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Abstract

A review of:

Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism. By Michael Barnett. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. 312pp.

Keywords

Humanitarianism, International humanitarian law, Humanitarian aid, Humanitarian intervention, Relief agencies, Humanitarian agencies

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Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism. By Michael Barnett. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. 312pp.

In "Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism," Michael Barnett has produced a readable and thought provoking analysis of international assistance now involving each year over 200,000 "aid workers" and almost \$20b in material resources. His primary focus is on the western states, which provide most of the resources, and the western based agencies, either non-governmental or inter-governmental, which mostly implement the aid. He does not cover Islamic charities, which is unfortunate since some Islamic aid agencies are reported to be important players in the game, receiving reportedly large donation from certain Islamic governments. It would also be good to know which of these Islamic agencies are truly charitable organizations and which are fronts for terrorist and other non-charitable causes. But that research would require linguistic skills that most of us do not possess.

In this reviewer's opinion, the strongest part of the book comes when Barnett provides short case studies of humanitarian crises, which both indicate the nature of the process at work and the nature of the actors involved. He is very good, for example, at taking the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 and showing how the fighting parties sought to manipulate and control humanitarian aid in the light of their fundamental objectives; how the Red Cross notion of neutrality and impartiality led to various limitations and frustrations for aid agencies of that network; and how some who were active in the French Red Cross reacted by creating what become Doctors Without Borders—which in turn led to further debates about whether and how to "witness" or speak out about human rights violations in conflicts without disrupting the flow of aid.

To take another example, he is very good at showing how in the case of persons in need on the Thai-Cambodian border after 1979, Oxfam undercut the efforts of UNESCO and the International Committee of the Red Cross, mainly because Oxfam wanted a larger share of the humanitarian action to justify its existence and satisfy its donors mainly in the United Kingdom. In still another example, he is very good at showing how CARE and Catholic Relief Service became involved in debatable and highly controversial U.S. anti-communist policies during the Vietnam War, to such an extent that both agencies began to rethink their relationship to the government that provided most of their resources.

Conceptually, Barnett's big picture is likely to provoke further discussion about the nature of the process and the interplay of "politics" and charitable intentions. His fundamental view is that since the process involves those with resources and the means of delivery, while others have little say over what happens, therefore "politics" is inherently at work. He sees a power differential between the haves and the have nots, which necessarily leads to a type of governance and control.

This seems true enough as far as it goes, but this conception of "politics" is quite different from Oxfam undercutting the ICRC-UNESCO team in a struggle for salience among non-governmental actors, and it is quite different from the ICRC trying to sabotage the International Relief Union in the 1920s and 1930s in order to insure that the newly emerged League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (now the Federation) did not eclipse the ICRC. And the power

differential between those who deliver aid and those who need to receive it is quite a different matter from the United States co-opting agencies like CARE and CRS into its power struggles against North Vietnam for control of the south of that country.

So in the matter of the interplay of "politics" and humanitarianism, it is probably a good idea to stay away from vague and undifferentiated references to a general "politics," which can and does mean different things to different people. There are other treatments in this field that make a differentiation between states' strategic politics, humanitarian actors' bureaucratic or administrative competitions, various actors' struggle to infuse state policy with more attention to human dignity, and so on.^[1]

Likewise, Barnett's historical breakdown of humanitarianism into three eras is most likely not the last word on the subject. As per above, his central notion is paternalism on the part of the haves (see pp. 8, 30, and passim). In his view, from 1880 to 1945 the system was fully paternalistic; this is Imperial Humanitarianism. From 1945 to 1989 it was still basically paternalistic; this is Neo-Humanitarianism (actually Neo-Imperial); and from 1989 to the present it has become relatively better and somewhat less paternalistic; this is Liberal Humanitarianism. In each era he looks at security issues (Forces of Destruction); economic issues (Forces of Production); and various attitudes toward "Civilization" or "Sovereignty" or "Human Rights" all of which he summarizes as forces of "Compassion." This is all creative and thought provoking but probably not the final word based on consensus agreement.

With regard to the practice of humanitarianism in a world of states and the state system, he finds contradictions which are enduring: there are many humanitarianisms, not one; the relevant ethics are both universal and circumstantial; there is both emancipation and domination; the process both advances and undermines progress; it helps meet the needs of others but reflects "our own needs."

This well informed, sophisticated, and eminently readable treatment constitutes required reading in classes and training programs dealing with contemporary international humanitarianism.

[1] See further David P. Forsythe, *Humanitarian Politics: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); and Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Politics* (Headline Series No. 304, Foreign Policy Association, May, 1995). Barnett does not utilize or even react to these and other works which utilize different notions of "politics."

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