

**Antonio De Lauri, ed., 2016,
The Politics of Humanitarianism: Power, Ideology and Aid,
London-New York: I.B.Tauris**

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Antonio De Lauri's book is a very needed reflection on contemporary humanitarianism. The last decades have been marked by a dramatic increase in the use of humanitarian interventions for different purposes, from relief to stabilization, from protection to democratization. In his introduction, De Lauri emphasises that humanitarianism, with its values, discourses and practices, is not merely a product of our times, but it holds a constitutive force that shapes human relationships and influences international relations and transnational governance. Exploring the progressive detachment of humanitarian assistance from the principle of neutrality, its lack of accountability, and the relationships between aid and military interventions, *The Politics of Humanitarianism* looks at humanitarianism as a salient feature of our times. Going beyond the rhetoric of relief interventions as a response to distant suffering, it successfully unveils the reasons of today expansion of the humanitarian enterprise and it unpacks the stereotyped dynamics of need between Global North and Global South. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive critique of humanitarianism, rejecting both reductionism, systemic explanations and hypersubjectivism. With a multidisciplinary and multifocal approach, it addresses the political, ideological and legal dimensions of humanitarianism. The eclectic contributions show with great clarity that humanitarianism – far from being a homogeneous and monolithic practice of aid confined to an isolated humanitarian space – is a multifaceted form of political power.

The collection starts with Mariella Pandolfi and Phillip Rousseau's *Critical Genealogy of Humanitarian Intervention*. The chapter provides an overview of how humanitarianism has progressively abandoned its original neutrality stance, to start to coexist and interact with the political, the military, and often work in the place of the State. By assuming its righteousness in intervening to respond to crisis, humanitarian reasons for action are not questioned anymore. In this way, international interventions and the responsibility to protect have become tautological justifications for humanitarian action. With its emphasis on responsibility rather than neutrality, today's humanitarianism is increasingly enmeshed with governance and security concerns. The blurring of lines between military and humanitarian interventions is

not without consequences: it has obfuscated the distinction between war and peace, relief and control, state of emergency and protracted war regimes. In this context, humanitarian control practices seem to become essential to the management of permanent crisis.

Drawing on de Wall's observation that Western humanitarianism is more concerned with managing emergencies rather than solving them, Laura Nader and Robin Savinar reflect on the self-justifying character of humanitarianism. The instances of humanitarian action in Libya in 2011, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) work in Palestine, the relief response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and the viral video *Kony 2012* help the authors to demonstrate that humanitarian interventions very often serve as pretexts for political and economic interests. What these very diverse kind of humanitarian actions share in common is an oversimplification of the context and the need for assistance, coupled with a lack of analysis on the dynamics of power. Most importantly, the examples serve Nader and Savinar to mark the imperialist character of the humanitarian enterprise and show how it completely neglects the voice of the people directly involved.

Going beyond the traditional view that sees the humanitarian intervention as a "state of exception" (p. 65), Julie Billaud and Antonio De Lauri draw the attention on another aspect of humanitarianism: its aspiration to normalization. Using the case of Afghanistan, the authors describe the humanitarian normalization process and its implicit imposition of specific models of normality. Humanitarian representation works on the level of the imagination of the future, by imposing a normality that seems the only legitimate way to conceive ordinary life, order and peace. Particularly interesting is the authors' analysis of humanitarianism in action through the analogies with the theatre and the concept of "carnavalesque" in representing the reversal from an authoritarian rule to democracy. In the humanitarian theatre, repetition, organizational bureaucracy and the massive production of disparate kinds of documents (reports, guidelines, templates, etc.) assume a crucial importance in reinforcing existing dynamics of knowledge production, hierarchies and power.

