
The politics of the political/humanitarian divide

by

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“[T]o live ethically, we must think and act politically.”¹

“[H]umanitarian endeavour and political action must go their separate ways if the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian work are not to be jeopardized....”²

“Even though operating in highly politicized circumstances, humanitarian action does not have to be political.”³

THERE has been a recent growth in “humanitarian affairs”. Whether it be in the budgets of organizations specializing in humanitarian matters,⁴ the labelling of conflicts as humanitarian crises, concern about humanitarian action, or even the creation of the post of Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations in the new Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, there is no question that the word “humanitarian” is much in evidence today as a

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¹ Melissa Orlie, *Living ethically, acting politically*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997, p. 169, cited in David Campbell, “Why fight: Humanitarianism, principles and post-structuralism”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1998, p. 519.

² Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the ICRC, Statement to the UN General Assembly, 20 November 1992, *IRRC*, No. 292, January-February 1993, p. 52. This opinion was recently reiterated when the President said: “the ICRC has strongly advocated the creation of a humanitarian space,

thereby emphasizing the need to leave room for independent humanitarian action in situations of conflict”. See Cornelio Sommaruga, “Humanitarian action and peace-keeping operations”, *IRRC*, No. 317, March-April 1997, p. 179.

³ Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian politics*, Headline Series, Foreign Policy Association, No. 304, April 1995, p. 17.

⁴ For example, the budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees went from just over US\$ 500 million in 1989 to over US\$ 1 billion in 1993 and beyond.

descriptive term for certain events and activities. At first glance this seems a favourable development. Concern for “humanitarian affairs” – like concern for human rights – appears to indicate a progressive move towards greater attention to individuals and to their personal safety. Like motherhood and apple pie, greater attention to “humanitarian affairs” is something no one should be against.

Indeed, the word “humanitarian” has become associated with all that is humane and positive. Like human rights,⁵ it implies helping those in need. In the case of humanitarianism specifically, and to distinguish it from human rights, this need has been constructed around helping victims. Humanitarian action may, for example involve helping victims of natural disasters, as in the recent operations in Central America. Our concern here, however, is more specifically with helping victims in times of armed conflict. It is important to remember that international humanitarian law comprises the laws of war. So the humanitarianism we are focusing on is specifically linked to violence. Without war, there would be no humanitarian law; without war, there would be no humanitarian space.

What is the relationship between this humanitarian space and war? If we assume that war and violence are extensions of the political, then we understand the traditional description of humanitarian space as an area separate from the political, and that this separation is a critical ideological concept that is fundamental to organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Impartiality, neutrality and independence are predicated on separating the humanitarian from the political. One acts within the humanitarian space in the midst of, but separate from, the political. In this sense, humanitarian law represents a beacon of hope, order and civility within the barbarity of violence and chaos. The very fact that there can be humanitarian law in a situation such as war is seen as one of the crowning achievements of recent history. To have rules within the breakdown of accepted norms crystallizes man’s efforts to overcome his base instincts.

Greater concern for humanitarian affairs would seem to represent an important opening of space for human values and, at the same time, a closing or limiting of the space for other less benign activities. Increasing

⁵ For a discussion on human rights somewhat similar to this article’s perspective on humanitarianism, see Daniel Warner, “An ethics of human

rights: two interrelated misunderstandings”, *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, Vol. 24, No. 2/3, Spring 1996, pp. 395-415.

the humanitarian space has inherent implications for the political and the relationship between them. It seems obvious that space can never be ever-expanding. Therefore, if humanitarian space is increased, or at least concretized, there is less space for the political/violent. The separation of the humanitarian from the political has implications for the occupation of a bounded area. Again, who could be against the expansion of humanitarian space and the limiting of the political/violent?

In order to re-examine this position, and to show why one might be against the extension of humanitarian space, it is necessary to go back to the fundamental premise on which the preceding arguments are based. The separation of the humanitarian from the political involves a long tradition in Western political thought and touches upon basic assumptions about who we are and how we live.⁶ From Thucydides to Hobbes, from Machiavelli to Weber, Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Kissinger, there has been a Realist political tradition with deep religious undertones and important political ramifications.⁷ The basis of this tradition, perhaps best expressed in the theology of St Augustine, is the notion of a fallen world and the separation of that fallen world from the City of God.⁸ Because this world is fallen, the tradition goes, man is limited in what he can achieve without divine assistance. Any human action without intervention, therefore, must be limited in its scope and bound up in the necessarily “messy” affairs of that which is inherently fallen and evil.⁹

In other words, according to the Realist tradition politics must be dirty. Decisions such as the fire-bombing of Dresden and the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima are typical examples of what politicians must do. Ethicists study these cases under the title “the problem of dirty hands”.¹⁰ Any political action in this world, say the Realists, must be tainted since the very arena in which the action is taking place is fallen.

