The Urgency of Nuance: Old Versus New Humanitarianism

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Defined today as a selfless act to save the suffering other, humanitarianism does not find its original definition in this context. The concept of the h*umanitaire* (humanitarian) was born in nineteenth century France, and served as a socialist critique of liberal individualism and capitalist ideologies (Andrews 2020:737) which were emerging in Europe at the present time. This original concept of the *humanitaire* was born of the desire to foster social change from within, challenging dominant political power structures from the inside out (Andrews 2020:738). Moving forward, humanitarianism has evolved, now carrying multiple definitions with varying applications. With challenges present in both old and new applications of humanitarianism as this response will define, I take the position that aid organizations must address the political scope of their actions by engaging with the political, remaining careful so not to become political actors— a balance fostered by a nuanced approach to the assessment of conflict and provision of aid.

In the present day, there are two main types of humanitarian practice, Dunantist and rights-based, both originating in the Global North. Dunantist humanitarianism is named in reference to the practices of Swiss activist Henry Dunant (Adami 2019). The ideology of this old humanitarianism is closely aligned with the mission statements of Amnesty International, United Nations humanitarian organizations such as the UNRRA and UNICEF (Chandler 2001:680), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In contrast to old humanitarianism, new humanitarianism (rights-based) offers an approach focusing on human rights, protection, and development (Adami 2019). Some rights-based organizations include Mèdecins Sans Frontières (MSF), CARE International, ActionAid and Oxfam (Fox 2001:277). By examining the afore mentioned definitions of humanitarianism, and the sociological dynamic of political engagement, the following response will offer an analysis to identify the boundaries present in both types of action. Beginning by discussing the faults of neutrality in humanitarianism, as presented by the ICRC during the second world war; proceeding to the Nigeria-Biafra war, sparking the ICRCs new found involvement with the political; ending with the involvement of Western European humanitarian organizations, as exemplified by the Rwandan refugee crisis.

HUMANITARIANISM AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Defining the two primary types of humanitarian aid will provide the groundwork to discuss the stark contrast between practices. The primary difference between the operations of old and new humanitarianism is characterized by a willingness to participate in political discourse. Old humanitarianism takes the position that aid must remain apolitical to be effective (Adami 2019). Responses preformed by old humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC are characterized by the allocation and delivery of goods and resources to sustain the survival in the wake of crisis. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the primary initiative of the ICRC was to aid wounded combatants; in later year, aid would then subsequently extend its reach to civilians (Forsythe 1996:512). Unlike old humanitarianism, new humanitarianism willingly addresses and engages in political discourse. Rights-based humanitarian NGO’s such as Oxfam publish “strategic plans” for the continuity of action and future development in countries receiving humanitarian aid. I will further examine the sociocultural implications of both types of political action, and inaction in humanitarian responses.

The choice of engaging or disengaging with political discourse is deeply interwoven with any humanitarian response, largely by virtue of the intensely political landscape of communities in the midst of crisis. Old humanitarianism is based upon the notion that conflict should be accepted by humanitarian organizations, and thus does not attempt to dissolve conflict (Adami 2019). This politically avoidant attitude is emulated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The organization identifies that it is only possible to provide care should they have the support to do so, which is a product of cooperation on part of the ICRC, local governments, and those on the ground (Forsythe 1996:514). Founder of the ICRC’s principles Jean Pictet states that, “[o]ne cannot be at the same time the champion of justice and charity. One must choose” (Leebaw 2014:1). The principal of neutrality is further explained during the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross in 1986 by highlighting that, “[t]he movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature” (Nwaka 2013:65). By virtue of the apolitical discourse present in the ICRCs guiding principles, the organization does not believe itself to be in a position to oppose conflict. Rather, the ICRC operates largely on the basis of need for immediate care.

*Apolitical Action: The ICRC and World War II*

The core principles of humanity, independence, neutrality, and impartiality are emulated by the humanitarian actions of the ICRC (Nwaka 2013:64). The apolitical actions of the ICRC were exemplified during World War II, for which the organization was heavily criticized. Farrè (2012) presents key actions of the Red Cross during the second world war by identifying the organizations decision to remain silent and impartial as a significant fault (1382). In October of 1942, based upon the premise of political neutrality, the ICRC does not make a public statement about the condition of the Nazi concentration camps, despite their knowledge of the conditions that the Jewish inmates faced (Farrè 2012:1382). Additionally, the ICRC completely disregards the provision of aid at the Eastern Front, where Jewish inmates were the victims of mass violence (Adami 2019). It is further discussed that the Red Cross makes negotiations with the German government to allow next-of-kin to send food parcels to inmates; this agreement is exclusive to German and Norwegian inmates convicted of war crimes. There is a clear hierarchy established between inmates, which the Red Cross is later criticized for (Farrè 2012: 1389). The ICRCs disregard as presented throughout the second world war in part allowed for the perpetuation of extreme human rights violations of the Jewish population. The extent to which the ICRC adhered to the principal of neutrality was truly startling; a crime shocking humankind did not cause the organization to stray from its apolitical stance (Adami 2019). The many failings of the organization during the second world war would lead to tremendous criticism of the ICRC and its credibility.

