

Humanitarianism and Humanitarian Intervention

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Humanitarianism, and its more forceful and controversial corollary, 'humanitarian intervention', have come under increasing scrutiny over the past few years. The recent 'humanitarian intervention' in Libya in the spring has rekindled popular interest in a trending academic topic, which has involved the critical examination of humanitarianism (1), humanitarian organisations (2), humanitarian aid (3) and humanitarian intervention (4). This has primarily been a political science exercise, with contributions from international legal scholars, and practitioners. 2011 offers a new turn in the study of this phenomenon: a desire to link current trends in humanitarian aid and intervention to the long history of the practices. Two volumes in

particular explicitly set out to illuminate the historical development of humanitarian intervention.

The first, *Empire of Humanity*, is a bold and provocative book that challenges the traditional frame of the history of humanitarian aid. Michael Barnett, a professor of international affairs and political science, argues that 'humanitarianism more closely resembles empire than many of its defenders might like, but because it is an emancipatory project this accusation does not fit quite as well as many of its harshest critics suggest' (p. 8). Unlike many political science books, *Empire of Humanity* sets out to study the long history of humanitarian ideology, looking to the continuous trends and tensions that exist in the imposition of humanitarian principles beyond national borders, the most convincing of which is his emphasis on the role of paternalism. Barnett writes that 'the concept of paternalism encapsulates many of the central ambiguities of humanitarianism' (p. 34).

The book is split into three main sections, with an introduction and a first chapter preceding, and a conclusion following, the ten main chapters. The book splits the history of humanitarianism into three 'ages' (and three corresponding sections): the first, 'imperial humanitarianism', from the late 18th century to the end of the Second World War; the second, 'neo humanitarianism', from the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cold War; and third, 'liberal humanitarianism', from the end of the Cold War to the present. First, the differences between 'alchemical' and 'emergency' humanitarianism are emphasised.

Part one, 'The age of imperial humanitarianism', encompasses chapters two, three, and four. Chapter two explains why humanitarianism emerged when it did at the end of the 18th century, and focuses primarily on the intellectual history of humanitarianism, its religious and enlightenment roots, and in general humanitarian thought rather than humanitarian action.

Chapter three locates the origin of 'alchemical' humanitarianism in the anti-slavery movement. This chapter reviews much of the writing on the role of evangelical tradition in the anti-slavery movement. The Exeter Hall humanitarians encouraged transformative (and thus 'alchemical') and religiously inspired humanitarian action throughout the 19th-century British Empire. Chapter four introduces 'emergency' humanitarianism and the internationalization of relief through the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Reiterating much of the standard history of the ICRC and emergency relief, Barnett's account differs because he argues against the traditional view of the ICRC as historically an independent organisation: 'from the very beginning the ICRC's very existence and effectiveness depended on states, which meant an acute sensitivity to their views. Largely because of its close connections, the ICRC strove to create principles and symbols of independence' (p. 81).

Part two, chapters five through seven, shifts its approach from an investigation of the religious and organisational impulses that led to the emergence of 'alchemical' and 'emergency' humanitarianism, to a study of several international NGOs. Chapter five argues that the forces of production changed in the Cold War in a way that meant that 'development and modernization became intertwined in doctrines of anticommunism' (p.101). Chapter six presents an organisational history of various NGOs. It explores the relationship between NGOs and the state, and the tensions between religious organisations and state funding and interests. The major difference in this 'age' is deemed to be the avoidance of 'human rights' (p.129). Chapter seven outlines humanitarianism during the 'hot' wars of the Cold War period: Biafra, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Ethiopia. This chapter makes an interesting contribution to the understanding of the internal and external organisational pressures that influenced the emergence of the humanitarian 'neutrality' principle in this period, particularly in the ICRC and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF).

Part three (chapters eight through ten) covers the period from the end of the Cold War through to the present. Chapter eight describes the shift to a 'security' mantra of humanitarian intervention (p.162). Barnett describes two shifts in this period: one in the purpose of humanitarianism as a result of the link between relief and development; and another in the further expansion of the state role. Chapter nine focuses primarily on the role of the United Nations in the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s. Barnett gives brief case histories for Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo, although there is no reason given for this particular selection of case studies, or its limitation to the 1990s, despite recent and controversial interventions (or non-

interventions) in humanitarian crises in Sierra Leone, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, Georgia, Sri Lanka, and others. Chapter ten once again presents a case study of five NGOs and their changing relationships with the politics of human rights. Finally, the conclusion looks again at the arguments for studying humanitarian movements in their broader context.

