Humanitarianism as Political Fusion

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Michael Barnett has written a brilliant—and sobering—analysis of the dilemmas of humanitarian organizations in contemporary global politics. He argues convincingly that humanitarianism is becoming politicized and that humanitarian organizations are becoming institutionalized. These changes speak to core conceptualizations by humanitarians of themselves and to their capacity to fulfill their most essential functions. Barnett appropriately draws attention to the unexpected, counterintuitive, and at times undesirable consequences of politicization and institutionalization, particularly for ethics and identity. Humanitarian organizations, he concludes, are now far more vulnerable to external control, to the ability of states to constrain their practices and principles. By implication, Barnett concludes, politicization and institutionalization produce negative consequences for humanitarianism. Power is changing what humanitarian organizations do and what they are.

Another way of putting Barnett's argument is that humanitarianism is maturing as it comes of age in global politics and governance. Politicization and institutionalization are evidence that humanitarians are "growing up," with all the attendant contradictions and angst. As the role of humanitarians in global politics has grown, some politicization and institutionalization were inescapable. I distinguish more sharply than does Barnett, however, between the consequences of the two. While the consequences of institutionalization are largely negative and at times deeply compromising of fundamental humanitarian principles, the consequences of politicization are far more mixed, subtle, and challenging. Politicization, I argue, provides some opportunities as well as the constraints that Barnett identifies.

The defining logic of neutrality and independence, characteristic of humanitarian thinkers and organizations since their earliest days, came undone as the end of the cold war melted the frozen status quo and opened up political space for transformative logics. In that wider political space, it became more and more difficult to define a restrictive set of parameters for humanitarian organizations. They could not easily stand by as states were made, unmade, and remade, and continue to remain neutral and committed only to emergency assistance to all the parties. They remain committed to the assistance of all the parties to a conflict, but what that assistance should be, where in the chain of transformative logic humanitarian organizations should focus their energies, and how assistance should be delivered so that it does not create undesirable political consequences are all now hotly contested. What was once unproblematic is now problematized, in large part because what was once only implicitly political is now explicitly so. Principles are contested within a community that is now beginning to grapple seriously with its political roles and responsibilities, and with the reluctant and at times grudging recognition that it is a political player.

As the humanitarian community recognizes its political role and responsibilities, it faces serious—indeed painful— challenges to established humanitarian thinking. Yet that recognition is essential if new and creative approaches to the dilemmas humanitarians face are to be developed. Humanitarians, belatedly and with difficulty, are acknowledging that they have been speaking prose, and have been doing so for a long time. To pretend otherwise, to struggle to maintain the fiction that their work is apolitical, is to do a disservice to those they seek to help.

It is difficult at times to understand how humanitarians could construe their work as anything but political. A "Dunantist" organization like MSF remains committed to neutrality, impartiality, and independence and, consequently, refuses to take money directly from northern governments and agencies. It raises all its funds from direct donations. Yet MSF originated in the urgent need to bear witness for the victimized and marginalized, to stand together in solidarity with those it seeks to help. Bearing witness is, at its essence, a deeply political act that shapes the reality of those who tell the story. When MSF began its campaign to make anti-retrovirals more affordable to sufferers from HIV/AIDS in southern communities, its leaders launched a sophisticated political campaign to bring governments, pharmaceutical companies, and international institutions to the bargaining table. It sought ultimately

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to amend existing international regulation by changing the dynamics of governance. Humanitarian thought and identities are now evolving to allow explicit consideration of the political. These are essential first steps for a much more sophisticated—and very much needed—discussion of the political role of humanitarianism and the political identity of humanitarians.

Institutionalization, the second change that Barnett traces, is a response to a similar set of imperatives, but has quite different consequences from the first. Indeed, the political and the institutional imperatives, although closely connected, can work at cross-purposes. The new emphasis on outcomes, results, measurement, evaluation, and standardized reporting is part of a much larger focus on accountability by governments as they withdraw from direct service delivery, at home as well as abroad. But this allegedly technical, value-free process of performance enhancement, as Barnett accurately observes, is a deeply political process that carries with it a new legitimating vocabulary, new authority relationships, and new values.

