

Human rights cultures in western democracies: digging up the differences

Volker Heins¹

Concordia University
Department of Political Science
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montréal, QC, H3G 1M8

e-mail: vheins@yahoo.com

Prepared for delivery at the 2005 convention of the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA), University of Western Ontario, June 2-4, 2005

Abstract

This article discusses some aspects of the changing structure and dynamics of the global humanitarian system with particular reference to nongovernmental agencies and the inclusion of human rights into their increasingly diverse organisational philosophies. The article has two goals. Firstly, an analytical framework is proposed based on game-theoretical concepts which allows us to broadly classify different forms of nongovernmental humanitarian action and their relations with states. Secondly, crucial changes regarding constraints and orientations which have reshaped the interactions between humanitarians and states in global society are explored—changes which cannot be understood without a closer look both at the interpretive cultures of specific aid agencies in different countries and at the operational arenas in which these agencies find themselves today.

INTRODUCTION

Powerful democratic states have increasingly accepted the notion that they have ethical "responsibilities" which go beyond serving a narrowly conceived national interest.² Humanitarian responsibilities, in particular, are often advocated by citizen groups pressing their governments to show restraint in times of war or to redefine the mandate of the armed forces. The proposition that democratic states including many of their citizens acknowledge special responsibilities regarding the rights and needs of distant strangers, even if they do not always behave accordingly, counters the suspicion that democratic states love to cloak the pursuit of their interests in "humanitarian ideology".³ While humanitarian concerns are real in a world of televised disasters and new wars, both the very meaning of the term humanitarian and the boundaries between the humanitarian and the political have become uncertain and controversial. Humanitarian action means giving impartial aid to victims of violence in war settings or war-torn societies, and to victims of other disasters. However, these aid agencies have got into trouble as they wanted to stay out of politics and remain neutral even in situations where civilians and combatants can hardly be told apart, where impartiality is perceived as an insult to deeply held beliefs about the status of certain groups, where regimes are seeking humanitarian rents by deliberately inducing and exposing massive civilian suffering, or where aid is granted by democratic states as a placebo substituting for effective political action. With the recent crises in Afghanistan and Iraq all these uncertainties have reached a climax, laying bare unprecedented levels of tension between different strains of humanitarianism.⁴ We are not only facing *change* but also a tremendous *diversification* of approaches and philosophies in international humanitarianism.

This article elucidates the changing nature of the humanitarian system with particular reference to nongovernmental agencies and their relations with states. Models of humanitarian activism have changed significantly since the early days of the Red Cross Movement, and in particular since the 1960s, when a number of new humanitarian organisations with a strong emphasis not only on the needs but also on the rights of victims became prominent. Yet talk about change is meaningless unless benchmarks specified against which to measure change. Hence, in the next section, the *original constellation* between states and the first global humanitarian actor which was the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is set out. Initially the traditional relationship between states and the Red Cross through the wide-angle lens of a game-theoretical approach in policy research associated with the work of Fritz Scharpf, among others, is analysed. Focusing on the interplay of policy-relevant actors and their strategic decision-making, this approach has proved its value in explaining the course and outcome of co-ordination processes within given "actor constellations."⁵

However, this well-established methodology presupposes stable preferences and perceptions among the actors involved, and is unable to explain cases of constellations *becoming unstable* and volatile as a result of normative and cognitive change. Game theory explains why actors with given preferences and perceptions act as they do in certain circumstances but it does not tell us why values and ways of knowing change to the effect that *new* settings emerge. Thus, for a fuller understanding of what is going on in the humanitarian world, we have to expand our attention beyond analysing robust alliances founded upon longstanding common interests towards more complex, symbolically based issues and multiple, often contradictory solidarities. In the second part of this article, a step is made in this direction

by summarising findings of a research project on the changing worldviews of a number of second wave humanitarian relief agencies in France, Germany and the United States that are critical of the Red Cross tradition.

Two dimensions are of particular interest here: first, the relative degree of independence from the government enjoyed by voluntary aid agencies, and second, the scope of normative goals pursued by these agencies. With regard to the first point, the notion that the humanitarian agenda has been altogether taken over by Western governments is rejected.⁶ Regarding the second point, an important distinction between international society and world society is relevant. Whereas international society is composed of states which form multilateral institutions and which follow a common set of rules in their mutual relations, the basic units of world society—or "world order", as Hedley Bull called it—are not states but individuals. Bull described world order vaguely as something "wider" and "more fundamental and primordial" than international society, and as "something morally prior to it."⁷ The institutions of international society may have an intrinsic value insofar as they protect and support the lives of citizens in states. Bull however made it very clear that ultimately the institutions of international society should be "instrumental to the goal of order in human society as a whole."⁸ Bull's formula suggests that the normative concept of world society is different from but not incompatible with the existence of national states. World society is the by-product of a commonwealth of liberal democracies. In this sense, the world society norm challenges the statist foundation of international society as envisioned in Article 2.1 of the Charter of the United Nations which assumes the principle of "sovereign equality" between democracies and dictatorships, republics and tyrannies.

Some humanitarian agencies do not take on their own and foreign governments in the name of strong notions of human solidarity, whereas others act as moral entrepreneurs by trying to win over the public and policymakers to the cause of saving strangers.⁹ A useful indicator for the adoption of a world society norm by humanitarians is the willingness to call for or to support the use of coercive measures against extremely repressive regimes. Humanitarian inspired calls for interventions, which may range from election monitoring to the use of military force, also reveal the twofold meaning of independence in the context of humanitarian action: besides being operationally independent from democratic *home* governments or not, humanitarian agencies also may or may not be morally independent from governments and authorities in *host* regions.