⁶ I have briefly discussed this in a book review in *Refugee Abstracts*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 1991, pp. 66-68.

⁷ A very readable recent presentation of Realism's modern manifestation is Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist thought from Weber to Kissinger*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1986.

⁸ For a wonderful engagement with St Augustine, see William Connolly, *The Augustinian imperative: A reflection on the politics of morality*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, 1993.

⁹ Witness the title of a conference hosted in Britain in April 1998: “Principled aid in an unprincipled world”.

¹⁰ See Michael Walzer, “Political action: The problem of dirty hands”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, No. 2, 1973, pp. 160-180.

And, according to this world view, within this fallen world humanitarianism becomes a tiny, possible opening which much be kept separate from the political. For humanitarianism, unlike the political, does not involve national interest or power. Humanitarianism is a space that, while not quite divine, is separate from the “messy” affairs of the fallen world. In addition, the greater the interest in humanitarian affairs and the greater the space this occupies, the smaller the space for the political, given the zero-sum game we mentioned before. As Adam Roberts has noted in another context but mirroring this line of reasoning: “The increase in humanitarian efforts in the 1990s contained many elements of idealism, not least a hope that it was part of a larger process whereby the sovereignty of states would take second place to the human rights of citizens”.¹¹

All this seems rather obvious and is contained in the assumptions of most of the writing on the political/humanitarian divide. One has only to read books like *Humanitarianism under siege: A critical review of Operation Lifeline Sudan* by Larry Minear and several colleagues or *Humanitarian politics* by Larry Minear and Thomas Weiss to sense the authors’ ferocious determination to stem the tide of political incursion into the humanitarian space.¹² The separation between the humanitarian and the political is sacrosanct; the Realist tradition underlies almost all writing on the humanitarian/political divide. And even if one gets behind simplistic notions of aid agencies stereotyped as non-political, one is left with unsophisticated arguments about how and why the humanitarian becomes involved in the political, such as the following.

In reality, humanitarian actors are deeply involved in the political sphere. To do their work, aid personnel and human-rights monitors usually require the permission of political authorities, which include entry visas and residency visas and permits. Relief programmes need duty-free entry for supplies, permission to exchange foreign currency, and authorization to communicate regularly and freely with their respective headquarters. Particularly essential – but also especially sensitive – in times of armed conflict, aid agencies need access to distressed populations.¹³

¹¹ Adam Roberts, *Humanitarian action in war: Aid, protection and impartiality in a policy vacuum*, Adelphi paper No. 305, 1996, p. 7.

¹² “International ethics do matter, although politics inevitably influence the contents of humanitarianism.” See Thomas Weiss and Larry Minear,

“Do international ethics matter? Humanitarian politics in the Sudan”, *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 5, 1991, p. 214.

¹³ Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 13.

But what would happen if we began from non-Realist assumptions? That is, what would happen if we began from the assumption that this world is not fallen, and that politics does not exist in a tainted environment? In other words, what if we began from the assumption that the political is not inherently evil, and that the humanitarian should not (cannot) be separated from the political? Or, more to the point, what would happen if we examined the notion that it is a very political move to separate the political from the humanitarian, and that Realism has its own politics?

Philosophically first, and then practically, this is a line of reasoning that has been taken up recently by more and more scholars. Much of the current post-structuralist research in international relations has attacked Realism, pointing out that it is a very particular way of looking at the world which was formed at a particular moment for a particular purpose.¹⁴ Rereadings of many of the canons in international relations such as the works of Hobbes¹⁵ and Machiavelli¹⁶ have opened up new possibilities in a number of areas, but the humanitarian/political divide has not yet been properly problematized.¹⁷

In order to contribute to a rethinking of that divide, I would like to suggest some of the reasons why there has been a growth in interest in humanitarian affairs. Rather than the positive reading of the increased attention to humanitarianism which I gave at the beginning of this article in terms of increased concern for personal safety, I would like to suggest that the recent rise in interest in humanitarian affairs is an abnegation of

¹⁴ Indeed, there is an abundant literature by scholars rereading certain texts to try to show that Thucydides, Hobbes, etc. were not that negative in what they saw in this world, and that modern Realism was part of a religious/political position specific to the United States and tied to its foreign policy positions in the 20th century. A good example of the latter would be John Vasquez, *The power of power politics: A critique*, Frances Pinter, London, 1983.

¹⁵ See Cornelia Navari, "Hobbes and the Hobbesian tradition in international thought", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1982, pp. 203-221, or Richard Flatham, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, individuality and chastened politics*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, 1993.