Barnett brilliantly identifies the longer-term costs of "professionalized" and "bureaucratized" humanitarian organizations. One obvious set of negative consequences of institutionalization flows from the imperatives of large organizations as a species—survival and funding. But there are particularities beyond the general. Humanitarian organizations compete in a very unequal marketplace, with many agencies and often only one or two big funders: a national agency and one of the UN agencies—either UNHCR, or WFP, or WHO, depending on the kind of emergency and the services the organization provides. Demands for efficiency ring somewhat hollow when the structure of the market is so asymmetrical that it gives extraordinary power to one or two buyers in a permanent buyers market. This kind of market reduces the independence of NGOs, limits their capacity to negotiate mandates and responsibilities and, consequently, creates strong incentives for agencies to exaggerate successes, minimize failures, and manipulate performance indicators strategically.[1] This kind of behavior over time risks distorting humanitarian practices on the ground. It does not contribute to a principled decision-making environment within humanitarian organizations. Under these conditions, the demand for accountability is profoundly corrupting.

There are, as Barnett demonstrates, other costs to professionalization and institutionalization. The outcomes that donors want, the "results" that they are looking for are often not "neutral," but infused with political values that, even when they do not directly contradict the values of the humanitarian organization, nevertheless shape their policies and practices in ways that they do not choose. One argument that is currently raging about food aid exemplifies this kind of not-so-subtle process.

The assertion that prolonged food aid is "inefficient" because it creates "dependency" is now being fiercely debated. In this lexicon, the negative outcome to be avoided is "dependency" and the desirable results are self-sufficiency and self-reliance. The argument is not abstract: it affects the kind of food aid humanitarian organizations provide and when and where they give it.[2] The argument provides useful description but poor quality explanation. Descriptively, it is accurate to say that some communities have become dependent on food aid over time.

The broader question is, of course, why communities depend on external assistance for food. What is driving what? Are governments, when they are relieved of their responsibilities to feed their populations, free then to abuse, rape, and pillage? This causal sequence is not intuitively persuasive: it is equally plausible that the nature of these corrupt governments is driving their failure to meet their responsibilities to provide the basic security envelope within which communities can safely invest in agriculture. Without social protection, local agriculture is unlikely to thrive.

Disentangling the causal threads is complex: community behavior is unlikely to be a function of a single driver. Moreover, a concept like "dependency" often has no unambiguous empirical referents. How much food aid as a proportion of a family's consumption constitutes "dependence" is unclear. Perhaps the issue is neither absolute nor relative amounts of assistance, but rather the predictability of food aid so that families and communities can retain the initiative and the resources to plan livelihood strategies. Or the issue may not be the community reaction to food assistance at all, but the alternatives available to them. Those confined to refugee camps by fearful host governments, denied the opportunity to move and to work, cannot develop viable livelihood strategies whether or not predictable amounts of food aid are provided by humanitarian organizations. As a recent review of "dependency" concludes, "The persistence of the idea of a dependency syndrome says more about the attitudes of aid providers toward recipients than it does about the attitudes of the recipients themselves. . . . Discourses around dependency often blame the symptom, rather than the cause."[3]

Yet as donors enforce these arguments about food aid in the name of "accountability," "value-for-money," and other "value-neutral" performance measures, humanitarian organizations, albeit reluctantly, change what they do and inevitably how they see themselves. These changes go to the essence of humanitarian principles and values. Lost in the argument is the absolute need, when viable alternatives are absent, of people for food.

What is compromised, as Barnett argues, is the ethic of humanitarian action. Humanitarian organizations, he concludes, that now act increasingly as the agents of states, not only lose discretion to make decisions—as has happened about food aid—but also their autonomy and their moral authority. Here, the issue is principally politiciza-

tion rather than professionalization, although the two are intertwined. The consequences of politicization, negative as well as positive, go far deeper and are even more far-reaching than the consequences of institutionalization.

Barnett writes cogently of the change in humanitarian objectives, a change that responds to changes in global politics. No longer content with saving people who will soon find themselves again at risk, humanitarianism now tries to change the structural conditions that make peoples vulnerable. Any attempt to change structural conditions is inescapably and deeply political. There is not now—and from the beginnings of modern humanitarian action, there never has been—an escape from politicization. Humanitarian organizations have made the claim that they are apolitical, that they are neutral, even while their work—from its earliest days—had deep political consequences. The claim to apolitical status served political purposes at the same time it opened space for political action at particular moments in history. Whether that claim to be apolitical continues to provide significant political benefits in today's global politics is an empirical question. What matters is not whether humanitarians engage in politics—they do—but rather what kind of politics, and how much agency humanitarian organizations have within these politics.

