Humanitarianism

In the name of humanity, over the last two centuries the international community has established a set of norms, principles, and institutions that are designed to alleviate the suffering, and improve the welfare, of vulnerable populations. Human rights. Development. Gender empowerment. Education. Public health. These are just some of the many fields that have this purpose. This class will focus on humanitarianism – the attempt to provide life-saving relief during moments of urgency to distant strangers. This form of humanitarianism is sometimes known as emergency relief. It has several key components. This is relief to distant strangers – individuals you do not know and probably don't expect to reciprocate if you were in a similar situation. It is assistance that crosses borders. U.S. emergency efforts to victims of Katrina doesn't count, but Cuban assistance to New Orleans would. It is assistance for the purpose of saving lives at immediate risk. There are lots of vulnerable populations around the world whose life chances would improve enormously with outside aid. Humanitarianism, though, focuses on situations when lives are on the line. These are not interns but emergency room doctors. Lastly, and relatedly, there is urgency. Time lost means lives lost. We often use the language of emergency to describe these situations. And emergencies, at least theoretically, are supposed to be short term.

Because humanitarianism is so closely identified with humanity, acts of compassion and benevolence, and people sacrificing to help strangers, it is often treated as the poster child of what is good in the world. But nothing is pure and this course takes a sober look at the blends. This course is divided into three sections. Section I considers the “humanity” in humanitarianism. What does it mean to act in the name of humanity? Who is supposed to act? When? For what purpose? Is humanitarianism a Trojan horse for imperialism? Do acts of relief and care bring out the best in us, or are they a mixture of care and power? Section II provides an overview of the history of humanitarianism. It begins by exploring the theory and practice of humanitarianism, and then turns to its history. A key point is that there are several humanitarianisms, and global politics deeply influences their life and times. It ends by looking at the current state of the humanitarian architecture. Section III examines some of the dilemmas of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism exists on an uneven ethical plane.

Requirements. You will be graded according to the following assignments: an in-class midterm (30%); a final exam (40%); and one paper (30% each). I will provide more information on the short paper after the midterm. I do not grade discussion, but I have a soft heart for those who do discuss.

Readings. There is a fair bit of reading in this course, including books, articles, essays, and reports. I have asked the GWU bookstore to make available the following books:


Office Hours. My office is at 605A at the Institute for Security and Conflict Studies, ESIA, and my office hours are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:30-12, and by appointment. The best way to reach me is either after class or by email: barnett@gwu.edu. Email is not a substitute for office hours. Because I tend to answer email with short, grunt-like, responses, email works for short, quick questions.
Consequently, if you have a substantive question regarding the class and the material, please stop by in person. Fabiana Perara is the teaching assistant for this course. Her office hours are Thursdays 2-4, and Friday 9:30-11:30, and by appointment. Her office is at 519 Gelman. Her email is fabiana@gwu.edu.

**Technology.** My class is a “no technology” zone. If it has an on-off switch, it stays off.

**SCHEDULE**

**August 29  Introduction**

This introductory lecture will introduce the course.

**Section I:  Humanity**

**August 31  Why Care?**

If humanitarianism had a bumper sticker, it would read “Compassion Without Borders.” Compassion would be unlimited, taking no notice of territorial, religious, gender, race, age, and other markers of identity. In the modern age such ethics are connected to the principle of humanity -- the greater leveler of difference. And supposedly we are best able to acknowledge the humanity of others by helping them when they are in need. But what motivates compassion? And are all acts of care driven by compassion? And how do we choose who to care about?


**September 5  Who is a Victim?**

Our humanitarian sentiments and feelings of compassion tend to extend not only to those who are suffering – but rather those we label as “victims.” But how do we know a victim when we see one? What are the ideal characteristics of the victim? Are there “deserving” and “undeserving” victims? Do we deny help to those who are deemed undeserving?


**September 7  Paternalism**

How do we help suffering strangers and victims? Do we give gifts without strings? Do we have an obligation to make sure that the assistance is properly used? Acts of compassion, ideally, are supposed to empower, but do they also contain mechanisms of control, domination, and power? Is this good or bad?

**Section II**

**History of Humanitarianism**

**September 12 Humanitarianism**

Do all acts of compassion count as humanitarianism? What is humanitarianism? What are the principles of humanitarianism?


Redfield: 11-36.

Barnett: 1-18

**September 14 Humanitarianism and the World**

We often think of humanitarianism as a defined by ethics trying to operate in a world of politics and power. But ethics and politics are never quite as separate as they seem, and often politics and power defines what counts as ethics. How has the world defined and constrained humanitarianism? How, and how can, humanitarianism maintain its ethics in a messy world?

Barnett: 19-50.

**September 19 Who is a Humanitarian?**

Who gets to be a card-carrying member of the Humanitarian Club? Does anyone who provides aid qualify? Or only certain deliverers of aid? Do different kinds of deliverers of aid lives by principles and practices? Are some less humanitarian than others, and does this matter?


**September 21 Voluntourism**

If this class is representative of the population of Americans, a good chunk of you have performed short-term service work. Why? Do you feel better? Did you do any good? And good for whom?
September 26  Origins

Although compassion has a long history, the idea and institutionalization of humanitarian is a relatively recent phenomenon. What took so long? What had to happen before humanity became humanity? And once it got started, what drove it forward?