Second-wave humanitarian agencies like Médecins sans frontières (MSF) and others have explicitly adopted a world society norm which is much less respectful of both home and host governments than Red Cross agencies could ever afford to be. However, this stateless humanitarianism without borders perpetuates the ambiguities of the old Red Cross ethic it intended to leave behind. The new humanitarianism foreshadows a future world society of equal concern for every individual while being unable to contribute to its emergence in an effective and lasting way. In order to be more effective in this regard they sometimes have to work more closely with responsible democratic states—an option usually ruled out in favour of political agnosticism and neutrality. While it is generally true that European aid agencies are more inclined than Americans to accept the Westphalian structure of a state-centred international society, the divide between German and French aid cultures is as deep as the much-discussed transatlantic divide. Differences or alliances between states do not simply rub off on the policies of humanitarian NGOs in these states.

SENSELESS SUFFERING, HUMANITARIANISM, AND INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Within international society, humanitarian action is set in a four-pronged institutional context made of *aid agencies* providing assistance and protection for mostly distant *victims* of organised violence and disasters. These victims are usually not fellow-citizens, which implies that foreign *states* have a role in granting access to victims as well as in funding humanitarian efforts. Victims have lost their inherent and uncontroversial innocence as their media image can be manipulated. Refugees who are simultaneously warriors are a case in point.¹⁰ Thus, along with humanitarians, victims and sovereign states, an important fourth element is the *public* which is targeted by different groups and which has to make sense of a chaotic and violent world now broadcast into everybody's home. These ways of giving meaning, in turn, strongly influence the environment and the chances of success of humanitarian action as well as of human rights campaigns.

International humanitarian activism started with the ICRC which linked up with victims, states and the public in a way that sometimes had a very real impact on the fate of prisoners of war, disaster victims and other categories of unfortunate people. Furthermore, given its critical role in drafting the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC has actively contributed to the emergence of modern international society itself by helping to persuade states to endorse a number of common rules regarding the practice of warfare. At times, the moralists who later founded the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement articulated a vision of order in human society as a whole, which clearly went beyond concerns about the order of interstate relations. Yet from its early beginnings the Red Cross was constrained by the structure and the accepted image of a political world composed of individual nation-states. In order to understand the recent proliferation of second-wave humanitarian organisations and their impact on international society, it is necessary to uncover the structure of the game played by states and the ICRC since the late 19th century.

The ways of the humanitarian diplomacy between states and the ICRC can be characterised in rational-choice terms as a mixed-motive game, in which the orientations and values of actors are partly harmonious and partly in conflict. In fact, the relationship can be redescribed as akin to an standard game nicknamed "Battle of the Sexes" by rational-choice theorists.¹¹ The name derives from a couple who wants to spend the evening together. However, he wants to attend a wrestling match, while she wants to go to the movies. Nevertheless, each would rather accept the less favoured entertainment than spend the evening alone. Translated into real-world settings this means that the ICRC has a preference for non-war over war, but would still prefer coordination with the war-making states over noncoordination and staying aloof. Nor do states want to go it alone since the absence of the Red Cross from battlefields or military detention camps—and non-compliance with the Geneva Conventions—can result in incalculable loss of reputation.

This is of course an oversimplification which deliberately ignores some features of Red Cross policies, in particular, its cooperation with other nonstate organizations. Yet the stylised account serves an heuristic purpose by making it easier to understand why Red Cross intellectuals insist on "preserving the good will and support of governments" without becoming auxiliaries to them. As in asymmetrical gender arrangements, the game between national states and the Red Cross has always been strikingly lopsided. This is because the rules of

international society are such that states can make the first move and select the preferred course of action, which sometimes is war. Without war, there would be no humanitarian law nor a humanitarian space to protect. The ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies would not exist in its current form without states. In the light of the choice of war made by states the Red Cross has no satisfactory option apart from coordinating its own behaviour on that same choice. Policy analysts dryly call this "a noncooperative but sequential game."¹² The ICRC must constantly reconcile the utopian ideal of world order with the realities of sovereignty-based international society. For most of the time, this has been achieved by stressing the ethical value of silently serving the victims and by relegating the ideals—at best—to the status of an "unspoken mission".¹³

Keeping the "Battle of the Sexes" analogy in mind, it is interesting to note that Red Cross delegates themselves have occasionally described their relationship with foreign states as something close to a "marriage"—a kind of arranged marriage, however, that lacks emotional attachment and is punctuated by periods of "icy formality".¹⁴ The highly gendered nature of many of the visual representations which have supported the message of Red Cross societies over the last century also fit into the use of this analogy.¹⁵ In playing a noncooperative game, in which states always have the sovereign right of the first move with the Red Cross left with the only option to join in and to take care of the victims of that first move, humanitarianism had to model itself on the role of the eternal Nanny and Nurse in the game of states.

Now, this longstanding constellation has been *challenged* by a number of developments. To be sure, the suggested metaphor of a two-player game is probably even more valid today than some decades ago, given the growing tendency of governments to channel funds through nongovernmental organisations instead of international institutions (the so-called bilateralisation of aid). But it is also true that we now observe much more fluid constellations of humanitarian agencies, states, victims and publics which sometimes transcend the asymmetrical and sequential games played until recently. Using the analogy of the Battle of the Sexes again, we notice several changes:

Agencies that used to 'accompany' their governments to wars are now lobbying them to change their outlook. States also try to actively shape humanitarians' preferences. As a result, some of them have begun to appreciate at least certain kinds of armed intervention. On a few occasions, humanitarian organizations even took the lead and tried to convince governments that a humanitarian intervention might be worth considering. Finally, we do not have any longer marriage-like situations with just two players (states and the International Red Cross). Rather, there are now multiple actors including an expanding pool of commercial aid agencies, which can simply be hired by governments.

What accounts for these changes which have given rise to a new generation of voluntary humanitarian agencies? One reason is that today modern states differ so widely from each other in terms of external and internal autonomy that they can no longer be treated as empirical variations of just one dominant type of Westphalian statehood.¹⁶

A second source of change results from the withering away of public philosophies which for a long time have either justified or obscured the suffering of distant strangers. Traditionally, ways of picturing those who suffer have been shaped by powerful systems of meaning which sociologists, following Max Weber, call "secular theodicies".¹⁷ Originally, the term "theodicy" referred to systematic attempts to explain the apparently senseless suffering of ordinary people as having some kind of hidden meaning within the God-given order of things.

