
be their witness.

Since the majority of great causes in the 1980s were
linked to the advance of Soviet allies in the Third World,
humanitarian aid became, consciously or not, an important
instrument of the antitotalitarian struggle. Therefore, hu-
manitarian action took place either in countries in which
the Cold War was fought by proxy and in which only organi-
zations "without borders" could penetrate; or at the borders
of these countries in refugee camps which also then served

as sanctuaries for guerilla fighters.[6] More than 90 percent of refugees in this period fled from régimes allied with the Soviet Union. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees became one of the most important agencies of the humanitarian aid system, and the image of refugees "who vote with their feet" acquired a positive connotation.[7]

The greatest catastrophe of this period, the Ethiopian famine, again underscored the limits of humanitarian aid. In Colonel Mengistu's Ethiopia, international aid meant to relieve the famine was used—directly or indirectly—to finance massive displacement of peoples from the north to the south; humanitarian organizations were used as bait to attract starving farmers who were then deported to the south. Thousands of human lives were saved, but the entire international system was used, often with the support of the UN, for the execution of a project aimed at crushing the Ethiopian peasantry. Relief agencies found themselves caught in a now classic dilemma—to remain silent at the risk of becoming the accomplice of an inhuman process in which they were one of the cogs, or to speak out at the risk of expulsion and abandonment of those they had come to save. By seeing only the malnourished children in the dispensaries, and not recognizing that the entire system of international relief had been placed in the service of a project that flagrantly violated the most elementary of human principles, humanitarian organizations unwittingly were condemned to supporting this process.[8]

Bosnia: Humanitarian Aid Turned Against the Victims?

The end of Soviet communism and the evolution of international relations have profoundly changed the work of humanitarian organizations. The image of the refugee is now a negative one; the UN as well as certain states have turned humanitarian aid into a powerful tool of their diplomacy. Blue Helmets, once ordered to keep the peace, now intervene with a humanitarian mandate, erasing the points of reference needed by belligerents and perpetuating uncertainty as to the real intentions of the parties involved.[9]

More troublesome, progress that had been made in the preceding period could now be turned against the victims. At

the end of the 1970s, when victims finally ceased to be viewed as oppressed people waiting to be liberated (or as "collateral damage" of the revolution in progress), humanity no doubt made a small step forward. The Nicaraguan farmer fleeing Sandinista authoritarianism was finally put on equal footing with the Salvadoran peasant living in fear of the Death Squads; there were no more good and bad deaths, only victims worthy of compassion. The theme "all victims are equal" gave birth to an "ethic of emergency" that gradually imposed itself on the humanitarian movement. But it was too quickly forgotten that values flaunted during the Cold War coincided with those imposed by the *realpolitik*: this ethic of indignation furnished a powerful tool for dismantling the logic of totalitarianism and denouncing the crimes of Soviet lackeys. From Afghanistan to Angola, from Nicaragua to Cambodia, no major Western power limited itself to the humanitarian realm to combat the Soviets, Cubans, or Vietnamese: political or military action was the principle element of a strategy of containment, in which humanitarian action played only a modest role.

In the former Yugoslavia, this emergency ethic turned against the Bosnians—they were no longer citizens fighting for values, but victims to be fed. They were not granted the right to decide whether they preferred weapons to defend themselves or humanitarian aid—it was decided for them. Humanitarian relief was the only somewhat consistent response by Europe to Serb aggression. It was a clear windfall for the aggressor; particularly in view of the fact that the humanitarian apparatus, in its laudable endeavors to protect the population, accelerated the process of ethnic cleansing. The Blue Helmets, symbols of international impotence in the field, became a cover for refusal to take any military action which could endanger them.

This is not meant to belittle the efforts, courage, and devotion of all those (e.g. the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, ICRC, NGOs, Blue Helmets) who have earnestly sought to help people, but rather to note that humanitarian aid, as official policy, has ultimately encouraged and favored aggression. Moreover, it has contributed to public opinion resigning itself to a "tribal" reading of conflicts. The result is well known: hundreds of thousands of

dead and injured, and 4 million displaced individuals and families. In the process, the European unification process was threatened, the new world order buried, and the essence of law ridiculed. "We wanted law without force, we got force without law."[10]

Today, the gap is immense between the principles and values posted on every street corner, and the actions undertaken to defend them. As a result, societies end up congratulating themselves on the progress of a mythical right of interference, all the while tolerating ethnic cleansing. Apartheid, dismantled in South Africa, has been restored within Europe's borders with the blessing and encouragement of the UN.

Yesterday as today, humanitarian aid represents human nobility when it seeks to help the victims, then recognizes as human beings those who aspire to their own destinies. When, in the name of humanitarian aid, the international community prevents people from defending themselves, when it attempts to feed them—almost against their will—it burdens them even more and becomes an accomplice to the crime of nonassistance to an endangered person.[11] Or in other words, to pass food through the window without evicting the killer from the house is not a humanitarian gesture.

In a peculiar swing of the pendulum of history, in the quarrel which opposed Sartre and his followers to Camus, it would probably be admitted today that the former were right. Camus, for whom revolt constituted the very meaning of life, "the refusal to be treated as object," might agree. But he would add: "Human solidarity is founded on the movement of revolt, which in turn finds its only legitimation in this complicity. Thus, we can rightfully say that any revolt that allows itself to destroy this solidarity by this very fact loses the name of revolt and consents to murder." We are there. In Bosnia, a perverse conception of humanitarian aid has triumphed over politics. And it is not certain that this will be to the benefit of the victims.

References

1. Jules Ferry quoted in Raoul Girardet, *Le nationalisme français*, (Paris: Points Seuil, 1983).
2. Rougier states: "To the sovereignty of a government capable of disregarding the human rights of its citizens is substituted a foreign sover-

eignty to carry out this neglected task, annul the vitiated deed, or prevent future defaults." A. Rougier, *La Théorie de l'intervention d'humanité* (Paris: RGDIP, 1910).

3. H. Béji, "Le patrimoine de la cruauté," *Le Débat* 73 (1993).

4. Gustave Moynier, *Les causes du succès de la Croix-Rouge*, (Paris: Académie des sciences morales et politiques, 1899).

5. EDITOR'S NOTE: Madame Boucicaut was a prominent personality of the nineteenth century who personified a charitable, perhaps condescending, attitude toward the poor and the sick.

6. J. C. Rufin, *Le piège: quand l'aide humanitaire remplace la guerre* (Paris: Pluriel, 1993).

7. F. Jean, "Le fantôme des réfugiés," *Esprit*, Dec. 1992; and F. Jean, "Réfugiés de Guerre: un défi pour l'Occident," *Politique internationale* 60 (1993).

8. F. Jean "Du Bon Usage de la Famine," Médecins Sans Frontières, 1986; and also see J. Clay and B. Holcomb "Politics and Famine in Ethiopia," Cultural Survival, Report No. 20, (Cambridge, MA: November 1995); see also "West's Live Aid Digs Graves in Ethiopia," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 1986; "Does Helping Really Help?" *Newsweek*, December 21, 1987.

9. R. Brauman, "Contre l'humanitarisme," *Esprit*, Oct. 1991; and A. Destexhe, *L'humanitaire impossible ou deux siècles d'ambiguïté* (Paris; Armand Colin, 1993).

10. J. F. Deniau in *Le Monde*.

11. On different occasions, the Bosnian rulers stated that if they had to choose between humanitarian aid and weapons (or simply lifting the embargo), they would prefer the latter.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For further reading, see also A. Destexhe, *Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995).