Considering the actions of the ICRC during the second world war, similarly to many scholars and humanitarian thinkers, I make the argument that the neutrality on part of the ICRC speaks to the very political consequences of refusing to engage in politics. Scholars such as Adami (2019) have made the argument that all humanitarian action is an engagement with the political; an apolitical stance is political simply by virtue of humanitarian engagement. The decisions of the ICRC during the second world war were avoidant, dismissing a humanitarian crisis occurring before the organizations eyes. Arguably, by remaining silent about the conditions that the Jewish inmates faced, the Red Cross inadvertently supported Nazi propagandists, who used the silence of the ICRC to paint a false reality of the concentration camps to the public (Farrè 2012:1383). Thus, the silence of a humanitarian organization has the potential to have as much political impact as an organization who actively makes a political stance.

*A Noteworthy Shift in Policy: The ICRC and the Nigeria-Biafra War*

Following the second world war, the ICRC makes notable alternations to their provision of aid by shifting the organizations interactions with the political. This shift is characterized by the actions of the ICRC during the Nigeria-Biafra War. As it is explained by Nwaka (2013) in the following recount, Eastern Nigeria’s succession of the Federal Republic of Nigeria lead to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra in May 1967. The cumulation of these developments lead to the beginning of the Nigeria-Biafra War in July of 1967. As conflicts rose, the Federal Military Government began an economic blockade of the flow of goods from Nigeria to Biafra. This was a tactic of starvation, employed to ensure that Biafra did not have any advantage which many lead to the succession of the Nigerian military. The ICRCs humanitarian involvement would be severely impacted by the starvation policy. The support of the starvation policy from Commanding Officer Benjamine Adekunl lead to his decision to barre the ICRC from providing aid in Biafra. Following this message from the commander, the ICRC is deported from Asaba and Onitsha and are sent back to Lagos.

At this point in the conflict, the ICRC is beginning to stray from its traditional, Dunantist approaches in the provision of aid. As Desgrandchamps (2012) further explains, the organization struggles to make agreements with both parties to establish airlifts of goods to Biafra. The Nigerian government had a stronghold on the flow of commodities into the Biafran Republic and did not want to lose this control; the Biafran Republic was adamant that they were not at the mercy of the Nigerian government (Desgrandchamps 2012:1413-14). Despite difficulty with negotiation, the ICRC begins delivering goods to Biafra; while attempting to act in accordance with humanitarian impartiality a relief operation is also set up on the opposing side (Desgrandchamps 2012:1413-14).

While delivering goods to Biafra, an aircraft belonging to the Red Cross is shot down in Nigerian territory, ultimately leading to the suspension of the initiative; the operation is then taken over by the Nigerian federal government (Desgrandchamps 2012:1414). While the ICRC was not able to see this initiative through, the response of the organization marked a significant alternation to their guiding principles. The pushback from the organization to provide aid to Biafrans against the wishes of the governments in combat was not a position that the Red Cross had ever taken. The genocide which occurred throughout the war in Biafra called the value of humanitarian neutrality into question, causing the ICRC to act outside of the purview of its historically apolitical humanitarian principles.

For the purposes of this response, the discussion of the humanitarian landscape throughout the Nigeria-Biafra War serves to illuminate the need for humanitarian organizations to reevaluate the principles from which they are governed; recalling as they appear in the previous section— humanity, independence, neutrality, and impartiality. Until their actions in the Nigeria-Biafra War, the ICRC strictly followed the principal of humanitarian neutrality; such as in the case of World War II, leading to one of the organizations most notable faults. This shift marked what would continue into the 1970s, as the organization began to transform its tactics from an immediate crisis response, to the longer term provision of aid. As suggested by Nwaka (2013), the increasingly political landscape of the twenty-first century requires the reevaluation of key humanitarian principles, such as neutrality (81). Humanitarian neutrality cannot evade the preservation of humanity and still remain humanitarian; the preservation of humanity is paramount to the provision of aid.