Human beings have an extraordinary ability to reconcile the reality of extremes of suffering with their moral orientations and their belief in a rationally ordered world. Modern societies are converting traditional into secular theodicies—or "sociodicies"—by offering narratives which help us to comprehend and to cope with the global scale of misery, injustice and inequality without giving up on the belief in an achievable common good.¹⁸ With a proper secular theodicy in place, certain kinds of suffering are still deplored but may at the same time be 'good to think', because they seem relevant in light of an intelligible cause or purpose. The notions of legitimate victimhood thereby created strongly influence the public environment of international humanitarian action.

Without more or less elaborate secular theodicies we would be unable to stay the course of a morally meaningful life. Yet these systems of meaning have a deeply ambivalent effect on the modern consciousness. They tend to foster our belief that the discrepancy between normative ideals and the violent reality of the empirical world can be bridged by efforts to reform our social and political existence. On the other hand it is obvious that powerful secular theodicies that explain the misery of our fellow-humans have severely restricted the flourishing of human rights activism in the 20th century by blunting our sensitivity towards that misery.

Malthusianism, Marxism and modernisation theory are major secular theodicies. As is well known, the British economist Thomas Malthus interpreted famines as necessary checks on excessive population growth which in turn was explained by the reckless reproductive behaviour of a morally infirm working class. Marxism is more ambivalent as it was certainly fuelled by moral outrage against massive oppression and the violation of social rights. However, in what can be seen as a classical exercise in secular theodicy, Marx famously vindicated the ways of global society to some of its members by explaining the "misery inflicted by the British on Hindustan" in terms of universal progress towards the radiant future of modernity which has made England "the unconscious tool of history." And in case someone should still feel bad about this explanation, he added that vis-à-vis History "our personal feelings" just do not count.¹⁹

The liberal alternative to both Marxism and Malthusianism is modernisation theory. The historian David Engerman has shown how before the Second World War many Western observers studying the early Soviet Union clearly valued the fruits of rapid industrialisation above its human costs. As a saying went at that time, the USSR was "starving itself great". American economists, but also commentators in the newly-independent former European colonies, claimed that in spite of its huge human costs Soviet-style industrialisation was worth the suffering including the catastrophic famine of 1932-33 in the Ukraine and elsewhere which left perhaps as many as eight million dead.²⁰

Malthusianism can be seen as a disciplinary narrative that establishes a moral causality between pain and punishment (the sufferers have themselves contributed to their suffering which they therefore deserve). Marxists and liberal modernises, on the other hand, construct a linkage between current pain and future gain: people have to pay a price if they want eventually to be free. Pain and suffering are seen as a hidden blessing, a step on the ladder toward the heaven of modernity to be taken by every social class or nation.

Today legitimate ideological systems able to lend meaning to massive social suffering, thus protecting us from despair, are on the wane. Marxism as a political ideology is dead, modernisation theory as it is operationalised by the World Bank and other development

institutions has been softened, and neo-Malthusianism is only a much-sanitised version of its misanthropic forerunner.²¹

Both the changing nature of statehood and the demise of secular theodicies in modern societies have contributed to a new situation in international society. First-wave humanitarianism emerged when powerful secular theodicies were still on the rise; hence the quixotic aspects of many Red Cross interventions in the 20th century. As table 1 illustrates, other aspects shaping the institutional context of humanitarian action have also undergone dramatic changes since the days of Henri Dunant and his contemporaries (see *table 1*).

TABLE 1. Changing contexts of 20th century humanitarianism: an overview

	Old Europe (until 1914)	Totalitarianism	after the Cold War
relief agencies	membership associations; the Red Cross Principles; "neutralité perpétuelle"	membership associations; collaborators v the "righteous among the nations"	professional, staff-driven associations; advocacy oriented; media-savvy
political power	competing nation-states	allied democracies v totalitarian states	a fragmented West v weak and failed states
victims	war casualties and POWs	persecuted minorities; people deemed subhuman	neglected majorities; noisy v silent emergencies
the public	middle-class philanthropics	disinformed bystanders	well-informed v manipulated; compassion-fatigued

AVOIDING THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES: FRENCH AND GERMAN EXPERIENCES

The game-theoretical toolkit which is used in this article to map out the distinctions between variants of humanitarianism and their interactions with states works only if the reality constructions and normative expectations of those involved in these interactions are stable. In addition, actors must be able to focus their interest strictly on a limited set of themes like the fate of civilians and prisoners in wartime without digressing into other, more abstract and ill-defined areas like human rights. Thus, the Red Cross Movement gave up on ideas of general moral reform held early on by Henri Dunant and his colleagues who once wanted to fight general social ills like "ignorance, selfishness, mercenary motives, indifference to the common good, idleness and debauchery, isolation and abandonment."²² Furthermore, actors must form coalitions in order to keep the number of interacting players as low as possible. Both the "decoupling" of issues and the "aggregation"²³ of actors are given with the norms enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and the mandate of the ICRC as the exclusive guardian of these norms. More recently, second-wave humanitarians have coupled the provision of aid to

civilians in emergencies with broader human rights or religious agendas. At the same time, aid agencies have mushroomed to an extent that it is no longer evident whether there is only one game played between states and humanitarians, and how to call it.

