The trouble with humanitarianism

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Abstract. Humanitarianism – that is, the political, economic and military interference in the domestic affairs of a state justified by a nascent transnational morality – is one of the defining and most controversial features of the post-Cold War period. This article advances nine theses, arguing that humanitarianism has a simplistic worldview, that coercive humanitarian actions trigger negative consequences, that humanitarianism is quite effective in sheltering Western states from the spillover effects of political crises but is less so in solving the problems it claims to address. These arguments are illustrated with reference to four prominent cases: Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda and Darfur. The article concludes with a brief outline of an alternative humanitarian approach.

The word 'humanitarianism' describes the worldview, aspirations, professional vocabularies and actions affirming the common dignity of humankind regardless of differences in race, gender, religion, national belonging, political creed, or any other accident of birth or contextual circumstance.[1] Humanitarianism has slowly affirmed itself as a political and normative alternative to the still predominant Westphalian system which has characterised international relations for the better part of the last three and a half centuries. The Westphalian system is distinguished by the presence of an international community composed of sovereign states with absolute and exclusive authority over the territory under their jurisdiction. States are all formally equal and must refrain from interfering in each other's domestic jurisdiction. Force is the main source of legitimacy of domestic political authority. Legitimate governments are recognised as such by the community of states to the extent that they effectively control their territory. The creation and coercive application of juridical norms and the resolution of controversies are all decentralised and left to the discretion of individual states. In the Westphalian system, international law is conceived essentially as a set of norms aimed at guaranteeing the peaceful coexistence of sovereign states.

[1] Many different definitions of humanitarianism exist, most of which tend to stress the impartial, independent and neutral provision of relief to endangered individuals and groups. By contrast, my definition is broader. It includes both the norms and values of humanitarians and their actions – including coercive interventions aimed at stopping or preventing human rights violations. As such, it closely connected to the growing influence of human rights in international politics. See Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

In contrast, humanitarianism allows individuals and groups to play an important role on the international level, which was traditionally the domain of sovereign states. Although a humanitarian impulse has always existed in all major world religions in the form of compassion or solidarity towards those who are in need, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that humanitarian principles were recognised in international law. After witnessing the 1859 Battle of Solferino, the Swiss businessman Henry Dunant was central in lobbying for the 1864 Geneva Convention – the first attempt to bind states to distinguish between lawful and unlawful conduct in war. The Convention gave the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) the role of ensuring respect for these humanitarian rules during times of war. Three principles have guided its actions. In conformity with the principle of humanity, the ICRC is inspired by the desire to help the victims independently from any political constraint; in conformity with the principle of impartiality, the ICRC concerns itself with the needs and vulnerability of the victims; and in conformity with the principle of neutrality, it refrains from political involvement, and particularly from taking sides between the parties in conflict.[2]

The affirmation of humanitarian principles continued even in the midst of war. While the first half of the twentieth century is generally seen as an era dominated by nationalism and the aggressive pursuit of the national interest, these decades nonetheless witnessed the attempt to bring reason and rule in the prevention of war with the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907, the creation of the League of Nations and the Permanent Court of Justice in 1919, the 1928 Kellog–Briand Pact and the establishment of the United Nations in 1945.[3] But it was in the aftermath of World War II that humanitarianism gained a new momentum. The horrors of the war discredited the Westphalian conception of the international order in which states could do as they pleased in the treatment of their citizens. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed an alternative conception of political order grounded on the rights of individuals. The Declaration did not impose European values onto the rest of the world, as is often argued, but represented 'a warning by Europeans that the rest of the world should not seek to reproduce its mistakes', in particular the idolatry of the nation-state.[4] Since then, human rights norms have proliferated and nation-states worldwide have gradually come to endorse them.

The 1970s witnessed the beginning of the transformation of humanitarianism.[5] The humanitarian crisis in Biafra in the early 1970s highlighted the limited effectiveness of classical humanitarianism. Thousands died while the ICRC, loyal to its founding principles, maintained a neutral and impartial stance. In response, a group of young French doctors founded Doctors Without Borders, a volunteer organisation which aimed at offering an alternative to the ICRC by bearing witness

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[2] See, for example, David Forsythe, *The Humanitarians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[3] Dorothy V. Jones, *Toward a Just World: The Critical Years in the Search for International Justice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[4] Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 65.

[5] Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarianism Transformed', *Perspectives on Politics*, 4 (2005), pp. 723–40; Kurt Mills, 'Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict', *Global Governance*, 11 (2005), pp. 161–83.

to the horrors it encountered, even if that meant entering the contentious terrain of politics. From that time on, the humanitarian ideal was increasingly extended beyond the ICRC's prerogatives. States, the United Nations system, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the media have increasingly involved themselves with addressing humanitarian issues. Contemporary humanitarianism results from and is reinforced by the actions of this wide range of actors. It is expressed in the proactive attempt to protect individuals and groups regardless of where they happen to find themselves. It aims at preventing massive human rights violations and at mitigating the effects of war both during an ongoing conflict and after mass violence has ended.

To fulfil its promise, humanitarianism often challenges the Westphalian principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and the ICRC's principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. While up to the end of the Cold War states, international organisations, and NGOs had to go to great lengths to justify their interference in the domestic affairs of other states, today the opposite is the case. States are under a great deal of pressure to explain why they do *not* want to intervene, either militarily, politically or economically to promote and protect human rights in the name of a nascent transnational morality by definition applying across borders. The assumption has turned in favour of such intervention, not against it.

Humanitarianism has supporters, critics and enemies. Supporters highlight how humanitarianism is a sign of progress towards human freedom and emancipation – something axiomatically worthwhile striving for and justifying the intrusive interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states failing to adequately protect their own citizens.[6] This pro-interventionist attitude is also evident in the international relations literature, which is often focused on the diffusion of human rights norms from the international to the domestic level, and brimming with notions of their success in the betterment of the human condition.[7] Critics denounce what they perceive as the vicious effects of humanitarianism, notably the misuse of humanitarian aid,[8] or highlight more subtle consequences of humanitarianism – in particular the conceptual and practical limits of framing human emancipation in human rights terms.[9] Finally, enemies criticise humanitarianism for being a moral cover for the interests of the most powerful states, in particular the United States.[10]

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[6] International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Center, 2001); Bernard Kouchner, *Les Guerriers de la Paix: Du Kosovo à l'Irak* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2004).

[7] Thomas Risse, Steven C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[8] Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Mary Anderson, *Do No Harm: How can Aid Support Peace – or War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

[9] David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

[10] Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (London: Pluto, 1999); David Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention* (London: Pluto, 2002).

This article aims to add to the debate an analysis of humanitarianism as an ideology. Two general meanings of this term can be identified.[11] In its weak and neutral meaning, 'ideology' refers to a set of ideas and values concerning political order and having the function of guiding collective political behaviour. Humanitarianism is an ideology in this sense, since it involves a range of ideas about the importance of protecting individual and group rights and aims at guiding political behaviour accordingly. Ideology also has a stronger and more negative meaning originating from Marx's insight that theories, values and ideas originate from and legitimate unequal relationships of domination and subordination. An ideology justifies this relationship by providing it with a false consciousness – by mystifying the 'real' nature of the relationship. Humanitarianism is also an ideology in this stronger sense. It is the belief that Western involvement in weak states in order to protect individual and group rights arises from unquestionably altruistic motives and is the answer to addressing human suffering worldwide. As this article argues, this belief is false. Rather than originating from a transnational morality, humanitarianism originates from and reproduces the unequal power relationship between the West and the less developed world. Humanitarianism hides a Western agenda of containment that has little to do with those humanitarian ideals originally used to justify the infringement of Westphalian sovereignty. Furthermore, rather than providing an answer to human suffering, humanitarianism is at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive.