Elisabetta Grande explores humanitarianism and its distorting dynamics through the lens of women rights programmes. After having outlined how women rights have often been used to justify colonialism, genocide, and humanitarian interventions, the author reflects on the connections between women rights discourse and the corporate agenda. Very persuasively, Grande shows how behind women rights programmes lies the interest for the creation of a conducive environment for market economy. Her point is that a highly individualized society is more functional to the neoliberal system than a collectivist society based on groups' needs and rights. The narrative of women rights is based on the idea that non-Western women attachment to local family practices is not the result of free choice because choice, in

that case, is forced by culture. Women rights discourse negates the relational self and relational agency, by advocating the superiority of the individual self. In doing so, women rights discourse ends up provoking two effects: dismantling group structures for the unique legitimate existence of the individual self, and promoting a vision of the individual that is functional to the corporate market economy.

Moving from women to children, the concept of childhood and how it is used in disparate ways from different humanitarian actors is the focus of Edoardo Quaretti's contribution. The opposing narratives of children as innocent victims on the one hand, and that of children as young criminals who need to be rehabilitated, on the other hand, coexist in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to the author, humanitarian actors use different concept of childhood politically, to justify their humanitarian operations and design their interventions. The manipulation of local categories of childhood and particularly the Western conception of children as victims to be protected is at the base of the Salesian humanitarian programme in the DRC since the colonial period. The author maintains that not only this understanding of childhood has always been at odds with local perceptions, but the Catholic Church missions have played a major role in manipulating children categories to justify humanitarian intervention. The "new ethics of childhood" (p. 102) was indeed based on Western notions of family, economic dependency and social order.

Alexandra Lewis looks at the macro level and at the ways in which foreign assistance in Yemen has contributed to fuel the conflict and delegitimize the State. Moving beyond traditional notions of humanitarianism as a space separated from political interests, and using the protracted emergency in Yemen as a case study, the author explores how humanitarian and development programmes have been and continue to be politicized. The mingling of humanitarian aid, development assistance, human rights programmes, and stabilization strategies has emphasized the politicization of the Yemeni "protracted relief" packages (p. 125), and the tensions between humanitarian practices and local values. Not only traditional Western donors do play a hegemonic role toward both the recipients of aid and the new donors, but the humanitarian space is dominated by political priorities and a liberal-interventionist ideology. The acknowledgement of the non-neutral and partial character of emergency aid by the humanitarian community, concludes Lewis, is imperative to safeguard the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

Focusing on the humanitarian management of refugees, Sophia Hoffman's contribution sheds light on the way in which humanitarian programmes contribute to reproduce a regime of politics based on nation-state dichotomies of citizen/not-citizen, inclusion/exclusion, order/disorder. Challenging popular accounts that see refugee camps as exceptional places, the author

convincingly shows how the humanitarian discourse represents the refugee as an outcast of the nation state's natural order, eventually naturalizing its exclusion as non-citizen. Therefore, humanitarianism fails to recognise that refugees are not an exception of the sovereignty system, but rather an integral part of it. Moreover, the massive expansion of the humanitarian sector has also contributed to the reification of the refugee as "a political trope against which the peaceful situation of those 'inside' sovereignty may be constantly compared and justified" (p. 162). United Nations (UN) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alike contribute to depict refugees in standardized and decontextualized ways. If Hoffman acknowledges that UN international and local partners do enhance the impact of humanitarian programmes in some ways, at the same time – she argues – NGOs work as tools of norm diffusion. In this way, the humanitarian *modus operandi* based on the nation state politics translates into the national level despite the specificities of the context.

De Lauri's book aptly puts into dialogue essays that highlight the very different ways through which humanitarianism and politics overlap and intersect. The authors of this excellent collection provide a synergetic stimulus to reflect on the way we think about humanitarianism and governance in the contemporary world. The book depicts a vivid picture of the character of today humanitarianism, a practice that has renounced to its ethical aspirations of neutrality and independence – if those ideals have ever been within reach. Contemporary humanitarianism is intimately linked to evolutionist ideologies as well as to principles of liberal economy and global governance. And yet, are we ready to abandon humanitarianism? For instance, we need to explore whether there is room for any potentially different humanitarian discourse out there – a discourse capable of overcoming a politicization that seems to inevitably jeopardize the ultimate goal of saving lives and alleviating suffering.