There are inevitable problems in bridging the disciplines of international relations and history, and Barnett makes a valiant attempt throughout the book, bringing to light the continuities and differences as humanitarianism progresses from its original conception in the 18th century. The book raises important questions and offers interesting case studies. It lays a strong foundation for future research in the direction of an organisational understanding of humanitarian work. Finally, Barnett is willing and able to present evidence of the continuous struggle between the desire of humanitarian organisations to remain apolitical and their reliance on politics and the state to pursue their humanitarian aims.

Unfortunately, the author's provocative argument and interesting focus are weakened in parts by the unevenness of its structure, and a non-historical approach to a historical topic. Perhaps inevitably given his research background, Barnett's history of humanitarianism is not methodologically grounded in history. While the focus on humanitarian 'ages' laudably traces the origins of humanitarianism long before the common international relations starting point of the 1990s or even the 1940s, the emphasis still remains on these later periods. Split into three sections, the first age covers roughly 170 years in 45 pages; the second, roughly 49 years in 61 pages; and the third, 20 years in 58 pages.

Beyond the amount of space dedicated to each of these time periods, the book suffers from the generalization and telescoping effects of treating these segments of time as coherent chunks, rather than examining the change over time. The function of history in this book is to act as a step function, moving from one 'age' to the next, as defined by the traditional imperial, Cold War, and post-Cold War markers, with very little emphasis on the continuity between 'ages', or on the changes within each 'age'. For instance, Barnett posits that there was a shift to state and NGO-led development projects after the Second World War, away from the ostensibly religious projects of the pre-war period. This marks one of the major differences between these 'ages'. However, this delineation neglects the importance of the imperial state in the development projects of empires both before and after the Second World War, as well as the close relationship and on-going tensions between the imperial state and missionary movements in the period preceding the Cold War.

Similarly, Barnett emphasizes early on that he did not want to write a book about the history of the non-governmental organisation (NGO). He lays out some perfectly good reasoning for this and the first section looks instead at intellectual traditions. However, by the time he arrives at part two, the book begins to shift to a history of the NGO; specifically CARE, the ICRC, MSF, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision International, and UNHCR. There is no explanation for the sudden shift to a focus on a handful of NGOs, or explanation for the choice of these specific NGOs. This transforms the book, at a certain point, into an organisational study of the development of NGOs and their relationships with political structures (both state-based and supra-state). But for an organisational study, Barnett misses the 'death of the mission' problem that represents one of the most interesting, provocative, and problematic tensions that carries through from the earliest notions of alchemical (and imperial) humanitarianism to the present. By focusing on the intellectual origins of humanitarianism in the first 'age' and then moving to an organisational study, rather than choosing, for instance, to focus on the changing nature of the organisations themselves through all three 'ages', the first part of the book seems to relegate the 19th century to a source for intellectual debate, rather than an era of practical importance for understanding why development projects – those sponsored by missionaries, empires, or humanitarian organisations – struggle to put themselves out of business.

This choice of structure and emphasis weakens Barnett's claim to carry the origins of humanitarianism back into their imperial foundations. Barnett is insistent that the major change between each of the 'ages' delineated herein is the role of the state in both alchemical humanitarianism and emergency relief; that is, a shift from a minimal role for the state to an increasingly state-driven vision of humanitarian action. The weakness of this argument becomes apparent when reading *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, which

emphasises instead a transition *from* state (imperial) actors to the non-state NGO. While both have support for their arguments, the weight of evidence behind Simms and Trim's claims reveals this to be a more convincing reading of the historical trends in humanitarianism and intervention. In their introduction, Simms and Trim make the convincing case that 'one of the phenomena of the late twentieth century has been the effective transfer of power from states to non-state actors' (p. 20).