This argument is developed through nine theses divided into four broader categories – progressing from an analysis of the humanitarians' worldview, to the negative consequences of coercive actions taken in the name of humanitarian principles, to the functions humanitarianism performs for Western states, and finally to the consequences of post-war humanitarian undertakings. The use of 'theses' is a rhetorical device which, to my knowledge, has no precedent in the vast and growing literature on the topic and which aims at putting in sharp focus key aspects of the humanitarian enterprise. The first two theses address humanitarianism's analysis of the situation, arguing that humanitarianism simplifies too much and misinterprets reality on the ground. Theses 3 and 4 highlight the negative consequences of coercive humanitarian actions, in particular the possibility that intervention on humanitarian grounds might induce ethnic minorities to raise the level of violence and, after conflict breaks out, prolong war and misery. Theses 5, 6 and 7 draw attention to the prophylactic and managerial character of humanitarianism, suggesting that humanitarianism is rarely altruistic, is a short-term substitute for development and is organisationally dysfunctional. Theses 8 and 9 examine the negative consequences of postwar humanitarian actions, maintaining that humanitarianism reinforces the predominance of local warlike elites and reproduces the same cleavages it is trying to overcome. The concluding part briefly outlines an alternative strategy to addressing humanitarian concerns focused on preventive action and the improvement of domestic human rights culture in Western countries. Most empirical illustrations are drawn from four prominent cases: Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda and the current crisis in the western Sudanese region of Darfur. These are all cases with a significant

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[11] I draw this distinction from Norberto Bobbio's work on political ideologies: see his *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

ethno-national dimension. They provide enough variation to make a compelling argument that the flaws of humanitarianism extend beyond the limits of a single unfortunate set of circumstances.

Worldview

Thesis 1. Humanitarianism simplifies too much

Humanitarianism sustains a worldview where individuals are either victims or perpetrators, and not, more accurately, human beings in a complex set of relationships. The recurring plot has been described as a 'fairy story'. There is a hapless victim, either a malnourished child, or an ethnically cleansed refugee. There is a villain, no longer the unpredictable drought or hurricane, but the racist and bloodthirsty ethno-nationalist. And finally there is a knighted saviour, that is, the international aid agency, the Western foreign minister who has been working night and day on the crisis, or the journalist who has uncovered the dramatic story of human despair.[12] Differences between victims and their particular experience are eradicated. The victimised local population is described as weak, helpless and non-white, while the rescuers are brave, generous, white Westerners.

This underlying ethnocentric model has led some critics to charge humanitarianism with more or less implicit racist attitudes.[13] But even though this charge might be too extreme, humanitarianism does localise the underlying reasons for distress, and, by so doing, reinforces the image of irrationality it claims to address. The outbreak of war and the downward spiral of human suffering are attributed to backward and war-like people who have 'always been at each other's throats'. This localisation permits the disregarding of any Western contribution to the outbreak of a humanitarian crisis, elevates the West as the realm of reason, modernity and tolerance, and downgrades the rest as the realm of passion, tradition and fanaticism. Not only is this orientalising view inaccurate, but also it removes inhibition in the use of force for humanitarian purposes. Once the West is morally elevated to the realm of right and reason, the use of military violence in the name of protecting superior moral values is easier to endorse. Furthermore, because violence is used against supposedly irrational and brutal peoples, it can be employed with no restraint.[14]

Media coverage contributes to the simplification of the reality where humanitarian crises occur. As humanitarian advocate Michael Ignatieff explains, television structures its message by means of *synecdoche*, that is, by taking the part for the whole: 'the starving widow and her suffering children who stand for the whole famished community of Somalia; the mute victim behind the barbed wire at Tranopole who

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[12] Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul*, p. 36. The expression 'fairy story' comes from Jonathan Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993).
[13] Larry Minear et al., *The News Media, Civil War, and Humanitarian Action* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), p. 37.
[14] Sven Lindquist has traced the evolution of this slippery mindset from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to the twentieth century holocaust. See his *'Exterminate All the Brutes'* (London: Granta, 1996).

stands for the suffering of the Bosnian people as a whole'.[15] *Synecdoche* can foster the most ruthless behaviour among journalists in the field. A well-known example is that of a journalist who, during the war in Bosnia, broke into a collective centre looking to interview 'any woman who has been raped and speaks English'.[16] In addition to being distasteful (to say the least), *synecdoche* is a meagre approach at compassion. By focusing on a particular victim, it tells a story devoid of content and meaning. It induces the viewer to identify with *that* particular victim, at *that* particular moment, without understanding why he or she became a victim in the first place. Inevitably, this shallow empathy with the victim is destined to quickly fade when a new victim, a new starving child appears on television.[17]

The goal of simplified and direct messages is *not* that of raising consciousness and making the Western public think about poverty, war, human rights violations and the like. On the contrary, it is to avoid considering and examining the reasons for such human suffering. Hunger and pain are presented to the public only for the time necessary to convince viewers to contribute a small sum and return to their daily business. Television viewers will then be relieved to know that they contributed to a noble mission whose impact, however, remains questionable. Humanitarianism, then, is the means to temper public conscience in Western developed countries.

The media is only one of the reasons why humanitarian crises are depicted in a deceptively simple manner. Media operate in an effective synergy with humanitarian agencies on the ground, as both need each other. The media needs humanitarians to provide the information on the subject matter they investigate, just as humanitarians need media coverage to make a humanitarian crisis known to the world and thus raise the funds to address it. Both sometimes exploit victims for shock value, dehumanising those who suffer in what has been aptly termed the 'pornography of suffering'.[18] Both face a difficult moral dilemma. They can opt to present a nuanced analysis of a crisis, at the cost of leaving the public disinterested and aloof, and thus even limiting humanitarian agencies' fund-raising ability and the related capacity to achieve their humanitarian goals. Or they can adopt unethical tactics to provoke an impression among the general public and enable humanitarian organisations to raise more funds. More often than not, this dilemma is resolved in favour of the latter.

Thesis 2. Humanitarianism misinterprets reality and delays effective intervention

Most human rights crises are not in any sense 'emergencies' resulting from the sudden and unforeseen deterioration of the environmental situation of a country or region.

Michael Ignatieff, 'The Stories We Tell: Television and Humanitarian Aid', in Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 294. 'Tranopole' is likely to be 'Trnopolje', the site of one infamous Serb-run detention camp.

16 I have heard this story many times on my several visits to Bosnia, but I have been unable to locate the original source, or the name of the journalist. Perhaps the fact that many Bosnians know and believe this story is true is in itself a sign of a broader disillusionment with the quality of media coverage.

17 Stanley Cohen defines this attitude as a 'cultural form of Attention Deficit Disorder' in his *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (London: Polity, 2001), p. 177.

18 Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 18.

Instead, they arise from political, economic and social processes that can be identified, isolated, and potentially prevented. The crisis in Darfur, for example, is ultimately a battle to control fertile farming land that has been evolving for years. The roots of the crisis are found in the five-decades-old civil war that engulfed the Sudan. More recently, catastrophic droughts in northern and eastern Africa have soured the relationship between the farming and nomadic communities.[19] While there are elements of ethnic division – the nomads are primarily Arabs, while the established farmers of Darfur are mainly Africans – economic and political issues are at the heart of the fighting. The various tribes in the region have found themselves in increasing competition for the same shrinking set of natural resources, including water, grassland and arable soil.

The main point is that humanitarian crises do not suddenly break out. Not only do crises have a long gestation period, but also they come about because of the choices and actions of particular individuals and groups. Especially when mass killing is involved, the perpetrators require planning, logistical support and political backing. As a consequence, their actions can and often are detected before mass violence engulfs a country. The events leading up to massive human rights violations are thus in principle within the scope of human control; that is, they can be stopped and averted. But the prevailing humanitarian mindset is inherently *ex post-facto*, and limited in its capacity to proactively address a critical situation before it degenerates. As the old popular adage goes, when the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Humanitarianism is not about prevention, but damage control.

One could argue that the risk of violence in countries with an unstable political system and a history of inter-ethnic disputes such as the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and the Sudan is always present. It is a defining characteristic of these countries that violence tends to repeat itself. As such, even well-meaning external observers can never know with precision when and how civil coexistence is about to break down, and when and how they should intervene. While this reasoning might have a kernel of truth in it, it also condones the lack of appropriate preventive action. For most crises, a timely and relatively modest international intervention can prevent catastrophe.[20] But humanitarianism is unable to make its voice heard when most needed.