Barnett: 49-56.

September 28  Civilizing Missions

Humanitarianism is about helping others, but what kind of help? How was the attempt to “save” others bound up with colonialism and imperialism? Did this entanglement make humanitarianism less humanitarian?

Barnett: 49-75.
Redfield: 48-50.
Penelope Adams and Anna Johnston. 2016. “Empire, Humanitarianism, and Violence in the Colonies,” 17, 1, Spring.

October 3  Humanitarianism During War

According to many, modern humanitarianism began not with trying to save and civilize strangers, but rather protect and save soldiers on the battlefield. Henry Dunant is credited with being the founder and the International Committee for the Red Cross the founding humanitarian organization? How did ICRC civilize war? Or did states domesticate humanitarianism?

Redfield: 45-66

October 5  Post-Cold War Humanitarianism

The world changed with the end of the Cold War and humanitarianism changed with it, but how? And were these changes good or bad for humanitarianism?

Barnett: 171-95.

October 10  Fall Break

October 12  Midterm
Section II:
Challenges and Dilemmas

October 17  Civilian Protection

If humanitarianism is supposed to do anything, it is supposed to not just save lives but also protect vulnerable populations from the threat of immediate harm. But who gets protection and what kind of protection? What does protection mean? Does protection have to be tailored for the situation and the groups under threat?


October 19  Gender and Protection

One of the “discoveries” of the recent decade is that women might have distinctive vulnerabilities that require acknowledgment by aid organizations. What are the assumptions that were often built into a “gender-blind” definition of protection? How did this change? And in what ways?


Redfield: 140-45.


October 24  Triage

Redfield: 155-228.

October 26  Humanitarian Intervention

The idea of humanitarian intervention is not new. It has a very long, and quite unflattering, pedigree – often times much more intervention than humanitarian. When should the international community get involved in civilian protection? When have things gotten so bad that intervention is the only humane choice?

October 31  Genocide

What should aid organizations do in the face of genocide and atrocity crimes? Should they stick to their principles of neutrality, independence, and impartiality, or should they abandon these principles and declare their allegiance with one side rather than the other? Should they speak out and risk their access to the victims, or should they keep their heads down and save lives? In other words, should aid organizations take sides and become parties to the conflict?


November 2  Dilemmas of Aid: Should They Stay or Should They Go?

One of the most wrenching dilemmas of humanitarianism is the concern that aid is being used to fuel or prolong conflict. In other words, it might be doing more harm than good. What should aid organizations do if they suspect that they are increasingly complicit and part of the problem rather than the solution?


November 7  The Humanitarian Fig Leaf

One of the most famous statements ever made about humanitarianism is: There are not humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems. But what happens when humanitarianism seems to be used to cover up the failures of politics? What happens when humanitarianism becomes a “fig leaf.” What happens when political problems become defined as humanitarian problems? Is the fig leaf something used by those in power to make themselves feel better and avoid responsibility, or does it operate below the surface and distract us from other forms of action?

November 9  Protecting the Protectors

One of the important concepts in humanitarianism is the “humanitarian space” – a zone that protects aid workers when they are doing their work. But over the last several years aid workers have been increasingly targeted, bombed, kidnapped, and harassed, making a dangerous job even more so. Why? What should aid organizations do? What role can the international community play to protect aid organizations?


November 14  Humanitarian Governance

Do humanitarians govern? And what does this mean? Should they accept that they are governors? What kind of governors should they be?


November 16  A Global Politics of Pity?

Humanitarianism has grown considerably over the last thirty years, but has its character changed? Is it organized around compassion or pity? Does it help create a genuine humanity or a humanity that divides the world into the superior and the inferior? The saviors and the saved?


November 21  The Recipients, Hosts, and Objects

What do we know about the objects of humanitarianism? What do humanitarian organizations hear when they listen?

Lasker: 115-160. 
http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2015/03/05/what-refugees-really-think-aid-agencies

November 23  Thanksgiving

November 28  Big Hearts or Big Bucks?

If you want to understand how humanitarianism works, follow the money. What is the political economy of aid? How does the aid dollar/euro/yen get sliced up? Who are the middle-men? How much of it actually gets to the recipients?

http://www.gppi.net/fileadmin/user_upload/media/pub/2016/Steets__Binder__Horvath__Krueger__Ruppert__2016__Drivers_and_Inhibitors_of_Change_in_the_Humanitarian_System.pdf

November 30  Reforming the Humanitarian Architecture

The humanitarian architecture looks and feels hierarchical. It has the texture of colonialism. Those who have the power recognize and accept this accusation, and so they keep pledging to share power with the beneficiaries. But all these pronouncements have not led to much progress. Why?

Redfield: 145-51
December 5   What is Humanitarianism Good For?

When all is said and done, what do we make of humanitarianism? What do we hope to accomplish with humanitarianism? Who is humanitarianism for? If humanitarianism were to disappear, who would “suffer” more – “us” or “them”?

Redfield: 229-47
Barnett: 220-39