¹⁶ See R.B.J. Walker, "The prince and 'the pauper': Tradition, modernity, and practice in the theory of international relations", in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (eds.), *International/Intertextual relations: Postmodern readings of world politics*, D.C. Heath and Co., Lexington, MA, 1989, pp. 25-48.

¹⁷ Special mention should be made of the *Emerging Political Complexes Discussion Group* in England and David Campbell's paper, *op. cit.*, note 1. See also the excellent article by Jenny Edkins, "Legality with a vengeance: Famines and humanitarian relief in 'complex emergencies'", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1996, pp. 547-575.

responsibility by those in power. That is, instead of admitting that civil wars or outbreaks of violence such as the situations in the African Great Lakes region, Sudan, Afghanistan and Chechnya are very political activities, these outbreaks are termed humanitarian crises in order to avoid hard decisions about what to do. Organizations like the ICRC or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are then sent in to manage the crisis in “Band-Aid”, palliative operations that avoid the root causes of the problem and often lead to uncompromising situations, such as dealing with guerrillas in refugee camps.

Humanitarian organizations are not equipped to handle political crises such as civil wars or the collapse of governments. Because “political” organs such as the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council are unwilling or unable to deal with these situations, a political move has been made to call the situations “humanitarian” and to involve relief organizations in political crises.¹⁸ Indeed, as Roberts notes, “Numerous Security Council resolutions since 1989 have addressed humanitarian issues arising from armed conflicts. (...) One reason for the UNSC’s astonishing attention to humanitarian issues is that, in a 15-member body, it is easier to reach agreement on the lowest common denominator of humanitarianism than on more partisan or risky policies”.¹⁹

Within this policy vacuum, the humanitarian space given to those organizations is inherently limited since the abnegation of responsibility allows a mixture of activities to take place at the same time. Innumerable discussions about differences between peace-building, peace-making and peace-enforcement highlight the unfortunate situations in which organizations like the ICRC find themselves today when their humanitarian space is not clearly defined. Complex emergencies also call for complex responses, with the humanitarian community playing a limited role. Humanitarian space has traditionally been a limited space within given parameters. If those parameters disappear or are not clear, the humanitarian space does not expand automatically. In fact, without the parameters, that space becomes more diffuse and may even disappear. Part of the re-examination of the humanitarian/political divide is a re-examination of the zero-sum

¹⁸ This is a simple answer to Adam Roberts’ question: “Has the increased emphasis of governments on humanitarian action been an abdi-

cation of serious policy-making?” See Roberts, *op. cit.*, note 11, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

game assumption that the growth of humanitarian space limits the political/violent.

For example, if one examines much of the current literature on complex emergencies, as Jenny Edkins argues,²⁰ one enters into systemic analyses of the relationship between human rights violations and violence. That is, one enters into monocausal arguments that can lead certain complex emergency theorists to suggest that aid may in fact be allowing, if not producing, famine. Without going into the details of the argument, what we wish to emphasize here is that attempts to systematize the causes of conflict often lead to dichotomies similar to the Realist paradigm we pointed to earlier. And an organization like the ICRC which begins from a set of principles based on many of those dichotomies may find itself in situations where its efforts are counterproductive for those it is trying to help. In this sense, upholding humanitarian principles is a political move that may undercut the ethical basis of the organization's activities.

That is, by accepting the humanitarian/political divide and accepting mandates for operations called "humanitarian", organizations like the ICRC may in fact be working against their own objectives. Paradoxically, a practical conclusion of the situation we have described is that it may be necessary to limit humanitarian space and reduce humanitarian activities. Our argument is that if the root causes of the conflicts are properly addressed and "response-ability"²¹ developed, then when conflicts arise humanitarian organizations will have limited functions.²²

For example, for an organization like UNHCR to be involved in root cause alleviation is to go beyond its major protective function. The fact that the political/economic root causes are not being addressed by the proper organs does not justify expansion of the humanitarian space. As we have argued, diffusing the humanitarian space may cause it to disappear, not to expand. For, as in the case of UNHCR, increasing the humanitarian space

²⁰ Jenny Edkins, *op. cit.*, note 17.

²¹ Responsibility understood here as being able or willing to respond, a distinction I owe to G.M. Dillon.

²² There is an interesting convergence here between conservatives who see little use for humanitarian activities and want to reduce the budgets of humanitarian organizations and all multi-

lateral organizations and those who want to reduce humanitarian activities and put the political in the forefront by strengthening the political organs of multilateral diplomacy. The fact that both parties want humanitarianism to be reduced does not mean that their ultimate aims or understandings of politics should be confused.

gives rise to illusions because of the considerable differences between expectations and capacities, and may prove to be counterproductive to helping victims. Indeed, UNHCR, after an important period of expansion, has begun to scale down its space and to return to its primary objective, namely protection, perhaps indirectly recognizing that it had become a victim of its own success through bureaucratic overreach.