Sans-frontiérisme

The rethinking of humanitarian action and the role of human rights in it started from a reflection on the structural weaknesses of the ICRC which became most visible under the extreme circumstances of National Socialism when a European society of states bound by common rules and values ceased to exist. The ICRC has been accused of unduly separating material aid from wider demands for the moral equality of individuals and necessary regime change. The Swiss philanthropists responded to the Holocaust by devising a "Concentration Camp Parcels Scheme".²⁴ They showed such an exaggerated respect for their own Principles that it ultimately failed to honour them in light of new, unforeseen circumstances.²⁵ The founders of Médecins sans frontières must be credited with having invented a new concept of professional activism called *sans-frontiérisme* which is driven by an ethic explicitly directed against the historical failure of the ICRC during the Nazi rule in Europe. Thus Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of MSF, has named the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg as his principal hero, the man who put his life on the line to save over 100.000 Jews during the Second World War.²⁶

MSF defends a notion of independence as the *separation* of humanitarianism from the state seen in a French tradition as being led exclusively by a morally indifferent *raison d'état*. The Battle of Sexes may continue but it now looks more like a battle among divorcees. MSF-France not only values its own independence from the state, but also the independence of the French state and its armed forces from humanitarian considerations. After the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the programme director for Africa, Jean-Hervé Bradol, stated explicitly that "We asked for a military operation to stop the killers, not for a military-humanitarian one."²⁷ The defiance of borders by MSF and like-minded voluntary organisations refers first of all to international borders which are not respected in principle and sometimes actively ignored, especially when political authorities try to stop aid workers from helping people in danger. A corollary to *sans-frontiérisme* is the "right to intervene," a formula which from the late 1980s on inspired a number of UN resolutions.²⁸ The original term was coined in 1979 by the liberal writer and philosopher Jean-François Revel, who at that time urged the Europeans to end the rule of despots like Bokassa in Central Africa or Idi Amin in Uganda.

Interventionist rhetoric has another aspect. It is easily overlooked that the 'French doctors' not only advocate human rights for others. They also refer to *themselves* as citizens who confidently make use of these rights, in particular the "freedom to cross borders without a visa."²⁹ These rights—not only of victims, but also of aid agencies—are defined in contrast to state sovereignty and the current rules of international society. According to Jean-Christoph Rufin, former vice-president of MSF, moving beyond borders also means to "transgress the law"³⁰ in the name of higher standards of legitimacy. This is more than empty talk. In 2001, for example, MSF-Belgium illegally imported life-saving antiretroviral medicines to fight Aids in South Africa, a practice frowned upon, but ultimately tolerated by the South African government.

Yet, all this does not seem to amount to a policy discourse about goals, obstacles and strategies of humanitarian action that differs radically and on all counts from that of Red Cross institutions. Like their famous Swiss forerunner, the new organisations want to alleviate and possibly prevent the suffering of civilian populations. And like the ICRC, they strongly criticise the misuse not only of humanitarian aid but also of the very terminology of humanitarianism, which according to Cornelio Sommaruga, former president of ICRC, has degenerated into "*un alibi facile*"³¹ for power politics. Stronger epistemological and ethical differences emerge only in the field of crucial *secondary* objectives. Thus, in order to achieve the primary goal to avoid extremes of human suffering, the French believe that it is necessary to change the structure of humanitarian activism itself, and more specifically, the structure of the game between states and relief agencies, in which humanitarians have so far played the part of an always-too-late "after-sales service of politics."³² Only in the light of this major secondary objective, new obstacles and adversaries become visible. The French and Dutch sections of MSF as well as Médecins du Monde (MDM) are particularly outspoken about who are the 'bad guys' to be blamed for the continuing suffering of vast populations. As far as the intended beneficiaries of relief are concerned, public and internal documents speak of "the victims"³³ of armed conflicts, "populations facing massive suffering, pain and death"³⁴, "defenseless populations"³⁵ or just "the people."³⁶ On the opposite side, those who stand accused are "dictatorships"³⁷, "oppressive, abusive and tyrannical/militarist regimes"³⁸ or simply "the butchers."³⁹

In the second line we meet the twin demons of "inaction of the international community"⁴⁰ matched by the flawed action of "state humanitarianism."⁴¹ The place of the United Nations is somewhere between these extremes of doing nothing and doing wrong. As an organisation of states, the United Nations is clearly seen with suspicion. This mistrust was reinforced by a number of incidents during peacekeeping operations in which competing visions of humanitarianism openly clashed.⁴² The same is true for NATO operations. In the wake of the Kosovo intervention, MSF-Belgium publicly criticised the Kosovo Force (KFOR) for being unable or unwilling effectively to protect Serb and other minorities against indiscriminate revenge killings, and even suspended its operations in some areas.⁴³

One of the most surprising and outstanding elements of strategy applied to overcome these various adversaries and obstacles is the consistent refusal to talk of humanitarian crises in the first place. The term is criticised for turning political responsibilities and sometimes crimes into problems of the logistics of relief operations.⁴⁴ Unlike politicians, the moral public is courted as a potential ally. Since states are treated with suspicion, and since the victims of man-made emergencies cannot by themselves protect those who provide assistance, the organisation is seeking "the protection of public opinion."⁴⁵ Public indifference as an obstacle to humanitarian action is attributed to failures of the mass media or to flawed information policies, not to the silent workings of a secular theodicy. In the view of the new organisations, we have moved from secular theodicies able to justify massive suffering to the next problem of how to justify the *alleviation* of suffering through intervention from outside, when these interventions happen in some places but not in others. Sceptics have argued that the secular West somehow bears a resemblance to the choosy God of Calvinism whose irresistible grace rescues some sinners while others are doomed to fall into eternal oblivion.⁴⁶

Most importantly, MSF-France, in particular, not only tries to stay independent from its own government, but is also critical of many *foreign* governments if they fail, for example, to implement adequate HIV/AIDS policies. MSF's bid for independence from target states is best

epitomised by its increasing capability to operate in failed states where political authority is exercised by nonstate actors including armed gangs. Whereas the ICRC focused on signatory states of the Geneva Conventions, the new humanitarians try to negotiate access to populations in need with groups who may not even be aware of these conventions and who certainly do not run anything close to a rational state.⁴⁷

The Anti-Missionary Impulse

In Germany, given the weakness of traditional notions of a *raison d'état* insulated from popular and world opinion, human rights and humanitarian activists used to have less reason than their French colleagues to vocally insist on their autonomy from the state. In spite of this, humanitarian NGOs in Germany are quite independent as far as their financial basis and their policy agendas are concerned. A good example are the big church-related humanitarian agencies which occupy a prominent place in this otherwise highly secularised society. Both the International Department of Caritas-Germany, and the human rights office of the Diaconal Agency of the Evangelical Church in Germany can be seen as symptomatic of a process of 'self-secularisation' of church agencies and pastoral identities.⁴⁸

Both organisations value their independence from the home government as well as from local non-church authorities in host regions. This independence allowed Caritas and other Catholic agencies to operate in Iraq after the fall of the Baathist regime when the German government did not support reconstruction or humanitarian efforts. Caritas also tried to open a chink in the Western sanctions regime against Milosovic by supplying heating oil to Serbian towns in 1999. In addition, the Catholic agency strongly opposed the 'oil for democracy' plan agreed on by EU foreign ministers in October 1999 to exempt only those Serbian communities from the embargo which were under opposition control. Caritas accused the European Union of playing politics with aid.

