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Patricia Genoe McLaren, Albert J. Mills, Terrance G. Weatherbee

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Adam Rostis
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Introduction – humanitarianism

Imagine an organized team of neutral doctors arriving during the Spanish attack on the Aztec city of Tenocheitlan in 1521 pleading with soldiers on both sides to spare civilians. The juxtaposition of what is now the taken-for-granted role of humanitarian physicians within an historical period unfamiliar with such a role indicates the “historical specificity” of humanitarianism and leads to the questions: “[W]hat is it about the present … that casts the care of strangers in such a leading role?” (Bornstein and Redfield 2007: 2) and how have humanitarianism and the humanitarian organization come to be accepted as inevitable, natural, and taken-for-granted?

Humanitarianism can be understood as the “institutionalized patterns of action … oriented meaningfully towards the welfare of distant strangers” (Stamatov 2008: 5). It has become a celebrated, accepted, and taken-for-granted contemporary social force as evidenced by the presence of longstanding formal organizations dedicated to its pursuit. Many of its tenets have become enshrined in laws and policies such as the Geneva Conventions, and the organizations themselves have received formal appreciation and legitimization through awards and recognition such as Nobel Peace Prizes. These organizations are rather unique entities with a global presence and significant impact on human lives. It is difficult to quantify the total value of humanitarian aid, but in 2012 there were 76 million people targeted in United Nations humanitarian assistance programs (Development Initiatives, 2013). The estimated value of humanitarian aid in 2012 was $17.9 billion US dollars (Development Initiatives, 2013).

However, it is my contention that these massive, organized structures of helping are “some of the most powerful pacific weapons of the new world order” Hardt (2000: 136) yet have been largely unexamined by organizational scholars. Perhaps this is because the organization imbued with legal or moral legitimacy and a mission to help, heal, or rescue has seemingly little that can be criticized. As Beck (1999: 44) notes, “[Non-Governmental Organizations – NGOs] have a blank cheque for an almost unlimited store of trust” because of their pure public image. De Waal (1997) argues that crises of war or natural disaster allow humanitarian organizations to intervene into nations in a similar way that financial and debt crises permit international financial institutions to intervene in countries and impose programs of economic and social adjustment. I believe this makes humanitarian organizations worthy of the same attention given to their private sector equivalents.
In this chapter, I am interested in addressing this gap in scholarship through a critical history of humanitarianism and the humanitarian organization. I will show how it has transpired that the present humanitarianism has come to be accepted as inevitable or natural. Concepts (such as humanitarianism) are not isolated, but exist in relation to other concepts and the manner in which they are used (Althusser, 2005). Therefore, one can look at the conditions by which a concept has come into being, or rather the history surrounding a concept in order to understand it (Patton, 1978). As well, a concept exists because of the rules or grammar that must be followed or used in order for it to be understood (Patton, 1978). Reading a text symptomatically can reveal these rules by identifying what is not said; in other words, to identify the absences (Assiter, 1984). This process is a problematization of history and is particularly relevant to humanitarianism because, as Fiering (1976: 196) notes, “of all the great themes of eighteenth-century social thought, humanitarianism has received the least study in intellectual history.” Lambert and Lester (2004: 324) argue that a critique of those “who constituted the nexus of globalized philanthropy in the early nineteenth century is long overdue” and Bankoff (2001: 19) suggests that “[i]nadequate attention … has been directed to considering the historical roots of the discursive framework within which hazard is generally presented.”

History through genealogy

Genealogy is a method of historical critique that is the product of work done by Michel Foucault, who in turn built on the genealogical critique of morals performed by Nietzsche (1989). Genealogy defamiliarizes taken-for-granted knowledge by rejecting the ahistorical, coherent, systematic production of knowledge. Through an examination of the descent, emergence, and trajectory of events, it attempts to uncover other explanations that have been hidden in the construction of a logical narrative or explanation of how the past occurred. How has popular knowledge been repressed, and how has struggle and conflict resulted in the exclusion of particular parts of history? Genealogy turns the reader’s attention away from the importance of the origin stories of institutions towards the discovery of random accidents and rifts in history that give rise to changes in old perceptions and emergences of new orderings of society. These accidents continue always, and it directs us away from supposing that history is on a linear path towards some form of end state (Prasad, 2005). Critique is at the heart of genealogy. The method begins with normal, seemingly inconsequential events or experiences and draws from these narratives the process by which they have become inconsequential or normal (Jacques, 1992). In sum, these stories show the contingent nature of practices.

The traces of these practices are contained within the archive. It must be recognized that Foucault uses the term ‘archive’ to refer to the way in which statements are formed within a society at a given point in time (Prasad, 2005). It is the “general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (Foucault 2002: 146). Doing a genealogy involves re-reading parts of the archive to observe “broadly held cultural assumptions” (Jacques, 1992: 102) and occasions where the relationship changed between a concept’s meaning and the specific practices it implied (Jacques, 1992). It implies that there is another way of interpreting and understanding history. But, this re-reading is not an attempt to uncover or correct the true meaning of history. Jacques (1992) has culled from Foucault’s genealogical work some guidelines for re-reading, which is, in effect a guideline for conducting a genealogy.