The best example is that of Rwanda. In April 1993, one year before the beginning of the genocide, the UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions compiled a damning report following his field visit to Rwanda. He described how the killing of civilian population could be termed as 'genocide'; how Radio Rwanda was fomenting ethnic violence; how a parallel political structure, in combination with the official government, was involved in massacres of the civilian population.[21] But his findings went unnoticed. The appeals of human rights NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders failed to reach a broader audience and to convince governments to act. In creating a peacekeeping force for Rwanda, even the UN Security Council ignored the admonitions of impending violence.

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[19] Alex de Waal, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[20] I. William Zartman, *Cowardly Lions: Missed Opportunities to Prevent Deadly Conflict and State Collapse* (Boulder, CO & London: Lynne Rienner, 2005).
[21] Report by the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions on His Mission to Rwanda, 8–17 April 1993, UN Document E/CN.4/1994/7/Add.1, 11 August 1993.

A few months later, in January 1994, the head of the peacekeeping mission to Rwanda, Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, estimated that the early deployment of 5,500 troops with a robust rule of engagement would have prevented most of the killing.[22] A later study confirmed this figure.[23] But the UN Headquarters in New York overlooked the General's views – and not because of lack of information about the unfolding crisis. Thus, the idea that great powers with the means to intervene to prevent and stop the killing (in particular the United States) could not have known about the scale of the mass killing in Rwanda until it was too late is off the mark.[24] In sum, despite the evidence of how the situation was deteriorating, no serious efforts were made to comprehend the evolution of the underlying power dynamics, or even to take seriously the warnings coming from informed observers.

A similar conclusion is warranted for the dissolution of Yugoslavia. American intelligence had predicted that Yugoslavia would fall apart about eighteen months before the beginning of the hostilities.[25] But the tragedy unfolded without any significant attempt to prevent it. Instead, the active lobbying of interests opposed to intervention hindered meaningful action. American generals, for example, inflated the number of troops needed to stop the Serb military campaign, claiming that 400,000 troops would be needed to enforce a ceasefire.[26] British pundits claimed that the defeat of the Serbs and subsequent military occupation of Bosnia would require half a million soldiers.[27] These estimates are strikingly in contradiction with those of the Serb political and military leaders. For example, Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzić declared in a televised interview that the deployment of 20,000 NATO troops to Yugoslavia during the 1991 war against Croatia would have been sufficient to stop the Serbian project. The same could be said for the war in Bosnia, where NATO's control of the Posavina corridor, linking the Western with the Eastern territories under Serb control, and only 5 km wide, would have quickly ended the Serb military campaign.[28]

In sum, a modest intervention in the early stages of the Rwandan and Yugoslav conflicts might have saved hundred of thousands of lives. Instead, major powers decided to stand idly by. It is tempting to conclude that the political will among American and European foreign policy elites to engage in peripheral countries was simply nonexistent. Instead, the rhetoric of humanitarianism was cynically used as political cover-up. Major powers declare themselves in favour of human rights, but refuse to seriously commit to their defence.[29]

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22 Romeo Dallaire, *Shaking Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (London: Arrow, 2003), p. 548. The number of personnel requested by Dallaire was a third of the missions currently deployed to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia; see: ⟨www.un.org/depts/dpko⟩ (accessed on 4 May 2005).

23 Scott R. Feil, *Preventing Genocide: How the Early Use of Force Might Have Succeeded in Rwanda* (New York: Carnegie Commission on Deadly Conflict, 1998).

24 This is the argument of Alan Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2001).

25 David Binder, 'Yugoslavia Seen Breaking up Soon', *The New York Times*, 28 November 1990.

26 Samantha Power, *'A Problem from Hell': America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 283.

27 Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 229.

28 At least Karadzić conceded this much in the 1997 BBC documentary *The Death of Yugoslavia*.

29 This is the main thesis of Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *'A Problem from Hell'*.

But perhaps more than major powers' egoism is involved in the failure to act. Because most humanitarians think of their work as short-term and *post-facto*, they are ill-placed to detect long-term political dynamics. Often they do not even want to look for signs and warnings that presage disaster, but choose to abstain from political analysis and even more so from political involvement. This choice leaves them the possibility of taking the moral high ground, while holding others responsible for their failures. Humanitarians condemn or approve a military intervention (or a lack of); they speak truth to power, but they are freed from the responsibilities of exercising it.[30] They resist making the difficult and always criticisable choices of where, when and how to intervene. In the process, as thesis 5 will argue, Western governments can cynically take over the humanitarian vocabulary, and use it for their own narrow-minded political interest.

Negative consequences of coercion

Thesis 3. Humanitarianism induces minorities to raise the level of violence

The prospect of international military intervention for humanitarian purposes can increase internal violence. The victims of human rights abuses – ethnic groups in particular – often strategise like social movements. In order to challenge and seek to change the forces that keep them subordinated and oppressed, minority leaders must become skilled in mobilising domestic and international resources and in 'framing' and interpreting relevant events in ways to muster potential constituents and gain bystanders' support.[31] To these ends, minority leaders can be tempted to confront their oppressors to attract international sympathy and support by instigating further violence. Alan Kuperman confirms this possibility, arguing that in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq (during the first Gulf war) and, to a lesser extent in Rwanda, the leaders of vulnerable subordinate groups escalated the conflict with the central authorities to provoke a crackdown and attract international support.[32] Bosnia and Kosovo are particularly interesting cases, since some of the dynamics from these conflicts are currently repeating themselves in Darfur.

The Bosnian Muslims are the ethnic group who suffered most in the process of Yugoslav dissolution; they were nearly obliterated by the vicious campaign waged against them by the Croats and especially the Serbs. Aware of their military inferiority, the Bosnian Muslims tried to avoid direct confrontation with their more powerful neighbours. After the 1991 secession of Slovenia and Croatia, however, they could not prevent war from breaking out in Bosnia. Placed under an arms embargo that effectively guaranteed military superiority to the Serbs, who controlled Yugoslav army supplies, the Bosnian Muslims could only hope to be rescued by international

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[30] Kennedy, *Dark Sides of Virtue*, p. 338.
[31] On social movements see, for example, Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Doug McAdam, 'Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency', *American Sociological Review*, 48 (1983), pp. 735–54.
[32] Alan J. Kuperman, 'Transnational Causes of Genocide, or How the West Exacerbates Ethnic Conflict', in Raju G. C. Thomas (ed.), *Yugoslavia Unraveled: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, Intervention* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 55–85.

intervention. Initially, the absence of such intervention motivated them to fight. When the war seemed to be drawing out indefinitely, they reasoned that escalation could serve their cause. At times they pursued offensives with the intent of provoking Serb retaliation, inducing NATO's intervention against Serb positions, and validating their claim that they were the victims of external aggression and deserved international help.[33]

The public claims of prominent Western politicians justified the Bosnian Muslims' hope that intervention would eventually save them. US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, for example, declared in February 1993 that 'bold tyrants and fearful minorities are watching to see whether ''ethnic cleansing'' is a policy the world will tolerate . . . [Our] answer must be a resounding no.'[34] Unfortunately for the Bosnian Muslims, intervention did not occur until late summer of 1995, when NATO bombed Bosnian Serb positions around Sarajevo paving the way to the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the end of the war in Bosnia. By then, however, ethnic cleansing was nearly completed, and tens of thousand were killed. Many more had become refugees or internally displaced persons (DPs) – whose survival needs were met primarily by the assistance of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).