Since recently the agency's mission statement also includes a general commitment to protect human rights. This is a largely rhetorical formula, however. In interviews with Caritas staff, the task of protecting human rights turned out to be synonymous with assisting "the weak" not by opposing "the strong", but by appealing to them or winning them over. Exchanges between Western and non-Western church workers are couched in terms of family relations between younger and older siblings. States, especially those in host regions, are largely absent from this picture, and senior officials have expressed something close to contempt for the meddlesome politicians, bureaucrats or armed forces in poor countries. Caritas does not define itself *in relation to* governments as a 'nongovernmental' organisation. In fact, the NGO label is considered almost a blasphemy by an organisation that conceives of itself as the relief and development branch of an ecclesiastical entity much older and much more dignified than any state on earth. From this point of view, it is meaningless to divide the world into democracies and dictatorships, rights-respecting and rights-violating regimes, as is any earthly discourse of polarisation. Accordingly, humanitarian aid and human rights are strictly kept apart. There is hardly any cooperation with and often not even much sympathy for human rights groups.

Unlike its Catholic counterpart the Diaconal Agency has explicitly included an human rights aspect into its humanitarian programme. As early as 1977 a specialised office for victims

of political persecution and refugees was established. This initiative was a response to the dismal situation in countries such as Chile, Paraguay and South Africa, where widespread violations of human rights were often witnessed in the immediate context of development projects. From the start, the human rights office in Germany developed close links with Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Switzerland. Similar to these organisations, the focus has always been on *individual* cases of victims who are in many ways assisted, lobbied for, visited or in a few cases even physically protected by companions. In Red Cross terms, the Protestants are as 'impartial' as the Catholics, but less 'neutral' and more politically outspoken. War, for example, is for them not only an absolute evil, but an evil that can be traced to evildoers who are publicly lambasted.

The establishment of the human rights office was also a strategic response to the restrictions posed by the tight ecumenical network in which the churches are embedded. For example, the Protestant churches and their agencies are partners of the Russian Orthodox Church which cannot be openly faulted for not engaging the Russian government over its war in Chechnya. "The Evangelical Church is big," as the director of the human rights office explained to me, "and it has to act with caution like a state."⁴⁹ Human rights concerns were delegated to a separate office within the Diaconal Agency to expand the room of manoeuvre for both German activists and their counterparts in host countries. This was an innovative move which has since allowed for many quiet activities in the shadow of the official church, such as passing on information about human rights abuses, collected in refugee camps in Ingushetia, to international agencies or to Russian groups like Memorial.

Officials at the human rights office recognise that there are obvious limits to this approach that cannot be overcome just by more money, better organisation or enthusiasm. The sheer scale of many human rights crimes leaves many activists clueless. The Rwanda genocide, in particular, was perceived as a signature event that also led to the first timid steps to reconsider possible roles for the military in ending human rights emergencies. Unsurprisingly, this is still a highly controversial issue until today. Key policy statements are premised on the symbolic divide between "repressive" and "democratic" governments, and are calling for a strategy of denouncing and "upsetting" the often smooth relationships between these contrasting political ways of life.⁵⁰ Yet the "upsetting" is expected to be achieved in peaceful ways, not by resorting to military intervention or other forms of coercive diplomacy. Outside observers like a former German field commander during the Kosovo intervention confirmed that the Diaconal Agency was unwilling to cooperate with the military, even if such a cooperation would have saved time and resources for both sides.⁵¹

While Catholics and Protestants differ with regard to human rights advocacy and the moral relevance of drawing a line between democracies and tyrannies, there is a broad convergence of views about the general illegitimacy of external intervention by military or other coercive means into distant crises. In spite of their high-minded moral posturing, German aid professionals cling to a vision of a world composed of sovereign states monitored by unelected international expert bodies. At a closer look, anti-interventionism and anti-missionary rhetoric in Germany are often a thin veneer covering some deeper, more ambiguous beliefs. An inside advisor to German aid agencies, for example, compared the current African wars to the Thirty Years' War in mainland Europe in the 17th century, ignoring the fact that the early European wars led to the formation of states whereas modern African civil wars have preyed on existing state structures and destroyed them, leaving only the empty shells of juridical

statehood in place. Further research may answer the question as to what extent humanitarian agencies are still influenced by a seemingly tolerant and culturally sensitive attitude toward distant peoples, the flip side of which is a belief in cultural incommensurability.⁵² Cultural incommensurability means that we do not want to impose our culture upon others, but we are equally reluctant to grant them rights or to make sure that their rights are being effectively protected.

THE ASSURANCE GAME AND BEYOND: AMERICAN AID CULTURES

In the Second World War, the anthropologist Margaret Mead declared that "to recognize the *rights* of other peoples" is at the very core of the "American belief."⁵³ As long as people feel that this belief is held by everybody including the government, it is morally pointless to be against or autonomous from that government. In fact, private aid agencies in the United States rarely saw a reason to defend or cherish their 'independence' in the way Europeans did. U.S. humanitarianism did not start as an independent movement trying to constrain state action. Rather, after the Second World War agencies like CARE and others believed that the interests of the government and of humanitarians were best served when both sides agreed on a concerted strategy. American humanitarians avoided the "Battle of the Sexes" situation by consciously subscribing to the political ideals of the American Century. If governments and nongovernmental organisations define their relationship in terms of a division of labour to the benefit of a shared goal, we have a structure resembling an "assurance game."⁵⁴ This game, first analysed by the philosopher Rousseau, derives its name from a situation in which a mixed group of people sets out to hunt a stag. Given the size of the potential prey, hunting stags is most beneficial for the whole group but requires a lot of trust and cooperation among its members. If individuals get distracted by the sudden chance to shoot a rabbit, for example, they may obtain a small prey, but at the expense of the rest of the group whose members are now unlikely to catch anything.