Much of what humanitarians have done in the past several decades under the cover of neutrality and independence has been deeply infused with liberal values. Humanitarian action has been important in constituting and reconstituting a "liberal" global order. As Barnett concludes, humanitarians can no longer pretend that they do not have or do not exercise power, even as they in turn are shaped by the power of big states and global institutions. The interesting question for scholars and for humanitarians is how much scope humanitarian organizations have for defining their political voice and the values they carry with them in their work. Do their politics and values necessarily reflect the politics and values of the dominant global order?

When the question is put that way, the challenges and the opportunities for humanitarian organizations come to the foreground. Few would make the deterministic argument that humanitarians have no degrees of freedom, that an era of globalization and neoliberalism dictates the principles, values, and practices of all not-for-profit organizations. Nor would this kind of argument be empirically supported when we consider the diversity in structure, values, and purposes of global not-for-profits.

Perhaps, then, it is the large humanitarians who specialize in emergency assistance that are most constrained. They are constrained because of their need for significant funding in real time, funding that can only come from states and from the specialized agencies of the UN. Dependent for their operations and their survival on national and international funders, these organizations are especially likely to reproduce the existing global order and its values. Analysis of the humanitarian marketplace in which the largest of these organizations operate, as I suggested earlier, privileges this kind of explanation. But this may still be too simple.

Some strategies can expand the degrees of freedom that large humanitarian organizations have. The move to consolidate emergency appeals under a single rubric should help to relax some of these constraints by reducing the opportunities for national and international agencies to exploit their monopoly positions. Consolidated appeals also dampen the competition among humanitarian organizations and reduce the pressures for visibility. Even now, however, when these strategies have not yet been fully implemented, there is considerable variation among the largest in their mixes of public and private funding, in their foundational principles, in their values, in their political programs, and in their practices. MSF, CARE, and Oxfam look and sound very different from one another. All, despite official rhetoric to the contrary, are "political," but the three have very different politics within the larger global order. Nor is it easy for institutional funders to marginalize any one of them.

If what was implicit is now becoming explicit, the challenge humanitarian leaders face is to identify the opportunities for political action as well as the constraints imposed by the global order. Barnett frames the problem this way: humanitarianism is poised precariously between the politics of solidarity and the politics of governance. As humanitarianism moves beyond palliative care to reduce the causes of misery, humanitarian organizations become embroiled in collaborative relationships with governance structures that they once resisted. They face a Hobson's choice.

This framing of the problem may put humanitarians within an artificially constructed binary world. Their challenge may not be between the politics of solidarity or the politics of global governance, but rather to fuse the politics of solidarity with that of governance. Whether the politics is solidarity or governance does not mitigate the explicitly political responsibilities that humanitarian organizations have. They play a political role in either world. Once they acknowledge that role and their responsibilities, it becomes somewhat easier to craft a politics that fuses solidarity with governance.

The transformative strategy that MSF developed to reduce the cost of anti-retrovirals drew explicitly on a politics of solidarity *and* governance. It grew directly out of solidarity with those who were unjustly denied access to treatment in poor societies and it politicized those changes to the world trading system that had to be made in order to open up space for a solution. This strategy along with others—global purchasing and warehousing of the pharmaceuticals that are needed for emergency medical care, just-in-time integrated world-wide delivery

systems, and the funding of basic research on diseases in the south that receive almost no attention in northern laboratories—do not fit easily into the one-dimensional image of MSF as young doctors in tents delivering medical care in the midst of an emergency. Yet these kinds of strategies grow directly out of a fused politics of solidarity and governance.

Fusion politics—solidarity and governance—may be the newest face of humanitarianism. The familiar mantras of neutrality and impartiality have been used in the past as a shield against explicit politics. Those organizations that lead the next wave of humanitarianism will be those that openly acknowledge their political role and seek out the opportunities for a reconfigured humanitarianism that political fusion creates.

Notes

1 Darcy 2005.
2 Harvey and Lind 2005.
3 Ibid., 5, 6.

References

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Harvey, Paul, and Jeremy Lind. 2005. *Dependency and humanitarian relief: A critical analysis.* HPG Research Report, Humanitarian Policy Group. London, July 2005.