Provoking confrontation with their oppressors was also a rational choice for the Kosovo Albanians in the second half of the 1990s. For years Kosovo Albanians under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova expressed their opposition to Serb rule through peaceful and non-violent means. Despite generic claims of support, their plight never reached the top of the international agenda. Instead, for fear of opening a Pandora's box, at Dayton the status of Kosovo was not even discussed. As a result, a number of Kosovo Albanians concluded that the policy of non-violent resistance they had observed up to that time was not working. According to Tim Judah, 'Dayton was an extraordinary trauma for the Kosovo Albanians . . . it confirmed to them in the most dramatic and humiliating way that Rugova's policy of passive resistance had failed. And not only that, but that his idea that they would be rewarded for their 'good behaviour' by Western countries had been just plain wrong.'[35]

The political/military radicalisation of their struggle was almost immediate. In 1996, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) appeared on the scene and claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on Serb military installations. Serb crackdown provoked even more Albanian resistance and brought about international condemnation. The KLA calculated that a massive humanitarian crisis would compel NATO to intervene. In the year leading up to NATO's bombing, Serb military forces 'cooperated' with the KLA strategy. More than 1,000 Kosovo Albanians were killed and another 300,000 were forced to leave their homes. The KLA's increasing confrontation with Serb authorities and the violent Serb response made it more and more difficult for Western powers to ignore Kosovo. NATO intervened militarily in the spring of 1999 entirely and officially justifying its actions in human rights terms.

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[33] Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1995), pp. 320–1.

[34] Cited in Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America's Bosnia Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2000), p. 10.

[35] Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 2nd edn. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 124–5.

Many observers have disputed the 'real' motivations for intervening. The situation in Kosovo was certainly not stable, but there was no clear evidence of the existence of a genocidal plan to kill and expel the province's Albanian majority.[36] Adam Roberts argues that NATO's war was in part motivated by not having done enough in Bosnia.[37] This is an important point about intervention on humanitarian grounds: no such intervention is completely *sui generis*, but each builds on previous cases, and creates expectations for future ones. A history of intervention plays an obvious role in fostering the belief that the West will come to rescue an endangered group. The situation in the western Sudanese region of Darfur illustrates the danger that a repressed minority might learn the lesson that escalating confrontation might pay back in the long-term.[38] The *janjaweed*, or 'devils on horseback', supported by the Sudanese government, have been terrorising the civilian population. While numbers are difficult to come by, it is estimated that around 200,000 Darfuris have died since February 2003, some 2 million people have become DPs inside Darfur, and an increasing number have been crossing the border and entered neighbouring Chad. In mid-September 2004 American Secretary of State Colin Powell condemned the situation in Darfur as a case of 'genocide'.[39]

What is most bizarre about this conflict is the response of the armed revolutionary movement that the Sudanese government has been trying to crush by letting the *janjaweed* loose on the civilian population. According to a state department official working in Sudan, the rebels 'have been very content to sit back, let the village burnings go on, let the killing go on, because the more international pressure that's brought to bear on Khartoum, the stronger their position grows'.[40] In other words, the rebels in Darfur have adopted the same propaganda strategy that proved successful for Kosovo Albanians (and, in part, for the Bosnian Muslims). They hoped to attract international sympathy and thus trigger intervention against the government in Khartoum. So far, intervention has been limited. The African Union has deployed about 7,000 troops to monitor a shaky cease-fire, providing a convenient excuse for Western powers to avoid committing their own soldiers. Whether more assertive Western involvement will ever occur remains to be seen. But the expectation that humanitarian reasons will prompt such involvement so far has instigated further conflict, instead of limiting it.

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[36] One of NATO's key reasons for intervening was evidence of a Serbian 'final solution' to the Kosovo problem: a plan called 'Operation Horseshoe', in which Albanian Kosovars would be surrounded on three sides and driven through the gap into Albania. The German foreign minister disclosed the existence of the plan at the beginning of the NATO bombing, but he did not share the details of the plan with NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, whose job it was to counter it. For this reason, many even doubted 'Operation Horseshoe' ever existed; see Roberto Belloni, 'Kosovo and Beyond: Is Humanitarian Intervention Transforming International Society?' *Human Rights & Human Welfare*, 2 (2002), pp. 35–43.

[37] Adam Roberts, 'Nato's ''Humanitarian War Over Kosovo'' ', *Survival*, 3 (1999), pp. 102–23.

[38] Roberto Belloni, 'The Tragedy of Darfur and the Limits of the ''Responsibility to Protect'' ', *Ethnopolitics*, 4 (2006), pp. 327–46.

[39] He further added that 'no action is dictated by this determination', disappointing human rights groups who demanded more assertive intervention. See Testimony before the Foreign Relations Committee of the US Senate, 'The Crisis in Darfur', available at: ⟨www.state.gov/secretary/rm/36032.htm⟩.

[40] Quoted in Scott Anderson, 'How Did Darfur Happen?' *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.

Thesis 4. Humanitarianism prolongs war and misery

Post-Cold War humanitarianism has changed the dynamics of war-waging. Instead of allowing a war to be fought to the bitter end, humanitarianism defends the dignified idea that letting the stronger faction prevail is to endorse the law of the jungle. By so doing, humanitarianism can perversely make the war longer and prolong human suffering. Part of the reason for this outcome has already been mentioned. In Bosnia, humanitarian politics gave the Bosnian Muslims an incentive to prolong the fighting to either take advantage of the possibility that the international community would intervene in their defence, or even to obtain better peace terms under international sponsorship – a pattern that seems to repeat itself in Darfur. In addition, humanitarianism can also prolong and aggravate the war in other ways.

Critics of humanitarianism argue that the expectation that respect for human rights must be part of a peace settlement complicates the work of international mediators who cannot endorse, or be seen to endorse, political solutions which cannot be justified in human rights terms. In the former Yugoslavia, successive peace plans were often judged on the basis of whether they 'rewarded [Serb] aggression'. According to Saadia Touval, who best expresses the critical consensus on this issue, the 'human rights community' (in which Touval includes any policymaker, journalist or NGO opposed to recognising Serb military superiority and the ethnic partition of Bosnia) proved to be insensitive to the fact that the war continued with its heavy toll in human lives. The priority of international diplomacy should have been to end the fighting as soon as possible and to physically separate the different factions, instead of attempting to reach some version of peace with justice. As Touval concludes, 'the insistence on respect for international norms, the insistence that the three national communities [in Bosnia] should live together side by side in peace and that ethnic partitioning will violate this principle, served to extend the war, at the terrible cost of human life and suffering'.[41]

Critics such as Touval, however, only grasp half of the picture. The main mechanism worsening and prolonging war is the great powers' cynical use of humanitarianism to avoid more intrusive engagement. To the extent that humanitarianism is a substitute for political action and possibly military intervention, it embodies the Western choice of relief over rescue, a point not fully appreciated by Touval who prefers to blame the 'human rights community' instead of those policymakers who used humanitarianism to buy time and avoid finding a solution. It is not so much that humanitarianism extended the war, as Touval argues, but the influence of human rights norms combined with international reluctance to act consistently with those norms produced the worst outcome. Western powers did not want to risk political capital and the lives of their own national military to stop an alien and apparently intractable war. Instead, they dispatched peacekeepers and humanitarian workers to Bosnia and created lightly protected 'safe zones' which allowed them to claim that they were constructively engaged in the conflict – saving lives while working to find a solution.

But in fact humanitarianism had the opposite effect. The presence of peacekeepers in 'safe zones' created an illusion of safety among desperate DPs. In the most

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[41] Saadia Touval, *Mediation in the Yugoslav Wars: The Critical Years, 1990–1995* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 182.

infamous case, in July 1995 the Bosnian Serb army overran the town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia, one of the UN-declared 'safe zones', and killed more than 7,000 men and boys in the worst single massacre on European territory since the end of World War II. As UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata frankly admitted, 'the Security Council's designation of Srebrenica and several Muslim pockets as safe areas . . . gave false hope to the besieged people and ultimately led to the debacle.'[42] According to Susan Woodward, 'the creation of safe zones, motivated largely by the humanitarian objective . . . made possible an escalation of the war and further exposure of civilians to bombardments.'[43] Instead of saving lives, humanitarianism's main role was to provide an appearance of engagement, while avoiding intervention. In the process, those Bosnians initially kept alive and fed by Western aid, were killed.