Stag Hunts

From early on, major aid groups shared with the U.S. government the goal of hunting down the twin 'stags' of fascism and communism. CARE started as an agency closely associated with the strategic interests of the United States which in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War were often inextricably linked to humanitarian efforts. This link is best epitomised by the Berlin airlift in 1948-49, in which CARE and its proverbial 'packages' played a substantial role. In the beginning, CARE's organisational formula combined three different things: first, a strong needs-oriented moral universalism, second, the sheer industrial power to move tons of standardised relief goods—mostly surplus foods held by the U.S. Department of Agriculture—to any place on earth, and, third, the sure feeling to be showered with gratitude.⁵⁵ CARE used to be the most American, the most Wilsonian and the most Fordist player among the big private humanitarian agencies. It has also been a natural ally of the U.S. military until the late 1960s and beyond.

Something similar is true for Catholic Relief Services (CRS). During the early stages of the Vietnam War, when CRS was by far the most resourceful American aid provider in South Vietnam, the agency earned the reputation of being "the most hawkish of the voluntary agencies."⁵⁶ At the same time, the agency shared with old-world humanitarianism a decidedly legalistic and state-centric approach. Thus, CRS refused to defy existing laws—like the Trading with the Enemy Act—that hindered relief supplies to North Vietnam, or worse, used these laws as an alibi for not helping 'undeserving' civilians in need. There was no vision of a humanitarian universalism liberated from the constraints of international society.

The evangelical federation World Vision added a missionary note to this overall picture. Many of its organisational characteristics can be traced to the origins of World Vision in the late 1940s. The staunchly anti-communist organisation was founded by Bob Pierce, an American newspaper correspondent and fundamentalist Protestant evangelist. Pierce worked for Youth For Christ (YFC), a movement that sponsored what it called "World Vision Rallies" in big American cities. These rallies helped to raise money and stir enthusiasm for global missionary activities. Pierce himself was a gifted preacher who even went to China and later to South Korea where he started child-sponsorship programmes, which today are the source of about half the income of the agency.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the alliance between the U.S. government and voluntary aid agencies—forged to hunt the 'stags' of totalitarianism—began to loosen. As Scott Flipse has pointed out, CRS changed their policy around 1967, when the Catholic agency proved to be responsive to the rising anger and frustration about the war in Vietnam within its constituency and the wider American public. The debate triggered by young liberal academics around and within CRS led to the end of an unequal partnership between the U.S. government and the Catholic charity in which the latter increasingly felt it was being misused as an instrument of military pacification experts.⁵⁷ From this we learn that the preference rankings and shared definitions of reality on which the humanitarian game played by states and aid agencies is based are subject to cultural changes which reverberate across society, influencing even the self-description of faith-based agencies.

CARE also has become much more independent and professional, although the organisation remains highly resource dependent on government agencies, in some countries like Germany or the Netherlands even more so than in America. Unlike other agencies, CARE also does not focus much on 'silent' emergencies in neglected areas but tends to follow the attention given to certain areas by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Yet, on the other hand, CARE-USA is certainly independent in the sense that it can stick to the problems of one region even when this region has largely dropped from the Administration's view. It has also demonstrated that it can lobby both national and international policymakers effectively in order to stop certain emergencies from falling 'silent'. Unlike digging wells or rehabilitating schools, consistent advocacy is almost by definition based on the moral independence of those who try to push for policy changes. Thus, to the extent that CARE strengthened its human rights-oriented advocacy activities it also grew more independent from shifting U.S. foreign policy interests.

Like others, World Vision had turned a blind eye to the humanitarian consequences of the American war in South-East Asia in the 1960s and later. But the relationship between the agency and the U.S. government also changed in those disturbed years. With hindsight, internal observers see the assistance given to Cambodia after the Vietnamese army had toppled the

Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 as a watershed event which marked a clear split from mainstream U.S. foreign policy makers, for whom communist countries were unworthy of any kind of support.⁵⁸

In terms of the 'stag hunt' metaphor, these were cases of unilateral defection on the part of aid agencies from the joint project of stalking a deer in favour of taking smaller prey. Aid workers began to think of themselves as having had "insensibly acquired some gross ideas of mutual undertakings"⁵⁹ with the government which in retrospect and under the influence of normative changes and new perceptions did not seem worth the effort. These changes also affected the relationship between humanitarians and soldiers in American political culture which European observers tend to paint in much too rosy colours. Today's leadership of CARE-USA, for example, is dominated by the generation of baby-boomers who experienced Vietnam as America's 'second civil war' and whose image of the U.S. military was mainly shaped by gory Hollywood movies. From the perspective of a former colonel of the Marines who later joined CARE, many European agencies are now *less* anti-military than their American counterparts. This includes CARE-Germany.⁶⁰

A Return to Pure Humanitarianism?

For CRS, a testcase for the new policy was the devastating famine in Ethiopia in 1984 during which the aid group lobbied, energetically and with much success, a conservative U.S. government reluctant to help a Soviet satellite. By that time, CRS no longer tailored charitable objectives with foreign policy goals like it did in Vietnam. Rather, the organisation now insisted on the opposite course of radically *separating* aid and politics. Unfortunately, this also did not work out well.