The first is to read between the lines of a document to understand what has made it possible for an author to make a statement. In other words, I must understand the rules of admissibility to a discourse leading to an understanding of what makes something acceptable as knowledge.
Second, contextualize and place the document within a broader historical picture. Third is to look for discontinuities where common sense ceases to be common, or where the nonsensical becomes common sense. This is the dividing line, on either side of which “the structures used to frame what can be known each appear nonsensical when viewed from the other side” (Jacques, 1992: 104). Fourth is to recognize that there could also be changes in other discourses resulting from the discontinuity or rupture; look for these changes. Finally, the discontinuity and emergence of new discourse should also produce new subjects as a result of the rearrangement of social relations; look for the emergence of these subjects. What becomes apparent from Jacques’ (1992) approach is that discourse is key.

The term utterance is used to refer to speech, writing, dialogue, or a constituted body of knowledge; discourse is the collection of all utterances about a particular idea (Prasad, 2005). Underlying any discourse is a set of assumptions that may overlap with other discourses and change over time (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000). At one extreme, discourse is considered not just as a descriptive tool but a mechanism by which a reality is formed (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 2000). Discourse about any particular idea will determine what is and is not admissible, legitimate knowledge about that idea; in other words there are discursive rules that determine what gets admitted to a discourse (Prasad, 2005). It is not so important to understand if a discourse is valid or true. Rather, these concerns are overshadowed in importance by discursive effects; that is, how a discourse manifests itself in practice (Prasad, 2005). Discourse, then, is more than just a collection of statements: it is productive because it has an effect and produces something as a result of its existence (Kendall and Wickham 1999). A discourse is a way “of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them” (Weedon 1996: 105).

In my case, humanitarianism is considered a ‘good’ practice that operates neutrally and opposes war, suffering, and the effects of disaster on human society. People should be rescued, and soldiers should be spared death if injured. This state of affairs, however, was once considered extraordinary (cf. Moorehead, 1999, for the ‘creation’ of the Geneva Conventions). Genealogy documents how these kinds of changes in society occurred that moved the extraordinary into the mundane (Jacques, 1992). The question that results is that if concepts such as discipline or humanitarianism were once considered remarkable, and are now normal, then is it not equally likely that that which we now take for granted could be replaced by something else?

The archive: the Red Cross and Médecins sans Frontières

In 1859, a Swiss businessman traveling in Italy happened upon the aftermath of a battle between Austrian and French soldiers. Shocked by the terrible conditions of the wounded on both sides of the battle, Henri Dunant marshaled the resources available to him and set about ameliorating their suffering. Soon after, as the story goes, Dunant wrote about his experiences in A Memory of Solferino, a book that became widely read throughout Europe and eventually fomented the creation of what is now known as the Red Cross. Nearly 100 years later, a young Red Cross doctor working in the Biafran civil war of 1968 witnessed civilians caught between warring factions, Western nations, and politically neutral aid organizations (Aeberhard, 1996; Redfield, 2005). Bernard Kouchner was frustrated that Red Cross principles dictated that assistance could only be supplied with the consent of a legitimate government. But Biafra was a civil war and the legitimate government refused to allow outside help to be supplied to a rebelling population. Kouchner’s frustration motivated him to form Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) in an effort to better match humanitarian assistance with contemporary world politics.
These organizations were formed during the rise and fall respectively of the colonial period. The Red Cross was born on the battlefield in an actively colonizing Europe on the brink of decades of conflict while MSF was also formed on the battlefield, but nearly 100 years later during the heyday of decolonization and African independence struggles. The lineage of the Red Cross is such that it was created with the consent of, and existed alongside, colonial states using state power and sanction to achieve humanitarian goals (Moorehead, 1999). In contrast, MSF was formed as a reaction to a perceived failure of this approach, valuing its independence from state sanctioned humanitarianism above all (Captier, 2005). While seemingly novel at the time, there is now an expectation that the humanitarian organization will act to relieve suffering and assist states that do not have the resources to help their own citizens. How is it that this expectation arose and continues to persist? I believe that genealogy is the most appropriate choice to investigate this question.

The first point of entry into the archive will be the Red Cross. This is an organization, an object of investigation, as well as a research site because it is a visibility that gives rise to statements, but it also houses an archive in the physical sense of the word. This archive forms part of the broader archive of humanitarianism when considered from Foucault’s interpretation of the term. A summary of the accounts of the formation and present form of the organization given in Moorehead (1999) and Forsythe (2005, 2007) provides an outline of the organization; this should help to understand it as a research site. In brief, in 1864 it was agreed to establish national Red Cross ‘societies’ dedicated to caring for battlefield casualties, and to enshrine the principles and conventions of these societies in international law (Moorehead, 1999). The emblem used to identify the neutral volunteers on the battlefield was a red cross on a white background, the reverse colors of the Swiss flag; eventually the organization came to be uniquely known by this symbol, and the committee eventually became today’s International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Moorehead, 1999). The power of the agreement between states gave the Red Cross leave to intervene in conflict, obliged armed forces to respect the neutrality of Red Cross volunteers, and compelled nations to accept the establishment of Red Cross national societies (Forsythe, 2005). Since its creation in 1864 the Red Cross has diversified outside of armed conflict and this causes some degree of confusion for outsiders to the organization as the Red Cross is actually three different organizational forms: the International Committee (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are both based in Geneva, and the National Societies are based in each of the 186 member countries (ICRC, 2005). The two ‘international’ organizations are often referred to as the International Red Cross, and the other organizations as the National Societies. By agreement amongst the International Red Cross, the IFRC focuses its attention on natural disasters and recovery from conflict, while the ICRC has the guardianship of international humanitarian law and concerns itself almost exclusively with conflict and issues surrounding conflict (Forsythe, 2005). The International Red Cross refers often to its network of national societies and a legion of volunteers in disaster relief and recovery.