The experience in Bosnia seems destined to be repeated. Currently, the main unfolding humanitarian crisis is in the Sudanese region of Darfur, where Arab forces have killed thousands of African citizens. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Colin Powell and British foreign minister Jack Straw are only a few of those high profile individuals who travelled to Darfur to ask the Sudanese government to stop the killing. A Bosnia-like scenario is taking place. The rebels in Darfur, like Bosnian Muslims before them, believe they have the support of the international community, in particular that of the United States. A journalist has described the rebels' message to the victims of government's repression in these terms: 'Hey, don't give up. The US and England will come here and occupy this country and they will give you everything and take off the Arabs from Sudan.'[44]

Because the killing in Darfur does not harm the national interest of major and minor powers alike, intervention remains unlikely. Instead, in much the same way that the Great Powers operated in Bosnia, they are now engaged in providing humanitarian relief to the refugees, trying to contain the confrontation between the government and the rebels. International diplomacy claims it is constructively engaged in the crisis, while avoiding taking dramatic and more costly steps. At the same time, such international involvement on humanitarian grounds emboldens the rebels to continue their fight, provides refugees and DPs with the perception they can rely on international humanitarians for their safety, and delays reaching a compromise among the parties. This might be the recipe for another humanitarian catastrophe.

Prophylactic function and organisation

Thesis 5. Humanitarianism is not altruistic

Humanitarianism's main function is not so much that of improving the human condition by changing the structural circumstances which permit human rights violations but that of temporarily sedating political crises, preventing their escalation

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[42] Sadako Ogata, *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s* (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 169.
[43] Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, p. 321.
[44] Cited in Anderson, *How Did Darfur Happen?*.

into wars with cross-national and cross-border consequences, and limiting their impact on Western countries. Under the guise of human rights norms, the West can legitimately get involved in foreign crises to soften the cross-border implications of political instability. Humanitarianism is part of a control strategy designed to prevent the transmission of disorder and chaos from war-torn, poor and peripheral countries to the developed world.[45]

Perhaps the best illustration comes from Europe. The process of European expansion and integration has been accompanied by the creation of 'Fortress Europe' – the building of a European architecture impermeable to the waves of refugees escaping war, devastation and persecution, and simultaneous weakening of legal principles and norms of refugee protection. European integration is centred on the ability of the European states to keep civilians within war or war-ridden zones. This goal is achieved through a twin strategy. First, humanitarian agencies have increasingly come to support DPs within areas of conflict. In order to benefit from the protection of the international refugee regime, individuals must have crossed the border of their country of nationality. However, since the Yugoslav government requested UNHCR assistance for the displaced population in Croatia in 1991, humanitarian protection has been extended to those individuals who did not cross an international border. As Sadako Ogata summarised the new approach, 'the over-riding principle . . . should be to bring safety to the people, rather than people to safety.'[46]

Second, because refugees place a financial and social burden on the states hosting them, they are encouraged or even coerced to return to their place of origin as soon as possible. While during the Cold War the principle that repatriation must be voluntary was widely accepted, since the early 1990s the practice of repatriation has affirmed itself. The Yugoslav crisis provided the opportunity to replace the standard of voluntary repatriation with the concept of 'safe return' – which involves the return of refugees often against their wishes, and even before peace has been achieved and consolidated.[47]

Not surprisingly, in most crises the main humanitarian agency tasked with coordinating relief operations, providing support to internally displaced persons and repatriate refugees is UNHCR. Since the outbreak of war in the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, UNHCR's main task in that region was to alleviate the suffering of the local population. Sometimes reluctantly, UNHCR has accepted the assignment of helping victims on the ground, instead of bringing them to safety, or ending the conditions keeping individuals on the run. Sadako Ogata compared UNHCR work to that of a 'fire brigade' – better in alleviating human suffering, rather than addressing the underlying problems which led to conflict, and thus providing a cover for strategic inaction.[48] In the Middle East, this placebo humanitarian function has assumed the most grotesque form. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

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[45] Hugo Slim, 'International Humanitarianism's Engagement with Civil War in the 1990s', *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (June 2002), at: ⟨www.jha.ac/articles/a033.htm⟩; also, more generally, Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

[46] Ogata, *The Turbulent Decade*, p. 90.

[47] B. S. Chimni, 'Post-Conflict Peace-Building and the Return of Refugees: Concepts, Practices, and Institutions', in Edward Newman and Joanne van Selm (eds.), *Refugees and Forced Displacement: International Security, Human Vulnerability, and the State* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003), pp. 195–220.

[48] Ogata, *Turbulent Decade*, p. 317.

Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has acted as a humanitarian bandage to the Palestinian refugee problem created in the aftermath of Israel's birth in May 1948. Since then, however, the refugee problem has only increased both in size and importance. Palestinian refugees grew from about 700,000 in 1948 to 4,186,711 in mid 2004.[49] Their displacement and political radicalisation remains a main stumbling-block to peace in the Middle East. UNRWA's humanitarian work has done much to help the Palestinian population, but nothing to end their displacement. It is no surprise that the Israeli government is one of UNRWA's major donors.

Like the Israeli government, Western governments have important reasons to finance and possibly expand the humanitarian aid system. They can stand idle and let catastrophes unfold when their interest is only marginally affected by a humanitarian crisis, and when involvement is judged to be too risky. When they do intervene, they do so in the form of providing humanitarian aid, instead of political solutions. In the case of Israel/Palestine, for example, a stable and lasting settlement requires the creation of a Palestinian state. However, the lack of sustained and coherent international support has made such an outcome impossible. Similarly to their involvement in the Middle East, in most cases Western governments prefer to prevent short-term negative side-effects, such as massive refugee flows that could spark repercussions on their own societies, instead of putting forward long-term and potentially costly political initiatives.

The humanitarian crisis in Darfur confirms the limits of band-aid humanitarianism. Human rights groups have documented widespread human rights violations. Western states and organisations have become involved to address the crisis, yet their humanitarian activity has stopped short of ending the emergency. Instead, 'the advocacy has stimulated government responses that have had the perverse effect of defusing the political pressure to stop the killings and return the refugees home'.[50] Western governments can pinpoint their engagement to limit damage and save lives. But that type of involvement perpetuates a low level crisis that keeps people dying slowly, instead of ending their suffering. From the Western vantage point, slow death is much preferable to quick, violent annihilation. The lack of widespread killing does not mobilise media interest, and buys time for Western diplomacy trying to defuse the crisis. This intervention is a case of damage control parading as humanitarianism. At the time of writing, the crisis in Darfur continues to unfold without apparent solution – despite the signing of a peace agreement in May 2006. Human rights groups predict it will only become worse.

Thesis 6. *Humanitarianism is the short-term substitute of development*

The West is attracted to humanitarianism because of the failure of development efforts. In the 1950s and 1960s, economists believed that chronic poverty resulted from the lack of capital and investment. Hence, development aid was created and endorsed by world leaders. United States President John F. Kennedy, for example,

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[49] This number includes Palestinians expelled and their descendants. See 'UNRWA in Figures', at: ⟨http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications⟩.

[50] Morton Abramowitz and Samantha Power, 'A Broken System', *Washington Post*, 13 September 2004.

increased development aid by 25 per cent. The results, however, have been disappointing. Over the last four decades, the gap between rich and poor has grown. When Kennedy was elected in 1960, the proportion of the income of the richest one-fifth of the world population in relation to the poorest one-fifth was 30 to 1. In 1997, it was 74 to 1. Development policy was a failure.

Underdevelopment brought about war and misery. Seventeen of the civil conflicts of the 1990s took place in the 33 poorest states in the world.[51] Furthermore, even where development aid seemed to work, its achievements were often illusory. Rwanda, for example, was considered a success story by the development aid industry in the 1980s, and foreign experts were flown in to learn from this experience in order to apply it to other cases. Needless to say, the 1994 genocide raised troubling questions about the whole development aid enterprise.[52] Humanitarianism is the way through which the Western developed world has thrown in the towel, acknowledging that development aid has serious limitations that, to many commentators, appear very difficult to overcome.