As a matter of fact, the communist government in Addis Abeba used famine assistance as an incentive to speed up a forced resettlement programme imposed on peasants who were deliberately starved. Hunger was used as a weapon and foreign food assistance as an incentive for peasants to leave their land. After having escaped the embrace of the U.S. government, CRS was now blamed for being inadvertently instrumental in the wicked designs of a tyrannical *host* government. Faced again with the charge of complicity, CRS officials engaged in angry anti-politics by claiming that "a political agenda is incompatible with the humanitarian principle, which aims at providing assistance to all those in need regardless of race, creed, or politics."⁶¹ They did not realise the paradox that in Ethiopia this very claim, as soon as it was put into practice, produced completely counter-intentional results: humanitarianism driven solely by apolitical good intentions is perfectly compatible with the most ruthless power politics as long as humanitarians do not study and evaluate the political context into which they intervene and which shapes the outcomes of their intervention. CRS preferred the 'small prey' of giving emergency relief to many individual peasants without addressing the moral hazard created whenever efforts to insure against senseless suffering inadvertently encourage political behaviour contributing to this very suffering.

Overall, World Vision and CARE have been more consciously focused on maintaining a certain distance from the U.S. government without being mucked around by oppressive foreign governments, thereby keeping in line with the 'American belief' in the rights of others. Both try to strike a balance between the ambition to separate humanitarian concerns from

broader U.S. foreign policy goals and the reluctance to return to a pure humanitarianism which ignores the often political causes of senseless suffering.

In fact, World Vision can be said to be the relief organisation farthest away from Red Cross-style European humanitarianism. No other agency has gone as far as World Vision in combining the redistribution of material goods with an ideology of holistic recognition of individuals, especially children. The agency's mission points far beyond the mundane tasks of assisting people in need by handing out blankets or biscuits. The goal is to transform the sufferer instead of merely alleviating her suffering. Whereas the Red Cross Movement always insisted on the importance of decoupling humanitarian from political and other issues, World Vision has turned the much-denounced *confusion des genres* between aid and politics, religious sentiment and media orientation into a systematic policy approach.⁶²

In recent decades, the agency has been undergoing a process of routinisation of charisma, ideological liberalisation, and remarkable economic success. As far as the American office is concerned, we are dealing today with the wealthiest among the big players in international U.S. humanitarianism. This leads to a strong presence in many of the poorest countries. In some host regions in Sudan or Ethiopia, for example, World Vision is now sometimes the second or third largest employer, immediately after the army or rebel groups. Yet interviews suggest that at least the staff at the U.S. office in Washington bear hardly any resemblance to the popular prejudice of World Vision as an association of rich evangelicals dangling carrots before hungry people to convert them to their version of right-wing Christianity. Evangelising non-Christians or Catholics might play a more prominent role in other national offices, and on some occasions Christian neophytes in Africa or elsewhere have blamed the U.S. veterans for their *lack* of proselytising enthusiasm. This may be seen as an ironic side-effect of the otherwise appreciated "decolonization"⁶³ of humanitarian activism, which was in many ways spearheaded by faith-based NGOs.

In the early 1990s World Vision started to build up an advocacy team centred on a (religiously reinterpreted) human rights agenda with a strong focus on children's rights. With growing concern for human rights and the consolidation of a network of policy experts, the agency also began to advocate humanitarian interventions, starting from the controversial peace enforcement mission in Somalia 1992 and after, which was later defended against those who gave the impression "that we squandered our blood and treasure with no good results."⁶⁴ Of course, calling for armed intervention or peace enforcement is only an option of last resort. Only when vast populations are deliberately put into harm's way, does the agency start to consider calling for coercive diplomacy or outside military intervention.

CARE has been the aid group that took the lead in reframing conventional relief and development goals in human rights terms. Individual executive-level staff members now openly argue for a "politicized humanitarianism", partly by drawing on the early philosophy of MSF which is played off against more recent attempts of this organisation to snatch the clothes of the Red Cross and look more "neutral" again.⁶⁵ To some extent this intriguing reversal of roles between a French and an American agency has been triggered by recent developments in Afghanistan.

After the fall of the Taliban regime, CARE combined emergency relief and development assistance with lobbying for the 'security rights' of the Afghan people. The organisation joined the warnings from international organisations as well as from the U.S. military that the victory over the Taliban was far less decisive than the government had

portrayed it. Given the spectre of a sneaking return of the Islamist extremists in some provinces of Afghanistan, and the grim reality of a number of ruthless killings of aid personnel, election registration workers and others, the agency decided not to stay "neutral" between the formally sovereign Karzai government and its armed opponents. Instead, CARE aimed to highlight what ordinary Afghans actually deserved in terms of human security, and to get policy makers from Washington to Brussels to live up to their earlier commitment not to leave this country high and dry again. The expansion of the ISAF mandate beyond Kabul by the UN Security Council in October 2003 is widely credited to the dogged persistence of NGO advocacy on this issue. CARE alone has contributed to more than 30 TV and radio stories and 150 print stories in media calling for greater international support for security in Afghanistan. More than 30 senior staff dedicated significant time to this issue since 2002. The U.S. advocacy director spent at least 75 percent of his time on Afghanistan in 2002.⁶⁶

Not only ordinary Afghans but aid agencies as well would have profited from an improved security situation in a country from which MSF withdrew after five of its staff, driving in a clearly marked vehicle, were shot dead in June 2004. As in other cases, MSF reacted by blaming the authorities for not providing enough security while at the time bashing other aid agencies that had openly advocated a tougher mandate for the international armed force. The example illustrates that MSF never solved the dilemma of how to stay politically neutral while at the same time appealing to and depending on sovereign decision-making. It always wanted it both ways: taking sides and staying neutral, being political and shrouded in an air of eternal virginity like a modern-day Jeanne d'Arc. Only in most recent times, did MSF take the dilemma by its horns and return to a discourse of pre-political humanitarianism. In Afghanistan, MSF used its favourite policy tool of 'speaking out' publicly only to denounce those (like CARE), who spoke out in favour of strengthening security rights. Today, the agency dissociates itself from international reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere—a dissociation which is premised on the ingenious belief that it can control the way it is perceived by local insurgents ready to target aid workers in a very literal sense.