I chose Médecins sans Frontières as another specific organizational site. The formation story of this organization is that it was a reaction to the inability of established humanitarian organizations (such as the International Red Cross) to help vulnerable people during the Biafran civil war of 1967–70. The expectation was that the parties in that conflict would behave rationally according to principles tested in over 100 years of European wars. However, the Biafran war was fought in the media as well as on the battlefield and in effect both sides utilized civilians to convince the world of the rightness of their cause. In Biafra the template for provision of assistance did not fit with contemporary reality. And so, a new organization was formed with a new approach to humanitarianism. Médecins sans Frontières values its independence from state-sanctioned humanitarianism above all, and it always struggles to maintain vocal opposition.
without completely isolating itself from state structures that enable it to reach affected populations. Over time, Médecins sans Frontières established principles that would differentiate its humanitarianism from the established order. Its medium for action is Western medicine practiced on individuals, but its method is agitation, disruption and advocacy to change the conditions under which suffering can occur (Jeannerod, 2005; Orbinski, 1999; Vallaeys, 2004).

However, the environment in which Médecins sans Frontières operates reflects an evolving discourse of disasters and a change in the roles of state and non-state actors. Specific principles guiding its work include the right of access to victims, independent assessment of humanitarian situations and monitoring of effectiveness of interventions (Orbinski, 1999). Médecins sans Frontières also seeks to avoid the organizational bureaucracy that its founders believe hampered the humanitarian relief efforts in Biafra. As such, its organizational structure began and remains in a somewhat fractured state with operational cells existing in various so-called developed countries. Each Médecins sans Frontières organization functions somewhat separately, often times at odds with each other, but are held together by the common principles mentioned above. It is a loose federation with each country office operating independently and producing its own annual report. There is an international body, Médecins sans Frontières International, made up of representatives of each of the national organizations but the decision-making components of the organization exist exclusively in the West. The non-Western countries form the theater in which Médecins sans Frontières operates, but they do not seem to form part of the organizational structure. Therefore, the Médecins sans Frontières power structure roughly bisects Western and non-Western countries.

The humanitarian discourse

A discourse of humanitarianism can be found in the conditions by which the concept has come into being and occasions where the relationship changed between its meaning and the specific practices it implied. On these occasions, a discontinuity or dividing line exists. A concept makes no sense if viewed through the rules used on either side of this dividing line and new subjects emerge. People become raw material that can be acted upon by humanitarianism to produce these subjects. A discourse is also signaled by the presence of a relationship between subjects as the result of statements. In other words, statements about humanitarianism produce ways of being and acting. Finally, discourse acts through things, foremost of which are the rules embodied in laws, documents, and other texts by which a concept can be understood. These things are found in institutions where these physical objects are limited and authorized and help identify the boundaries of a discourse, which will in turn lead to a discussion of each of the research questions. In summary, then, discourse can be uncovered by examining the conditions by which a concept has come into being together with any discontinuities that signal a change between a concept’s meaning and the practices it incurs.

One discontinuity that shaped humanitarian discourse was a change to Christian ontology and its understanding of suffering. This change involved the role of God in determining the lives of humans: on one side of the discontinuity was the belief that conditions of the current world were insignificant in comparison to those of the next world beyond death (Core, 1950). Further, pain and suffering were believed to be natural and imitative of the suffering of Christ and Christianity posited that pain was inevitable and suffering was part of healing (Core, 1950). This is not to deny that benevolence existed, but rather that these actions directed towards others were motivated by self-interest or ego through the belief that such activity contributed towards repenting from sin. In contrast, Core (1950) paints a picture of the other side of a divide where these views of suffering gave way in the face of a more benevolent God. In addition, there
emerged a role for the individual in determining his own and others’ fates. This was reflected in an overall change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where pain and suffering were viewed as being avoidable and unacceptable. Therefore, the emergence of a benevolent God was key to unlocking the humanitarian impulse of humans: a humane God gave people the authority to be benevolent. It therefore became possible to speak about and act upon a humanitarian impulse.

The humanitarian impulse was hugely evident in the global reaction to the war in Biafra. This was, I believe, another dividing line: humanitarian practice before Biafra would not recognize its counterpart on the other side of the line. The result of Biafra for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and for humanitarianism was the creation of a discontinuity: Biafra signaled a divide, on either side of which the meanings attributed to concepts and their practices were no longer interchangeable. After the war, the notions of humanitarianism created and nurtured by the ICRC no longer made sense (Forsythe, 2007; Moorehead, 1999). Why might this be the case? Prior to Biafra, the ICRC followed behind war, visiting prisoners and rendering aid to those affected (Forsythe, 2007). This process was developed following the Battle of Solferino, the formation of the Red Cross, and then refined over decades of European conflicts (Moorehead, 1999). While European conflicts such as the world wars that were attended by the ICRC were vast and complex, the organization could still count on a semblance of order through the so-called laws of war in the Geneva Conventions and through shared cultural and historic linkages amongst combatants, governments, and helpers. However, in Nigeria the organization could not depend upon this common ground and didn’t seem to understand why this was the case (Forsythe, 2007). The war was regarded as being confusing, with no real front and with civilians intermixed into sites of conflict (Moorehead, 1999). In addition, the concept of neutrality at the centre of Red Cross humanitarianism was too inflexible to work in the context of Biafra (Forsythe, 2007).