Western donors and academic specialists often agree that corrupt governance in the less developed world wastes resources and does nothing to empower the poor. In theory, this reasoning does not eliminate the need for development aid, but simply warns against misuse of that aid. Accordingly, economic help should be given to countries with accountable and transparent governments – that are more likely to profit from it. This creates a double paradox in current development policy. First, countries more likely to receive aid are also the ones that need it the least, while countries with poor governance and in need of aid are not a priority. Thus, the allocation of international aid reinforces already existing disparities. Second, because the majority of poor and underdeveloped regions are thought to be unworthy of such aid, in practice it becomes very difficult to allocate money efficiently, with negative consequences not least for donor countries which continue to finance emergency budgets. For example, the United States has provided only US\$ 4 m to Ethiopia in 2002 to increase its agricultural output. When famine predictably hit the country a year later, US\$ 500 m in emergency food aid had to be disbursed.[53]

As a whole, Western attention to less developed areas is increasingly focused on the short-term management of politically, economically and socially explosive situations, instead of long-term development policy. Humanitarianism expresses the renunciation of the effort to address the root causes of poverty, anarchy and recurring war, focusing instead on the immediate needs of individuals and groups. As a practitioner-turned-scholar put it, humanitarians move quickly from one disaster to another, succumbing to the 'tyranny of the emergency'.[54] They have little or no inclination to inquire about and address the underlying causes of misery. 'There is, it seems, never an ideal time for reflection and follow-up action. The agencies are either putting out the latest fire or catching their breath from having done so.'[55]

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[51] World Bank, *World Development Report 2003: Sustainable Development in a Dynamic World* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003), p. 3.

[52] Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian, 1998).

[53] Jeffrey Sachs, 'The Development Challenge', *Foreign Affairs*, 2 (2005), p. 87.

[54] Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise* (Bloomington, CT: Kumarian, 2002), p. 52.

[55] Ibid, p. 144.

Changes in the allocation of donors' monies reflect a broader attempt to address immediate needs rather than engender broader socioeconomic development. Between 1990 and 1995, for example, the European Union increased its humanitarian aid budget sevenfold. Short-term needs are not weighted the same way everywhere. The closer the source of instability to developed Western states, the more resources are needed for containment. In practice, humanitarian spending has little relation to actual needs. Kosovo, for example, received in 1999 five times more aid than Sudan and Angola, despite the lack of a compelling reason for such dramatic difference in aid allocation.[56] At the same time, aid budgets also have been adjusted as a result of the different circumstances in which international agencies and donors found themselves since the end of the Cold War. To the extent that there remains any money for structural development projects, it has been redirected from underdeveloped areas to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Rhetorically, developed countries have not renounced the goal of eliminating poverty and underdevelopment. When the world governments met in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 for the Earth Summit, they adopted a programme of action which included, among other things, an aid target of 0.7 per cent of the gross national product (GNP) for rich nations. In 2002, they signed the Monterrey Consensus pleading 'concrete efforts' towards the allocation of the 0.7 per cent of their GNP for development aid. These countries have also subscribed to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, a bold initiative aimed at eliminating poverty, reducing child mortality and achieving universal primary education by 2015. Yet, almost all wealthy countries have failed to reach their agreed obligations. Instead of 0.7 per cent, the amount of aid has been between 0.2 and 0.25 per cent – a percentage which might be even lower when real aid is taken into account. In fact, more than 60 per cent of aid flows are 'phantom', that is, they do not represent a real resource transfer to the recipient but involve money wasted, misdirected or recycled within rich countries. Real aid currently stands at only US$ 27 bn – 0.1 per cent of donors' GNP.[57]

Economist Jeffrey Sachs calculates that US$ 150 bn will be needed to reach the development goals.[58] The fulfilment of the obligations subscribed to by donor countries would be sufficient to raise this amount. However, if recent trends are to be confirmed, even this relatively small sum of money (compared, for example, to the US$ 450 bn the US spends annually on its military) will not be appropriated. Instead, a further increase in short-term humanitarian and emergency budgets is to be expected.

Thesis 7. Humanitarianism is organisationally dysfunctional

Humanitarian NGOs, government agencies and international organisations are all broadly committed to the same humanitarian goals. Indeed, their staffs share the

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[56] Gorm Rye Olsen, Nils Carstensen, Kristian Hoyen, 'Humanitarian Crises: What Determines the Level of Emergency Assistance? Media Coverage, Donor Interests and Aid Business', *Disasters*, 2 (2003), p. 117.

[57] Romilly Greenhill and Patrick Watt, *Real Aid: An Agenda for Making Aid Work* (Johannesburg: ActionAid International, May 2005), p. 4. For an update see Larry Elliott and Kate Connolly, 'In 2005, G8 Pledged $50 bn for Africa: Now the Reality', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2007.

[58] Daphne Eviatar, 'Spend $150 bn per year to Cure World Poverty', *The New York Times Magazines*, 7 November 2004.

same common culture and frequently move between different institutions. For humanitarian NGOs, this closeness is the kiss of death. While government agencies and international organisations have only partly altruistic motives (thesis 5), NGOs are thought to be the indispensable independent link in the humanitarian chain. They are expected to speak truth to power, chastise governments' often slow and inept reaction to humanitarian crises and even rise to the task of responsibly advancing humanitarian causes when needed.

This is not the case. NGOs are often less independent from government policies than they would like to be. By accepting donors' money and priorities, they are part of the same humanitarian system that allows Western governments to avoid addressing the structural political, economic and social realities at the root of humanitarian crises, while at the same time claiming to be actively engaged in protecting human rights. Humanitarian aid agencies not only participate in, but also actively contribute to perpetuating the system and hiding its flaws.[59] In extreme cases, humanitarian agencies can even become unwilling accomplices to military actions. In a controversial statement, US Secretary of State Colin Powell praised humanitarian NGOs for their role as a 'force multiplier' for the US government.[60]

Because of the need to secure funding, NGOs have strong institutional incentives to portray humanitarianism as indispensable to address and alleviate human suffering, even when its actual impact is debatable. The humanitarian crisis in eastern Zaire between 1994 and 1996 illustrates the limits in the working of the humanitarian system. In the summer of 1994 about one million refugees poured from Rwanda into eastern Zaire to escape the advancing Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front. This massive number of people in precarious hygienic conditions could have sparked a humanitarian catastrophe. In response, outside donors spent about US\$ 1.3 bn to support this endangered population. What cynically came to be known as the 'gold rush' was soon on, with dozens of humanitarian NGOs quickly mobilising to provide their services. Unfortunately, the refugee camps hosted tens of thousand of genocide perpetrators, who exploited the influx of humanitarian aid, often against the refugee population they claimed to represent. Meanwhile, aid allowed them to reorganise and conduct cross-border raids on Rwandan territory. Humanitarian agencies in eastern Zaire were well aware of the precariousness of this situation and a handful of organisations, most prominently the French chapter of 'Doctors Without Borders', decided to pull out. Most organisations, however, remained in the refugee camps to feed and shelter the same individuals who shortly before massacred about 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus in one hundred days.

From the point of view of northern humanitarian NGOs, the fact of tolerating the misuse of funds makes a great deal of good sense. Human rights organisations, like other organisations in a competitive environment, suffer from a vicious version of the prisoner's dilemma, that is, a situation in which whatever the other one does, each is better off by following a sub-optimal course of action. In fact, even if all organisations agreed that their actions were actually causing more harm than good, the

[59] Alexander Cooley and James Ron, 'Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action', *International Security*, 27 (2002), pp. 5–39.

[60] Colin Powell, Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations, US Department of State, 26 October 2001; at: ⟨www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/5762pf.htm⟩. For an assessment, see Sarah Kenyon Lischer, 'Military Intervention and the Humanitarian ''Force Multiplier'' ', *Global Governance*, 13 (2007), pp. 99–118.

chances that they would all draw the coherent and consistent conclusion of withdrawing aid is quite small. If one organisation pulls out, it will do so at the cost of losing its 'market share'.[61] Other organisations might decide to stay, and thus consolidate their reputation as reliable implementing partners among donor governments. Thus, an ethical stand might result in the long-term damage to the organisation's capacity to survive and develop.