CHANGING CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS: SELECTIVE PRESSURES ON AID AGENCIES

The merits of different models of humanitarian assistance and protection cannot be judged in the abstract, regardless of the host regions where these models are supposed to be put into practice. It is therefore useful to insert a political-geographical perspective into the debate on the viability and future of different strands of humanitarianism. Aid agencies may change their organisational values and perceptions and may favour particular institutions and ways of acting. The intentionality of aid agencies is, however, largely irrelevant to the extent that conflict settings function as a source of powerful selective pressures on those agencies. Three types of conflict which never occur in their pure form, but which help us to judge the appropriateness of different humanitarian approaches in crisis regions can be distinguished.

Resource conflicts in "failed" states. Many so-called silent emergencies are the result of highly fragmented armed conflicts dominated by warlords who do not obey higher authorities and who also despise world opinion. These conflicts are neither politically motivated nor legitimated, and the civilian population caught up in them is, at best, completely neglected.

Some aid agencies have occasionally been quite successful in negotiating access to these civilians and to provide minimal assistance. In these most desperate places the classical values of impartiality, independence and neutrality are almost self-evident. There is no problem of keeping a distance from the state since the indigenous state is dysfunctional or absent, and the far-away democratic states try everything not to get involved in these seemingly hopeless battles. Taking sides would not only run counter to humanitarian loyalty, but would in many cases be simply as meaningless as taking sides between different street gangs in our own inner cities.

"Ethnic" conflicts over state formation. In these conflicts which have ravaged former Yugoslavia and other regions, it is both very well possible and meaningful to stay neutral and to help people impartially. Usually, belligerents are not completely indifferent to what outsiders or the international community think. Attacks on aid workers are rare, and political considerations are overriding commercial or criminal intentions, which are also present in some of these situations. In conflict settings from Kosovo to Palestine, aid agencies with a second-wave humanitarian agenda have often gambled away their credit by openly admitting to see things "through the eyes"⁶⁷ of only one of the conflict parties.

Neo-totalitarian conflicts. In countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, where not even the Red Cross/Red Crescent emblem is bulletproof, humanitarians can either withdraw completely (as has happened in many cases) or engage in another Stag Hunt scenario by cooperating closely with members of the host government as well as with foreign powers including the military or private military firms. Deliberate killings of aid workers, kidnappings and videotaped decapitations have shown that unlike the criminal belligerents in resource conflicts, radical Islamic insurgents are very much interested in projecting a carefully crafted image of barbarism to the global public.⁶⁸ Against this background, the apolitical holier-than-thou attitude of some humanitarian agencies which tried to stay aloof from the military and the foreign-backed local state has proved to be simply lethal.

The three types of conflicts characterising much of today's global political landscape require different approaches and different games to be played by democratic states and aid agencies. Both resource conflicts and ethnic conflicts may often require the development of an extended version of classic humanitarianism taking into consideration (in the case of resource conflicts) the absence of the state which used to provide the orientation for understanding the subordinate role of Red Cross-style relief agencies. In an inverse Battle of the Sexes, foreign states can sometimes be persuaded by aid agencies and other groups to get involved in these situations without actually fighting other peoples' wars. It should also be noted that in light of many cases of selective aid provision, the ICRC's call for "depoliticizing"⁶⁹ humanitarianism has its merits.

Yet depoliticizing humanitarianism may not be an option in areas like Afghanistan and Iraq. NGOs should definitely stay neutral in the sense of not becoming instruments of strategic 'hearts-and-minds' work for short-term military gain. On the other hand, it is problematic to stick to the principles of classic humanitarianism in situations in which these principles are not only ridiculed by local strongmen but in which Red Cross workers and others are systematically killed.⁷⁰ Whereas a separation of military and humanitarian powers is still essential, all sides should contemplate the integration of different mandates and capabilities into a workable regime by balancing separateness with interdependence and reciprocity.

CONCLUSION

This article seeks to demonstrate how the humanitarian system is structured by the character of the system's basic units (states and aid agencies) including their patterned modes of interaction. As long as we simply compare synchronic snapshots of different modes of interaction between states and humanitarians, it is useful to draw on game-theoretical metaphors. Their specific heuristic value consists in shedding light on the normative goals and perceptions needed to keep the actors within the parameters of the system. However, collective norms and ways of defining reality may change, the public may switch its sympathy to new organisations, and states may stop functioning in the way they used to. Over the last decades, in fact, social movements, new wars in postcolonial societies and changes in the moral sensibility of the public resulted in a flurry of institutional innovation in the field of global humanitarian action. Many different organisations emerged to challenge or to amend the Red Cross model of neutral aid provision within the bounds of international society in favour of more ambitious visions of world society.

Given the monopoly position of the ICRC in terms of its mandate laid down in the Geneva Conventions, the name of the game played by this agency and sovereign states has not changed much. No other aid agency was ever able to fill the big shoes of the ICRC and the International Federation. But second-wave humanitarianism nevertheless has an impact. Some of the newer agencies were easily coopted into foreign policy strategies or—at other times—were able not only to assert their autonomy but also to lobby governments successfully to protect and assist people in need. Aid agencies often escaped hierarchical coordination and have instead introduced an element of humanitarian unilateralism into global politics. Thus, our research does not confirm the overgeneralised claim that Western governments have increasingly gained control over humanitarian NGOs. Rather, many agencies not only in France, but also in Germany or the United States, have carved out their own professional niche, relying on their own sources of information, from which they draw their own conclusions.

There is some evidence that a widely used typology of humanitarian agencies which contrasts the 'disobedient' and 'independent' European NGOs with the more government-friendly U.S. groups misses important details. Admittedly, there were times when American aid workers joined the epic Stag Hunt against totalitarianism while many European groups were engaged in a Battle of the Sexes with their home states. The situation today is much less tidy. To begin with, there are considerable differences between the aid cultures in Germany and France, to mention just these two. Second, the typology cannot make sense of the fact that in recent times at least one major American agency has been much more receptive of the early philosophy of French *sans-frontiérisme* than German humanitarians have ever been. And third, the typology tends to obscure the distinction between home and host governments, thereby blinding us to the fact that some agencies can be wildly critical of foreign governments without opposing their own government (or the other way round).

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