This inflexibility is reflected in the fact that the Red Cross continued to argue for access to victims on the basis of its past performance without taking into account other perceptions of its intentions. These perceptions included claims that Red Cross flights were being used to ferry ammunition and war material, and that the influx of foreign currency for relief work was being used to the benefit of the Biafran government. It seems that these unintended outcomes of humanitarianism together with the non-European context of the conflict created many barriers that confounded the Red Cross. In addition, there was dissent and confusion within the Red Cross organization itself, with France and the Scandinavian countries arguing that the ICRC should do things not officially or legally sanctioned by the Geneva Conventions in order to prevent suffering (Forsythe, 2007).

In summary, then, the presence of discontinuities reveals an intersection of events where social relations should change and new subjects should emerge. In the case of the events cited above, one emergent subject was the humanitarian as a professional worker within an organizational structure: in other words, the professional humanitarian. Another subject created is the citizen transformed into a victim through the action of organizations during a crisis, disaster, or conflict. Yet another is the citizen humanitarian: that is a ‘man of feeling’ who responds to instances of suffering in another human. Why, though, is the production of the subject of importance to the humanitarian problematic? An example of some recent disasters serves to answer this question.

In her examination of some well-known disasters such as the San Francisco earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, Rebecca Solnit critiques perceptions of victims as helpless, dazed survivors dependent upon organizations to rescue them from their fate (Solnit, 2009). She joins with other scholars (cf. Drabek and Mcentire, 2003; Furedi, 2007a, 2007b; Rodriguez, Trainor, and Quarantelli, 2006) who try to illustrate that it is the
individual citizen rather than state or non-state institutions that serves the key role in responding to a crisis.

In the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake, Solnit recounts the way in which citizens who survived the disaster established kitchens and shelters for other survivors. She also notes that these efforts met with resistance from the formal organizations such as the military and the fire department. The phenomenon of emergent organizations during disasters is well understood (cf. Drabek and Mcentire, 2003; Rodríguez, Trainor, and Quarantelli, 2006), yet the paradoxical situation remains: formal, organized helping receives the bulk of attention and resources during a crisis. Whether it is a local or distant crisis, the story most often told recounts the role of the professional humanitarian responder working within a defined organizational structure. The object of this professional’s practice is the disaster victim. Somewhere in between these two subjects rests Solnit’s active citizen helper: the citizen humanitarian.

Discourse can also be found when statements produce subjects and produce a relationship between subjects. Obvious examples of these statements are documents such as the Geneva Conventions. Less obvious, but still figuring large in the archive, is literature and its obsession with humanitarian ideas. Humanitarianism benefited from the way in which literature trained people how to be compassionate. The archive shows that literature and humanitarianism are connected and the one had an influence on the other. Henry Dunant’s Memory of Solferino is but one example of this kind of humanitarian literature. In its formation story, the Red Cross continually reinforces the impact of this one book on the birth and development of the organization and on humanitarianism. The archive shows, however, that Dunant’s book is but one instance in a whole genre of literature that was obsessed with humanitarian ideas. In effect, humanitarianism benefited from the availability and impact of this literature to train people how to be compassionate. The literature provided rules by which humanitarianism could be applied, and it helped created the humanitarian subjects. The questions now are: how are these subjects constituted? How do they interact? We can see this process by examining one of the subjects produced by humanitarianism: the citizen humanitarian.

The citizen humanitarian

One trajectory of the citizen humanitarian is found in the archive through the emergence of a new social type called the “the man of feeling” (Halttunen, 1995: 303) who represented the behaviors that were to be emulated by others. The man of feeling displayed an innate understanding of the difference between good and evil, and this extended to acts of compassion and concern towards suffering individuals. In other words, he displayed a humanitarian sensibility. This sensibility is in stark contrast to earlier feelings of resignation generated from beliefs that current conditions on Earth exist for a reason, suffering is beneficial to heavenly reward, and things will be better in the next life. Replacing the afterlife as a barrier to helping were instead appeals to a transcendent force as a reason for acting in a humanitarian manner. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries evil was the universal motivator, the reduction of evil the goal. The transcendent and universal power of humanity and of humanity’s ability to change conditions becomes more important. Later, science and evolutionary theory in particular, are implicated in demonstrating the common origins of humans, and thus contribute to claims that there is less difference between people across cultures and borders. Institutions such as churches capitalized upon this belief in commonality and motivated individuals to give gifts such as clothing or food across borders. This enabled the consideration of the poor in another country not as strangers, but as fellow humans deserving of attention.