Thus, humanitarians in eastern Zaire became victims of their own agenda – subordinating humanitarian aims to their own interests. As widely anticipated, the provision of international aid was the prelude to further humanitarian disaster. In late 1996, after having warned several times that the presence of refugee camps just across the border constituted a threat to Rwandan security, the Rwandan army crossed into Zaire and closed the camps by force. Thousands more individuals died.

Not only do NGOs have strong external constraints and pressures, but also they often develop internal organisational cultures and structures which contribute to their limited capacity to assess the impact of their work. From a practical standpoint, many humanitarian organisations are based in the West, employ Western individuals, and rely on Western public opinion for (at least some) support. Few humanitarian workers have a contextualised knowledge of the language, tradition, customs and habits where they operate. International staff is often oblivious to and detached from the local reality where they intervene. In many cases, humanitarians are sent to a specific mission precisely because they have no contextualised knowledge, and thus are assumed to be more neutral to the parties in conflict. They do not speak the local language nor do they need or want to learn it. They follow donors' funding, frequently moving from one mission to another.

Humanitarians are increasingly becoming 'professionals' with technical skills applicable everywhere and not area specialists with narrow and ultimately less useful contextual knowledge.[62] While until the late 1980s professional training was an afterthought, since the boom of the humanitarian aid industry in the 1990s, humanitarian workers need to be conversant with management skills, fundraising procedures, international human rights norms, capacity-building trainings and anything else which is being added to the humanitarian tool-kit. Some observers take this development towards professionalism to its most extreme conclusion, and argue that the adoption of explicit businesslike professional practices for humanitarian aid workers would further improve their professionalism and thus their efficiency.[63]

This is doubtful. The possibility that professionalisation could improve humanitarian performance, foster genuine partnership between international and local actors, and develop local resources is slim. Instead, professionalism reinforces a view that the outside 'expert' knows how best to address the causes of domestic distress. Instead of sustaining local development, this approach reinforces a form of

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[61] Sarah Kenyon Lischer, 'Collateral Damage: Humanitarian Assistance as a Cause of Conflict', *International Security*, 1 (2003), p. 106. A similar mechanism has arisen in the controversial and still critically unstable situation in Iraq following the 2003 war; see Rony Brauman and Pierre Salignon, 'Iraq: in Search of a Humanitarian Crisis', in Fabrice Weissman, *In the Shadow of 'Just Wars: Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action'* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, in association with Médecins Sans Frontières, 2004), p. 271.

[62] Tony Waters, *Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan: The Limitations to Humanitarian Relief Operations* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001).

[63] Antonia Chayes, Adam Chayes, George Raach, 'Beyond Reform: Restructuring for More Effective Conflict Intervention', *Global Governance*, 2 (1997), pp. 117–45.

control.[64] As Ivan Illich has argued, reliance on 'professionals' and 'experts' comes with an additional cost. Experts can dull imagination, self-reliance and creativity, making it unlikely to envision learning experiences and personal achievements outside the confines of official education or professional training.[65] Finally, professionalism and expert knowledge allows humanitarians to avoid the contentious terrain of politics. Foreign 'experts' conceptualise political work in the same way as the technical work of rebuilding a bridge, a highway or a building. By so doing, they make themselves marginal to local political reality and thus scarcely effective. Alternatively, when humanitarians do have a political impact, their technical mould can blind them from appreciating such an impact on the local reality.

Negative consequences of postwar humanitarianism

Thesis 8. Humanitarianism reinforces the predominance of local warlike elites

It has become almost a commonplace to note that humanitarian aid can prolong wars and feed killers. The misappropriation of aid and its use for goals other than humanitarian ones is at the heart of the problem. While some misuse of aid is perhaps inevitable, the large amount involved makes it impossible to regard it as a marginal side-effect. For instance, as much as half of all aid to the former Yugoslavia is estimated to have been misappropriated to support the war effort. In such cases, aid can foster the birth of local mafia groups determined to exploit the influx of resources and with an interest in prolonging the war as long as possible.

The criminal use of humanitarian aid is a well-known and relatively straightforward phenomenon. The political impact of humanitarian impulses is subtler. According to Fiona Terry, humanitarianism can prop up the authority and legitimacy of local warmongers in four ways. First, negotiation with local leaders to gain access to a particular area recognises these leaders as legitimate representatives of a particular group or population. Second, local leaders can direct resources towards their supporters and thus consolidate their political power *vis-à-vis* domestic opponents. Third, by their very presence, international aid agencies can legitimate a human rights-violating regime. Fourth, aid agencies can replace the state in the provision of goods and services to its citizens. By so doing, they assuage potential dissent that might challenge local leadership. As Terry concludes, 'the legitimacy that humanitarian action can inadvertently bestow upon warriors and local officials is in many respects the negative side of the popular development notion of ''empowerment'' '.[66]

The negative consequences of humanitarian action in legitimating war criminals and perpetuating political crisis are confirmed by international intervention in Central Africa between 1994 and 1996. As mentioned above (thesis 7), following the Tutsi military advance in Rwanda, about one million refugees escaped to eastern Zaire. In most cases, entire villages moved together, preserving their leadership

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[64] Minear, *Humanitarian Enterprise*, p. 154.
[65] Ivan Illich, *De-Schooling Society* (London: Penguin, 1971).
[66] Terry, *Condemn to Repeat?* p. 46.

structures. To address the humanitarian crisis, foreign experts relied on 'local capacities', that is, the leadership structures present in the camps. Many of the leaders were the same ones who planned, orchestrated and implemented the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and moderate Hutus, controlled the aid flows to the refugee camps and kept the civilian population hostage to their political plans. Thus, in the effort to address existing humanitarian needs, humanitarian action in eastern Zaire consolidated the power of criminal elites, and then did nothing to prevent a dramatic showdown.

This outcome was not inevitable. While international humanitarians must have local counterparts, they do not need to legitimate and reinforce the predominance of warmongers through negotiation, delivery of aid and international recognition. Local leadership is not simply a domestic constraint beyond the control of international actors. In Somalia, for example, Algerian diplomat Mohamed Sahnoun achieved some success in promoting alternative sources of authority to prevent the breakdown and chaos that would engulf that country for most of the 1990s. His attempt, however, was quickly undermined by American diplomacy, which recognised the two main warlords Mohammed Farah Aided and Ali Mahdi as the legitimate representatives of the Somali people and thus ended Sahnoun's grassroots work.[67]

Similarly, humanitarians in the Balkans made little effort to empower alternative grassroots groups. In Kosovo, Albanians created their own parallel society in the 1990s, covering practically all aspects of social and political life. Although this parallel society was not multi-ethnic, it was consciously justified and framed by its members in human rights terms. After the 1999 war, however, it was simply set aside by international officials who believed it was not a 'good model for democracy'.[68] Instead, the new model included quick elections empowering the same elites opposed to inter-ethnic reconciliation and the promotion of Western-style NGOs with little or no local support. In the same fashion, the international approach in Bosnia was to conduct quick elections, while transplanting Western-style NGOs largely unknown prior to the war.[69]

As a result, humanitarianism in both Kosovo and Bosnia shows similar limits. In both localities, intervention legitimated the same elites actively working to undermine inter-ethnic coexistence; at the same time, it attempted to undermine those elites by empowering newly created and externally financed local NGOs. To date, there is little evidence that this strategy is working as intended.

Thesis 9. *Humanitarianism reproduces the very same cleavages it tries to overcome*

Despite the fact that humanitarians often think they hold a perspective on ethnicity and identity diametrically opposed to that of criminal ethno-nationalist militants, they actually share many principles with the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and

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[67] See Mohamed Sahnoun, 'Mixed Intervention in Somalia and the Great Lakes: Culture, Neutrality and the Military', in Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Hard Choices*.

[68] Julie Mertus, 'Improving International Peacebuilding Efforts: The Example of Human Rights Culture in Kosovo', *Global Governance*, 10 (2004), p. 340.

[69] Roberto Belloni, 'Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Journal of Peace Research*, 38:2 (2001), pp. 163–80.

mass human rights violations. Prominent among these ideas is that ethnic identities are inherently conflictual and that peace requires ethnic separation. Once again, the Balkans offers an important illustration. While the international presence has been justified in humanitarian terms to overcome fear and divisions, it has endorsed and perpetuated the very same cleavages it sought to address.