*Becoming the Political: New Humanitarianism and the Rwandan Refugee Crisis*

As previously discussed, rights-based humanitarianism opposes the value of neutrality which is championed in Dunantist practice. Rights-based humanitarian organizations are guided by the principal of development to sustain change. This new humanitarianism began to rise in the the post-Cold War era, after old humanitarianism found itself at the mercy of critique for what many believed to be insufficiencies in practice (Adami 2019). The afore mentioned failings of the ICRC during World War II were prevalent throughout discourse of humanitarian thinkers as they began to reconsider old humanitarian principles. In this questioning of neutrality, some scholars named humanitarianism “a bureaucratic structure that does not want to be so, but does not reflect on its own actions” (Adami 2019). As world conflicts presenting human rights violations were on the rise, pressure for humanitarian action was rising; the world began to require more than an immediate crisis response from aid organizations (Adami 2019). New humanitarianism is characterized by institutionalization and direct engagement with the political (Barnett 2005:724-5). Following the transformation of the humanitarian sector, I will continue by addressing the challenges presented by new, rights-based humanitarianism.

Humanitarian thinkers have questioned the morality of new humanitarianism, and how rights-based humanitarian action risks becoming too engaged in the political. That is, humanitarian organizations must be careful to negotiate the way that they interact with politics. Humanitarian organizations must balance between political engagement and becoming instruments of political action (Adami 2019). An example of humanitarian organizations acting as political instruments presents itself in the case of the Rwandan genocide occurring in Zaire from 1994-96 (Fox 2001:285). As the conflict is described by Fox (2001), the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda by the Hutus lead to the beginning of a refugee crisis. The crisis began with the fleeing of Rwandan Hutus to refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania. Humanitarian organizations mobilized at refugee camps in Zaire, and were widely criticized for their provision of aid. Many viewed the Hutus as *genocidiares* (Fox 2001:285) and therefore believed the refugees to be undeserving of such aid. Conflicts continued and were arguably prolonged by the actions of the Western humanitarian organizations (Fox 2001:286). As the push and pull factors of the Rwandan conflicts carried on, aid organizations were deemed morally unacceptable for providing care to the Hutus *genocidiares*.

In the wake of criticism, humanitarian organizations Mèdecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and CARE International made the decision to step away from the Rwandan conflicts, ceasing the provision of aid in 1994 (Fox 2001:286). Further, November 1996 would bring the invasion of Zaire by the Rwandan army, in which refugee camps were heavily targeted. As Fox (2001) describes, the landscape in Zaire was quickly becoming a refugee crisis, sending more than one million displaced peoples into the forests surrounding Goma. Western humanitarian organizations elected not to provide aid for displaced refugees. Instead, championing the principles of goal-oriented humanitarianism (Fox 2001:279), organizations state that the invasion was a “rapid achievement of a lasting solution to the Great Lakes Crisis” (Fox 2001:287). As noted by Fox (2001), it is the position of goal-oriented humanitarianism that the incorporation of human rights into humanitarian practice may necessitate the withholding of aid (278). Many refugees died due to both the rebel forces of the Rwandan army, as well as the lack of relief in the midst of their displacement (Adami 2019).

Following the discussion of the Rwandan refugee crisis, there are clear problems unveiled regarding the delivery of rights-based (goal-oriented) humanitarianism. In the Rwandan example, humanitarian organizations not only engage in political discourse, but part and parcel become political actors by withholding aid in effort to bring an end to conflicts in Rwanda. In this sense, humanitarian actors become actors in conflict. The new goal oriented humanitarianism, as discussed by Fox (2001), has the potential to favour political stability paramount to the saving of individual lives (288). The barriers of new humanitarianism are presented here in the Rwandan case; the reformation of old humanitarianism to new has arguably shifted the focus on the provision of aid to the preservation of rights and political stability.

*Often, humanitarian intervention acts in absolute value, appearing as completely avoidant of, or as an actor for the political.* The principles which govern the opposing humanitarian responses lead me to my final evaluation of humanitarianism; the characteristic most valuable in the humanitarian response is nuance. A nuanced approach is paramount to the delivery of meaningful humanitarian relief and development. Humanitarian organizations responsible for the provision of aid, of both old and new humanitarian principles have long struggled to strike balance in their avoidance, or engagement in the political. When the ICRC took the position that they would not intervene with the politics of Nazi concentration camps in order to maintain the organizations credibility, millions of lives were lost. The political acting on part of MSF and CARE International in the Rwandan refugee crisis left numerous Hutus refugees to die. Alternatively, the ICRC exercised a certain degree of nuance during the Nigeria-Biafra War; yet without exercising careful consideration and respect for the wishes of local governments, failed. The importance of nuance and a recognition of the politics of difference before forming an aid response is of importance without measure. The ability of humanitarian organizations to approach aid provision with nuance and engage in the political without becoming political actors is imperative to the provision of relief, both immediately and developmentally.

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