The existence of associations and groups that considered the suffering of others was also an adaptation in response to the fragmentation of society due to increasing economic and social
change attributable to modernization and colonialism. The argument begins to emerge that the state could no longer cope with, or chose not to cope with, the increased demands placed upon it in an industrial society. These demands resulted from the rising expectations of workers, as well as the expectations of citizens that government would also respond in a humanitarian fashion to the suffering of strangers within their own borders. Voluntary associations conveniently filled this gap as part of the so-called natural helping response of humanity. Thus the argument that the state is a weak institution exists in the eighteenth century, well before any contemporary idea of failed states that is so often used as a rationale for a humanitarian response in Africa or elsewhere.

Some examples of these collective efforts included the elimination of slavery, the creation of industrial schools to train the poor, and the creation of legislation that restricted work hours and reduced the use of child labour. The emergence of the Red Cross and its principles of neutrality and impartiality reflect this belief in commonality of human beings through the claim that suffering is something that transcends differences; the Red Cross, however, still respects political differences and the state’s power to care for its citizens. A later example comes in the form of MSF and its ethos of working without borders: it also believes in neutrality, but unlike the Red Cross it espouses a sharing in the suffering of strangers. In a paradoxical twist, though, MSF argues that difference between victim and helper is both productive and necessary for humanitarianism.

Therefore, the citizen humanitarian emerged from these various trajectories of changing views on suffering, pain, and transcendent rewards versus immediate relief but also from an awareness of distant needs that easily circulated in humanitarian literature and later in broadcast media. In the Biafran conflict, the citizen humanitarian finds a full expression as evidenced through the massive outpouring of individual contributions at the behest of churches, NGOs, and the Red Cross. Today it seems natural and almost expected that the citizen will behave in a humanitarian fashion when non-state organizations call for help on behalf of those suffering. But this was not always the case and it was through the intersection of many different trajectories that the humanitarian discourse has produced various subject positions of the citizen humanitarian. In summary, the citizen humanitarian is the common human with common characteristics and thus able to feel commonly no matter where or who the sufferer might be. This relation between the humanitarian citizen and the distant ‘other’ needing help is indicative of the emergence of another subject: the humanitarian victim.

The humanitarian victim

The distant suffering stranger is one object of the citizen humanitarian’s interest; the stranger at home is another. Victims have been viewed as idle recipients of compassion, but they also emerge in a more complex, often contradictory, relationship with humanitarians. On the one hand there is an expectation that victims should behave in a certain fashion, but on the other there is an acknowledgment that the victims have a part in the creation of their misfortune or in the construction of a situation as a disaster. The victim is now a subject for whom compassion should be felt. However, this compassion is directed such that there is an expectation that help will be provided only if the helper receives something in return. Perhaps what is received in return is not only physical but the victims’ implicit participation in being governed, complacent, and unthreatening to existing social order. During the Biafran conflict the struggle for humanitarian control of the war extended to placing war victims at fault for not behaving correctly. This is reflected in the ICRC’s desire to avoid creating the mentality of a refugee as a result of the humanitarian intervention; therefore, only well-behaved, well-managed victims of disaster are acceptable.

The Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law are fairly obvious components of the humanitarian discourse. They are rules that are intended to produce ways of being
and acting within conflicts. During the Biafra war the ICRC expected that governments and military leaders would instruct citizens and soldiers how to behave in a conflict. It also expected governments to allow it to operate independently and assist victims. The Red Cross expected that victims and combatants should behave in a certain fashion such that the humanitarian discourse produced the well-behaved, managed victim of disaster. However, in Biafra these kinds of subjects simply didn’t behave well. These actors were placed at fault for not behaving correctly by the discourse of humanitarianism, namely by not following the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law. This extended to the Nigerian government for not allowing the free flow of aid, to the combatants for not distinguishing between victims and soldiers, and to victims for becoming accustomed to aid or using it to help fund and prolong the conflict. Therefore, the war was not just over land, it also included a struggle over the meaning of the war and over control of the massive relief operation. This control is, in essence, to dictate the rules of the discourse. Biafra, however, was portrayed as an exceptional event both by the Red Cross and by others. This exceptionality justified the lack of success that the Red Cross and contemporary humanitarian discourse had in making the war behave correctly. Thus, statements about humanitarianism’s failure are deemed admissible to the discourse because the war was an exceptional event.

Thus, the humanitarian and the needy are in a hierarchical relationship where the humanitarian occupies a position superior to those needing rescue and knows what is best. On one hand, humanitarianism is under donors’ control, and the flow of gifts and resources is only from the giver to the receiver. On the other, the recipients shape this relationship albeit in an unequal fashion through providing legitimacy and status to the event: there can be no disaster or crisis without victims. For example, the Red Cross noted that victims in Biafra began to organize themselves into advocacy groups. This shows that there was a potential for resistance even in the midst of a conflict where the victims were portrayed as helpless.

In further constructing the humanitarian victim MSF contributes its understanding of what constitutes a disaster. MSF devotes considerable time and text to debate around what a disaster looks like and to determining who should be helped. The victim is first of all vulnerable. But a victim exists not because of his or her position in society or because of existing poverty or inequality. The humanitarian victim only exists if there is a crisis or event that causes sufficient excess suffering or excess mortality. At some point when the disaster is over the subject is no longer a humanitarian victim. This point or dividing line between disaster and non-disaster is an interesting one as it represents a discontinuity within the discourse of the humanitarian victim as a subject. The dividing line is determined by discursive rules governing what is and is not a disaster.