A more methodologically historical book, *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, is an edited volume that brings together scholarship on European, imperial, and post-colonial humanitarian interventions covering a period from the 16th century to the present. This chronological scope is what makes the book stand out from the crowd of books on this subject, and, like *Empire of Humanity* (p. 29) it convincingly argues for the emergence of a wider vision of 'humanity' over the course of many centuries. Unlike *Empire of Humanity*, however, this book focuses exclusively on interventions, rather than humanitarianism more generally. Intervention, for Simms and Trim's purposes, is defined to consist of 'sustained actions to end oppression, tyranny, persecution, or human rights abuses in another state, where the action was against the will of the government, its ruling elites, or a predominant faction or party, regardless of whether that action was diplomatic, logistical, economic, or military-naval' (p. 7).

While all of the contributions to this volume are well-researched and historically interesting, contributing to the widest possible history of intervention case studies, they are mostly tangential to the standard chronology of the emergence of humanitarian intervention. Rather than a weakness, this helps to support the editors' contention that humanitarian intervention has both a deeper history than previously explored, and a broader remit – touching early modern Protestants in Catholic Europe (chapters one and two), the Ottoman Empire (chapters seven through nine), European Jews (chapter six), underexplored 19th-century African interventions (chapters ten through 12), and American (chapters 13 and 14) and Vietnamese (chapter 15) interventions – than the standard list of case histories.

Humanitarian Intervention is both well-conceived and well-executed as an edited collection. The essays and editors' remarks alike are integrated seamlessly, with enough contextual overlap to see the connections between chapters. Additionally, this book does not give the sense of a teleological 'progress' towards modern conceptions of intervention. Rather, the diversity of the contributions adds to the impression that in each case there were historically contingent decisions being made in response to local and international, as well as timely legal and moral understandings of humanitarian intervention. A theme of the conflict between high-minded humanitarian motives and quotidian political realities runs through the book. The range of essays gives the reader the full sense that the development of the ideas of humanitarian intervention has never been a consistent and systematic development, but an ebbing and flowing of ideas centred on a notion of universalism.

Part one, 'Early modern precedents', examines in three essays the fundamental ideas at work in the post-Reformation period that contributed to a shift away from the idea that religious heretics should be punished by the various individual rulers of united (Catholic) Christendom, to 'the developing discourse that there was a right, indeed a duty, to defend or protect the subjects of a tyrannical and abusive prince from his excesses' (p. 32). This thought spread from a religious intervention to more generic terms associated with geopolitics in the 17th and 18th centuries. D. J. B. Trim, Andrew C. Thompson, and Brendan Simms all contribute essays looking at the tension between the desire to intervene and the realities of intervention, which become more possible with proximity and with an increase in military strength.

Part two, 'The great powers and the Ottoman Empire', explores the 19th-century European interventions in other European states and in the Ottoman Empire, particularly those in support of oppressed religious minorities. As John Bew's chapter on 'Intervention in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars' outlines, this is the period when anti-interventionist language begins to consolidate, particularly as a defence against European intervention in Britain. In most of the cases in part two, the theme of 'realist' intervention is present, and as Matthias Schulz's chapter on the Russo-Ottoman War illuminates, foreign policy-making in the late 19th century had an important effect on reactions to humanitarian crises in and peripheral to Europe (p.185). Abigail Green's essay, for instance, highlights that although humanitarianism is largely present in the

arguments for intervention, ‘considerations of *Realpolitik* appear to have been decisive’ (p. 146) in the choice of Britain to champion Jewish rights. This consideration of geopolitical realities meant that, in the 19th century, the balance of power was always a consideration in intervention. Davide Rodogno’s essay on Ottoman Lebanon and Syria argues that, while still the case in extra-European territories, the rules were slightly different there.

Part three, ‘Intervening in Africa’, carries this theme out into the European empires, introducing the element of imperial expansion, and the rights and obligations of empires. Maeve Ryan’s contribution examines the British naval intervention in the West African slave trade, and the conflict with French and Portuguese powers as the British sought to enforce anti-slave trade treaties. William Mulligan’s chapter moves later in the century and across the continent to the suppression of the East African slave trade. These two contributions to the volume are valuable for reintroducing the explicitly *military* interventionist argument of the anti-slavery movement into the history of humanitarian intervention. Although the anti-slavery movement has recently begun to be reintegrated into the story of the rise of humanitarianism, the focus tends to be on its metropolitan dimensions. These two chapters help to reintroduce the reader to the on-the-ground interventions in Africa and their controversial nature. Gideon Miller’s chapter on intervention in Sudan likewise brings out the theme of the slave trade and the conflict and collaboration between religious and humanitarian motives and the imperial, and eventually, post-colonial state in Sudan. This tension is explored in all of these cases, and as Mulligan writes, ‘humanitarianism enabled many otherwise sceptical Britons to accept and even demand the expansion of empire’ (p. 272).