The situation in Kosovo is a case in point. NATO's 1999 war was waged on the grounds that ethnically diverse societies should not only be protected but also actively promoted. This principle aligned NATO with the defence of the rights of the Albanians. The outcome of NATO's intervention is well known and barely needs to be mentioned: the victims of yesterday became today's oppressors. Following the departure of the Serb military from Kosovo, ethnic Albanians could take revenge on Serb and Roma civilians for years of repression. Many non-Albanians saw no other option than to leave. The small number of those remaining relocated to those few municipalities in the north where they constituted a majority of the population. Kosovo's two main ethnic communities are even more divided now than they were prior to the war.[70]

There are multiple reasons for this division, including a long history of conflict that has mostly indigenous roots. Even prior to the 1999 war, most Kosovars understood their own human rights in opposition to the rights of the other groups. Albanians and Serbs perceived their mutual relationship in zero-sum terms. But even granted the endogenous roots of the conflict, the outcome of NATO's intervention raises troubling questions about the usefulness of violent means for humanitarian purposes. Not surprisingly, these violent means polarised the population even further and only in a very superficial way did they begin to create the foundation for a multi-ethnic society.

NATO's reaction to such violent polarisation shows its implicit acceptance of a worldview of ethnic division running counter to the stated goals of intervention. NATO leaders decided to interpret postwar Albanian violence against Serbs and Roma as the 'natural' outcome of the new circumstances.[71] By so doing, they endorsed the same underlying extreme ethno-nationalist worldview that sees inter-ethnic violence as perpetual and inevitable. Having accepted this belief, NATO's role became that of temporary guardian of ethnic peace. Following the end of the war, the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) set up checkpoints and patrols aimed at limiting the possibility of violence by reducing contact between the different communities. From NATO's perspective, as well as from the perspective of local ethno-nationalists, peace requires the separation of Serbs and Albanians in ethnically homogeneous communities.

Thus, international humanitarianism in Kosovo has promoted an adversarial conception of human rights. This conception did not erode the long-standing zero-sum attitudes characterising the Serb-Albanian relationship and it is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. NATO bombed the Serbs in order to end real and perceived discrimination against the Albanians. After the war, the Alliance let Albanian extremists take revenge against Serb and Roma civilians, and then it concluded that it needed to focus on the rights of the Serbs and Roma who had

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[70] Iain King and Whit Mason, *Peace at Any Price: How the World Failed Kosovo* (London: Hurst & Co., 2006).

[71] William G. O' Neill, *Kosovo: An Unfinished Peace* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), pp. 46–8.

become, almost overnight, the new threatened minorities. It is no surprise that these actions did not affect the underlying conflictual relationship between the local communities. Even less surprising is the outcome: after years of postwar international administration, 'Kosovo is decidedly not a multiethnic and secure society, and equal access to basic human rights protection remains illusory'.[72]

Additional evidence of the negative consequences of promoting an adversarial conception of human rights comes from Bosnia. The war in this country led to the displacement of more than two million people and to the creation of the ethnically homogeneous areas. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement foresaw the postwar return home of DPs and refugees. This was to be a Herculean task, likely to be boycotted by all of those local politicians who fomented the war precisely to destroy any semblance of multi-ethnicity. Faced with this difficulty, international humanitarians again legitimised and reproduced the very same local cleavages they were attempting to overcome. In the first two postwar years, humanitarians did very little to support the displaced population's return. They believed that return home was politically destabilising – a view they shared with Bosnian Serb ethno-nationalists who justified attacks against non-Serb returnees on the same grounds.[73]

When the lack of return became a security problem because of the fear that the displaced population could retake by force what was denied to them through peaceful means, international humanitarians changed their policy. The first ambitious programme set up to help return was the so-called 'Open Cities Initiative'. This programme foresaw the allocation of economic resources to those Bosnian municipalities who declared themselves 'open' to the return of ethnic minorities. Cities and municipalities taking concrete steps to allow return and reintegration of refugees and DPs would be rewarded with additional reconstruction and development aid.

The impact of this programme was nil at best, negative at worst. The very idea of positive conditionality exacerbated resistance and opposition among the general population. Because the priority given by donors to returnees explicitly discriminated against the local majority, which was as much in need as the returnees, not only was positive conditionality counterproductive but also it reproduced the very same cleavages emerging from the war.[74] By addressing the problem of displacement in the very same terms in which it was framed by local nationalists, as the return of one ethnic group to an area dominated by another ethnic group, humanitarians embraced the same ethnic divisions that nationalist elites worked to preserve.

Only when humanitarians changed this policy did return home of refugees and DPs gain momentum. The creation of a legal framework for property repossession in 1998–99 set the precondition for a more successful return process. All refugees and DPs, regardless of their ethnic background, could claim their properties. The presence of this framework, which applied in principle to all regardless of their ethnicity or status, was an important improvement toward establishing the rule of law based not on ethnic affiliation but on universal principles of equity. For local politicians it became increasingly more difficult to prevent return. As a result, the majority of those displaced were able to take repossession of their properties and hundred of thousands actually have gone back home.

[72] Mertus, 'Improving International Peacebuilding', p. 333.
[73] K. R. Roane, 'Muslim Visitors Called Mortal Dangers by Serbs', *New York Times*, 28 May 1996.
[74] International Crisis Group, *The Konjic Conundrum: Why Minorities Have Failed to Return to Model Open City* (Sarajevo: ICG, 19 June 1998).

Conclusion

The last point suggests that humanitarianism can be made more effective. The answer to improving the human condition does not lie in an impossible return to the Westphalian international order where, insulated from international criticism, states can abuse the rights of their citizens. Nor does humanitarianism need to return to its original and amateurish pre-political impulse, focused on survival and aid delivery. Rather, a more effective humanitarianism requires the slow building of a culture of rights based on individual and state responsibility, and able to move beyond the short-term containment of human rights crises. A different approach can only be briefly outlined here.

- *Focus on prevention*. Preventing conflict is currently an unfashionable task. The dog that does not bark hardly attracts attention. Moreover, indicators of a deteriorating situation might be contradictory. And yet, the signs are often available for the attentive observer, while the human and economic costs of post-disaster intervention vastly exceed those of prevention.[75] In addition, a coherent preventive approach grounded on the 'responsibility to protect' involves taking development seriously and transferring resources and technology from developed to under-developed regions. Every year more than ten million children die of preventable illnesses; more than 500,000 women die in pregnancy and childbirth; 2 m die of tuberculosis; 1 m die because of malaria. Large parts of the world are depopulated because of the HIV/AIDS virus.[76] Without addressing the root causes of under-development, humanitarianism will become a travesty.

- *Change Western practice*. The predominant view that the West is the realm of reason and human rights and that Western states are slowly developing a genuine concern for humanity does not bear scrutiny. For example, the main producers of weapons (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Japan and Israel) are also those states most involved in the humanitarian business. In 1999, as the UK was preparing to participate in the NATO-led war against Yugoslavia to end human rights abuses in Kosovo, it was also selling weapons to Indonesia – which in turn was preparing itself to unjustifiably devastate East Timor in the autumn of the same year. Any credible humanitarian politics must fill the gap between rhetorical claims and actions.

- *Begin with human rights at home*. The main stumbling-block to effective humanitarianism is the persistence of nationalist views and their priority over trans-national moral issues. Both morality and interest are in large measure nationally based, and Western policymakers know how to take advantage of nationally-bounded views. After all, selling weapons to a distant and alien state can increase domestic GNP and employment – while the human costs are borne by others. Effective humanitarianism requires building a domestic human rights culture among the general public. As long as the moral imagination of citizens is limited to national boundaries, then humanitarianism is likely to continue to be an afterthought whose primary task is simply that of controlling the spillover effects of political instability for Western states.

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[75] Zartman, *Cowardly Lions*.
[76] Statistics taken from UNDP, *Human Development Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).