At one end of the spectrum, a disaster is an exceptional event beyond the daily societal background noise of tragedies and avoidable mortality. At the other end of the spectrum, disaster is enmeshed within political and economic systems to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish disaster from everyday existence. Thus institutions such as the Red Cross and MSF rely upon the former construction to perpetuate the subject of the professional humanitarian. A distinction must be made between the normal and the abnormal to make a space for the helper otherwise his or her task would be largely impossible. The existence of a victim is a necessary condition of the humanitarian act, and thus contributes to the creation of disaster, humanitarianism, and another subject: the humanitarian organization.

Humanitarian organization as a disciplinary institution

People have for a long time expressed their concern over the conditions of victims of disaster or war. In contrast, what we today call ‘humanitarianism’ is deemed straightforward and
taken-for-granted because it is unproblematically associated with organized helping, compassion, feeling, and sympathy. Humanitarianism is a word that seems uniquely ‘good’ because it has only one history. Humanitarian organizations ignore the problematic aspects of its history, and often they make significant efforts to concretize it as a single trajectory. For example, the International Museum of the Red Cross in Geneva is a physical embodiment of ‘history.’ While it includes the notion that there have been multiple contributors to humanitarianism in its present form, these contributions are sidebars to the main trajectory.

The MSF movement attempts to disavow itself of history through appeals to a transcendent, ‘neutral’ character of its humanitarianism that implies that humanitarians’ actions have no impact on the social construction and meaning of the term. Taken as a whole, this unproblematic view of history justifies specific approaches to helping, to dichotomize people as either ‘helpers’ or ‘victims’ and to perpetuate the notion that war and disaster are simply temporary setbacks to forward movement. In other words, I believe it is the case that by working to ensure that only one history is possible, it is easier to have people confuse the origins of the practice of humanitarianism with its meaning. But, in problematizing humanitarianism there are many trajectories of humanitarianism, and its present manifestation is the result of the intersection of these trajectories. There are other, equally believable, manifestations of humanitarianism and other interpretations of its meaning. If the caring face of humanitarianism can be problematized and questioned, and if its taken-for-granted status is called into question, the task now is to try and understand these other purposes that humanitarianism serves.

In a similar fashion, Foucault argues in his genealogical works *History of Madness, Security, Territory, and Population,* and *Discipline and Punish* that there has long been an interest in the poor, the insane, and the criminal. We believe that our era and our context are superior to those previous: that ours is more civilized, more humane, more enlightened. Have our present efforts truly evolved from control and punishment of victims into a benign interest in improving their conditions, ameliorating the illness, or reforming their criminality? Taking a longer historical view, Foucault (1997) shows that it is equally as believable that people have also been interested in mitigating the potential impact of the poor or criminals on the exercise of power because of the potential for chaos, resistance, and change. Take, for example, the development of social medicine in France and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this case, the increasing urbanization of the poor meant that rich and poor often shared similar urban spaces. This brought about the potential for, and the actualization of, violent disturbances. Not only this, but these shared urban spaces were characterized as unhealthy because whenever people “came together in closed places their morals and their health deteriorated” (Foucault, 1997: 144).

Thus people can become the object of medical intervention. Foucault (1997) shows how these beliefs about the behavior of the poor, together with medical interventions designed to mitigate these behaviors, resulted in practices that were ostensibly aimed at improving their conditions. However, they also had the effect of quelling the potential for revolution, violence, and resistance. Institutions exist where these mitigative practices are carried out: the prison, the workhouse, and the hospital are examples in this instance. These are ostensibly caring institutions where concern with the fate of others has a point of application.

However, they are also institutions created to see to it that people are governed through the application of discipline. As Foucault saw it, discipline is the application of routine that is sometimes carried out within an enclosed space such as a prison, school, or factory. Skills related to production or certain aptitudes within an individual are a component of discipline. For example, the factory worker is disciplined in the sense that s/he may have a skill necessary for production, but also because s/he works obediently, regularly, and within prescribed times. The individual becomes docile because he can be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault,
through ostensibly caring institutional practices such as funds for workers which, “freely and enthusiastically provided by industrialists for workers with families, are an answer to the need for employers to get men attached to them and to realize their responsibilities and the degree of material and moral interest that these responsibilities entail” (Mauss, 1969: 65). Thus, the notion of the disciplinary institution is that it is a space within which individuals become docile, obedient, and practiced for the specific purpose of applying certain values and regulating behavior.

I believe that humanitarian organizations are an instance of a disciplinary institution directed at a specific subject: that is, the disaster victim. In the aftermath of crisis the victim is constructed as being vulnerable and requiring the attention of formal helping structures. This is despite observations that victims are more often apt to help each other through the formation of temporary emergent organizations, and have in the past been considered resilient rather than vulnerable. But, can the refugee or disaster survivor really be considered equivalent to prisoner, delinquent, patient, or factory worker? That is, are the behaviors of these ‘victim’ subjects of disaster really subject to the same process applied within disciplinary institutions? I believe that they are. One piece of evidence for this claim comes from the literature and shows a striking intersection between humanitarianism and discipline through the claim that disaster disproportionately affects the poor, those living on marginal lands, and the relatively uneducated. For example, Fothergill and Peek (2004: 103) conduct an extensive review of disasters and poverty in the United States and conclude that the literature shows that “[t]he poor are more likely to perceive hazards as risky; less likely to prepare for hazards or buy insurance; less likely to respond to warnings; more likely to die … have more psychological trauma; and face more obstacles during the phases of response, recovery, and reconstruction.”