The expansion of the humanitarian space, we would argue, has not been helpful. Although this is counterintuitive, we have tried to show why it is so. The political move of focusing attention on the humanitarian has shifted attention away from the politics at the heart of conflicts and deflected responsibility for some kind of resolution from the proper organizations. It is always difficult for an organization to refuse a mandate, or to say that a particular problem is not its business. The ICRC has tried valiantly to remain within its basic principles, and to remain faithful to its limitations. Nonetheless, the general increase in humanitarian activity has drawn the ICRC into situations in which its limited, specific mandate has been called into question. That limited role is not the subject of this reflection. Rather, we are concerned here with the original problem of when and where humanitarian organizations are called in. We look forward to the day when the heads of humanitarian organizations will throw the ball back into the court of the proper political organs in a political gesture of self-denial that we feel will be helpful to the victims of abuse.

Those are the “pre-original political decisions”, and a firm denial of the Realist tradition. For if this world is not fallen, then the ethical can exist, although the decisions will not necessarily be based on some overarching principles and traditions etched in stone. To recognize that the ethical and the political cannot be separated is to recognize the difficulties inherent in living in this world.²³ Much of the writing on humanitarianism is filled with a dangerous idealism of other-worldly dimensions. While people like Robert McNamara can be criticized for ordering bombing raids from Monday to Saturday and then peacefully going to church on Sunday, idealists can work in the same fallen world from Monday to Saturday and attend the same church on Sunday, for they live in a similar Realist world. Idealism and Realism are different sides of the same coin. If we are to move

²³ This argument was developed in Daniel Warner, *An ethic of responsibility in international*

relations, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder and London, 1991.

away from the bombings, then we must also move away from the idealism. The separation of the humanitarian from the political is part of a world in which both have specific places through a very particular relationship. Reducing the divide between the two opens up a whole host of new possibilities.

Again, and to be perfectly clear, this reasoning is not meant to deny concern for victims or the difficult ethical/political decisions involved in trying to help. Rather, it is intended to initiate a new debate about the proper relations between people categorized as victims and those people or organizations trying to assist. The categorization of certain activities as humanitarian and others as political with their radical separation has not been helpful for the resolution of conflicts and the eventual targeted aid to victims. A small step in rethinking that categorization would be to understand the ontological nature of the categories and the political moves made to separate the two spheres.

For example, questions faced by the ICRC operationally such as: "Should aid be given to populations which are either supporting aggressors or which are unable to keep aid from aggressors?" are intimately tied to political realities. Helping victims in these situations belies the impartiality and neutrality of visiting prisoners, for example, although choosing not to testify about human rights violations once again places the political in the forefront. The decision not to testify about human rights violations is a very political decision, given legal conventions outlawing certain behaviour. The ICRC has clearly chosen to place certain priorities above others.

These types of operational decisions show the limitations of the political/humanitarian divide and the politics of humanitarian activities. Given the increasing number of those activities, greater transparency in discussing the nature of the decisions would be to everyone's benefit. In order to achieve that, a recognition of the politics behind the political/humanitarian divide is a first step which should include a re-examination of what humanitarian can mean. For to re-examine the political/humanitarian divide is not to suggest that there is no space for humanitarian activities. Rather, it is to place the humanitarian squarely within the political, and in so doing to offer greater possibilities not just to victims, but ultimately for a reduction in the number of victims. In order to do that, humanitarianism must be reinvigorated, politically. And this reinvigoration paradoxically includes the implosion of the political/humanitarian divide and the eventual circumscription of humanitarian activities.

Résumé

La politique de la séparation du politique de l'humanitaire

par DANIEL WARNER

L'auteur constate que les acteurs politiques sur la scène internationale portent un intérêt croissant à « l'humanitaire » et, notamment, à ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler « l'espace humanitaire », un espace qui serait clairement séparé du « politique ». Cette distinction entre l'humanitaire (qui est « bon ») et le politique (qui est « mauvais ») est-elle justifiée ? – D'une part, il n'est guère possible de poursuivre une activité humanitaire sans affronter des problèmes éminemment politiques. D'autre part, tout en soulignant l'importance du rôle des organisations humanitaires – apporter protection et assistance aux victimes de conflits –, l'auteur rappelle les limites de leurs activités. Il déplore que l'attention du public et des milieux politiques pour l'action humanitaire affaiblisse la volonté de s'occuper des causes du conflit. Le postulat d'une séparation rigide entre l'humanitaire et le politique doit être revu.

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