In non-colonial, or non-Western powers, this tension was particularly dramatic. Part four, ‘Non-European states’, examines two American interventions and the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia. Mike Sewall examines the humanitarian principles that informed the decision to ‘free’ Cuba from Spain in 1898, but also led to the rise of the opposition movement against the American repression of resistance movements in the Philippines. Thomas J. W. Probert and Sophie Quinn-Judge’s chapters move the chronology forward to the 1970s and 1980s. Probert’s example provides a strong case for understanding humanitarian intervention in non-military terms. Once again, the religious element of humanitarianism is underlined with the US reaction to Soviet Jewish emigration. Quinn-Judge’s examination of Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia, meanwhile, provides an example of non-Western military intervention, which ‘amounted to an undeclared but successful humanitarian intervention’ (p. 344) and the international assumptions that saw it as a territorial annexation or a Soviet expansion.

The American interventions are interesting, and it is good to see them included in this volume, particularly Mike Sewall’s contribution on the Spanish-American War. However, in possibly the only disappointing aspect of this book, the title of this section gives a global historian an element of false hope, as it leaves untouched the intriguing potential studies of the ECOMOG intervention in Sierra Leone, the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, the African Union’s intervention in the Sudan, and numerous other potential ‘Non-European’ examples.

Part five consists of Matthew Jamison’s essay on ‘liberal interventionism’ since 1990, and D. J. B. Trim’s concluding chapter. By including the post-Cold War examples, the volume rounds out the study of humanitarian intervention and places the recent cases into the context of the idea’s *longue durée*. Jamison’s chapter is particularly interesting because it locates, convincingly, the beginning of the post-Cold War interventions in the first Gulf War, a conflict that is not typically included, let alone seen as the ‘Iraqi precedent’ (p. 368) for the Croatian and Bosnian interventions.

Finally, Trim’s conclusion summarizes the volume’s themes, particularly the conflicting and, more often than not, complementary nature of political realism and liberal humanitarian intervention (p. 401). He also reasserts the editors’ continued dismissal of the ‘Westphalian paradigm’ of territorial sovereignty. Simms’ own contribution to the volume, chapter four, articulates this idea: intervention is the historical norm (p. 91). In fact, both *Humanitarian Intervention* and *Empire of Humanity* emphasize that humanitarian intervention or action has been perceived recently as contravening longstanding conventions of sovereignty, which have only broken down since the end of the Cold War. This, both books say, is a misperception. Both go some

way to reconcile humanitarianism's past with its present.

Both of these volumes make valuable, and timely, contributions to the growing literature on humanitarian interventions, helping to expand both popular and scholarly understanding of humanitarianism's past. Barnett and Simms and Trim focus on different aspects of the ongoing humanitarian project, but both of these books are about 'humanitarianism', at some level, being imposed upon others. This is an important step in understanding the continuities (as well as the discontinuities) in humanitarian interventions. While the notion of sacred and ancient state sovereignty is dismissed by both books, the imposition of 'humanitarianism' is still recognised as such. Barnett writes that 'Liberal peacebuilding is a highly invasive project; the expanded list of factors associated with a stable peace means that nearly all of the features of state and society have become objects of intervention' (p.164). Simms and Trim take a more limited view of what constitutes intervention but still emphasise the power dynamics that have underpinned all forms of humanitarian intervention, and which continue to do so today.

Notes

1. Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa* (London, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Linda Polman, *War Games: the Story of Aid and War in Modern Times* (London, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. William Easterly, *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good* (London, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations*, ed. Jennifer Welsh (Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The editors of *Humanitarian Intervention: A History* are happy to accept this generous review and do not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Foreign Affairs

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68137/michael-barnett/empire-of-humanity-a-history-of-humanitarianism> [3]

International Law Reporter

<http://ilreports.blogspot.com/2011/06/barnett-empire-of-humanity-history-of.html> [4]

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