Taking a more global perspective, one can find poverty and marginality implicated as responsible for individual vulnerability to disaster in the so-called developing regions of the world (Bankoff, Frerks, and Hilhorst, 2004; Bankoff, 2001; Blaikie, 1994). As Bankoff (2001) suggests, these regions have been constructed as being dangerous places not because of the disproportionate frequency of disaster, but because of the vulnerability of the population to the effects of disaster. The regions inhabited by these vulnerable people are therefore dangerous to themselves, but also dangerous to the West: they represent a potential threat to security. On the other hand, the population of the West is not, comparatively speaking, as vulnerable because they have the resilience to be able to withstand disaster. Therefore humanitarianism, at least insofar as it is interested in the suffering of those affected by disaster, considers the poor and especially those in the developing world, to be its main constituency.

It therefore reflects an established belief that the poor are huddled masses: dangerous and potentially threatening. According to Van Leeuwen (1994: 593), this has been a consistent concern about the poor and has motivated philanthropic and compassionate effort, the logic being that “[d]estitution for the many might easily lead to discontent” and “relief was advantageous if its costs were less than those of other means to maintain public order.” Poverty itself as not an unfortunate and random situation, but a moral one or rather “a consequence of a seamy way of life” requiring disciplining behavior and so to “give assistance without attaching moral conditions would only reproduce squalor” (Van Leeuwen 1994: 594). In another example, Twohig (1996: 333) notes the manner in which doctors in nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, Canada, “served the needs of a colonial administration actively seeking to settle natives in reserve communities” and that at least part of the reason was the fear of the spread of disease. Relief to the poor through medical intervention, in this case the indigenous Mi’kmaq population of the province, would counter this disease and also provide justification for resettlement in areas away from the colonizers. And it is the poor, and those requiring moral education, who have been precisely the sought-after target of discipline and disciplinary institutions.
Another piece of evidence is that humanitarianism has been removed from the personal and made organizational. That is, the subject of the citizen humanitarian has largely been ignored, except to support the humanitarian professional and to provide ontological status to the humanitarian victim. How did this happen and how does this contribute to the discipline of humanitarianism? Perhaps, as Solnit (2009) writes upon reflecting on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, and 9/11, disaster affords people the opportunity to be free: free from institutions, free from laws that assume that society tends to disorder in the absence of rules. This would produce a subject that is or has the potential to become someone “without social moorings” (May, 1993: 17): in short, an undisciplined subject.

Instead, the discourse of humanitarianism produces the victim as subject for the purpose of keeping them where they are physically and psychically, rather than see them migrate away from their borders, agitate for change, suspend productive activity, or form structures in opposition to the state. The persistent view is that disasters are temporary setbacks on the continually moving path of development even though there is considerable evidence to show that this is not the case. The literature suggests that this view arises because disasters are considered to be the result of “natural forces … a departure from a state of normalcy to which a society returns to on recovery” (Bankoff, 2001: 24).

With respect to conflict, one can also see suggestions that war is natural and merely a temporary setback. MSF itself raises the question of whether it would be better to simply allow wars to continue according to some kind of natural path: “is it better to have a brief, decisive war which ignores humanitarian principles, or a conflict prolonged by the respect of humanitarian demands?” (Terry, 1999: 5). However, I believe that when viewed through the lens of disciplinary society, the persistence of this view of the temporary nature of disaster and conflict can instead be understood as the need to make disciplined subjects that quickly return to contribute their part towards production. In other words, the discipline of humanitarianism exists because we cannot allow the disorder of displacement or dislocation: the state won’t allow it. It has nothing to do with being kind or compassionate although this may be the stated intention.

The discipline of humanitarianism is borne out in the refugee camp, relocation center, the field hospital, or in more subtle ways outside of institutions or bounded locations. These are humanitarian sites where discipline is applied: they are components of a disciplinary society. This suggestion answers some calls in the literature. Malkki (2002: 353) calls for historicizing humanitarianism to show that “contemporary practices of disciplining movement and segregating people are not newly emergent phenomena, but something much older and established.” I am suggesting that viewing these organizations as part of a disciplinary society means that we can no longer accept the Red Cross as a neutral organization, nor can we accept MSF as an activist organization with nothing more than the victims’ interests at heart. The problem of humanitarianism is not that it fails through an incorrect application of technology, management practice, or legal principles. It is, instead, the creation of the subject of victim and the subject of professional helper within a disciplinary institution that is the problem. In the refugee camp or disaster site, as one form of state structure withdraws because it is ‘weak,’ ‘failed,’ or ‘in crisis,’ another form of state arises and permeates through discipline. More often than not, it is Third World states that produce these sites while ‘developed’ world states inject discipline into them.

Further, while physical humanitarian sites are obvious points of application of discipline, it is equally as possible to consider the disciplinary practice of humanitarianism within broader, non-physical spaces. For example, Foucault (1995: 212) observed that “religious groups and charity organizations” have “long played this role of disciplining the population.” It is important to note that like the prison or the factory, the disciplinary role of humanitarian organizations is not directed or intentional. Rather, it is the result of “a multiplicity of often minor processes, of
different origin and scattered location … [that] converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method” (Foucault, 1995: 138). It is also important to note that while Foucault uses institutions as examples of an ‘enclosed space’ to explain the function of discipline, discipline “may be identified neither with an institution nor with an approach … it is a type of power … it may be taken over … by specialized institutions” (Foucault, 1995: 215). While discipline can be found to act in enclosed spaces such as “the colleges, or secondary schools … the military barracks … great manufacturing spaces” (Foucault, 1995: 141) the principle of enclosure “is neither constant, nor indispensable” (Foucault, 1995: 143) but rather “it was a tactic of anti-desertion, anti-vagabondage, anti-concentration.” I suggest, based upon my exploration of the discourse of humanitarianism, that one of these specialized institutions is the humanitarian organization. Therefore, humanitarianism serves a role in ensuring the separation of populations. The ironic quality of this purpose is noted in relation to the ‘without borders’ discourse of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism extends the colonization of former colonies by reclaiming these territories through the act of helping. My argument here has raised more questions on borders and their role in framing the humanitarian problematic. In removing borders, humanitarianism seeks territory that is not claimed by others and tries to create its own space. Both the Red Cross and MSF have a complex understanding of borders. While MSF is popularly credited with a humanitarian function that ignores borders, it appears to erect a new and different set of borders related to defining humanitarianism, victims, and professionals. The borderless organization is possessed of many borders. However, the Red Cross was operating in a borderless fashion in Africa well before the arrival of MSF. In its work during the immediate postcolonial period, the Red Cross appealed to universal ideals and attempted to apply them across national borders and cultures. In fact the ideals were not so much universal as they were European. However, this strategy is not unique to humanitarianism as it is similar to the approach taken by colonial powers in appealing to universal tenets of civilization when attempting to justify colonialism. The justification was not so much to convince the colonized population as it was to convince colonizing populations at home that the policies and practices were needed. Humanitarianism extends notions of European culture and intellectual heritage into former colonial countries.

**Humanitarianism and organization**

I would like to address the notion of the organization in general as a caring or humanitarian institution. To be clear, I am at this point in the discussion not talking about humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross or MSF but rather about applying what I have learned about humanitarianism from these organizations to other situations. In particular, I would like to identify how the humanitarian discourse works within the organization with a caring principle, or caring outlook.

There is evidence in the literature to begin building upon such an examination. In her examination of the role of the American Red Cross in China during the early twentieth century, Brewer (1983) outlines how the organization acted as an agent of productivity and efficiency both at home and abroad in China. She demonstrates that the American Red Cross was a progressive agency, its programs developed and managed by the elite to eliminate waste and inefficiency in American society. Its domestic reform programs were developed to prevent or mitigate the effects of accidents in American mining, railroad and lumber industries. Its disaster relief programs existed to provide aid in returning the victims to a productive, self-supporting role in society as soon as possible.

*(Brewer, 1983: 383)*
This philosophy was exported abroad in Red Cross projects in China where “a consistent theme” in the Red Cross efforts in China “was the elimination and prevention of waste and inefficiency through reform of China’s leaders, its government and society” (Brewer, 1983: 394). I too have explored this theme of the disciplinary function of humanitarian organizations, but what is important to note here is that in Brewer’s (1983) version, the Red Cross could be considered an instrument of a managerialist ethos that values efficiency. As Brewer (1983) explains, the organization represented what then-President Woodrow Wilson called “that spirit … of absolute disinterestedness, not thinking of ourselves, but thinking of the results we wish to achieve … spiritual as well as material” (Wilson, 1979). In other words, the humanitarianism of the organization was something that others could model their lives upon in order to achieve material gain.

Further evidence comes from the ‘business and society’ field. This area is a normative attempt to look at the relationship between business activities and the social good. This relationship is considered successful if the firm’s conduct results in profit maximization within the constraints of socially acceptable behavior and local laws (Swanson, 1999). However, this can only be applicable insofar as the laws exist and are enforceable. For failed states, in situations of conflict, or when the boundary between legal and illegal behavior becomes blurred, the non-profit sector’s ostensible reputation of neutrality and morality gives cause for them to play an important role in business: they become stakeholders in the process. The non-profit is considered a neutral, legitimizing partner in a private sector firm’s goal of including the excluded.

However, empirical studies (Banerjee, 2000, 2008; Herzlinger and Krasker, 1987) of non-profits cast doubt on this assertion of the inherent goodness of the humanitarian organization as a legitimizing agent and open a theoretical hole in the stakeholder concept into which more nuanced thinking about the role of humanitarianism can be introduced. This is especially important when attempting to view the non-profit as the subject of a stakeholder analysis rather than simply a stakeholder in its own right. This is particularly important as the NGO itself is often used as a legitimizing instrument and not an object of analysis within stakeholder theory. By incorporating the discourse of humanitarianism into stakeholder theory and ‘business and society’ research, this chapter suggests problematizing what has to this point been an unproblematic conceptualization of the non-profit organization as an unquestionable good.

References


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