Humanitarianism

Over the last two centuries, and particularly so over the last two decades, there has been an impressive expansion of humanitarianism: the desire to reduce the suffering of distant strangers. There is now a network of states, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations that count themselves as part of the humanitarian sector. These organizations have helped to create, and been nourished by, a complex of normative and legal principles. The existence of this network and normative fabric have created something that resembles, according to Didier Fassin, a “humanitarian government: [T]he administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle that sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action.” While government might be too strong a word, governance certainly is not: human activities are now organized globally to help protect distant strangers and alleviate the causes of suffering. The intertwining of compassion and governance alerts us to the very real possibility that humanitarianism is much more complicated than the simple act of giving the gift of life to those in need. Humanitarianism, after all, is an ism, and all isms tend to be a lot less pure in practice than they are in theory.

This course explores the foundations, logics, dilemmas, evolution, and consequences of humanitarianism. We begin by asking: Who is part of the humanitarian world? Has this world changed? How? Why? With what consequences? These introductory questions will be tied directly to a conference occurring January 20-21. We then examine the underlying foundations and logic of humanitarian governance. Humanitarian governance is rooted in the basic supposition that we do and should care for distant strangers. What does that mean, both philosophically and concretely? How do an ethics of care, compassion, and humanity interact? Furthermore, because humanitarian governance is a form of governance, and because all governance operates through different kinds of power, we must explore the forms and legitimating principles of the power in humanitarian governance. The concept of paternalism captures important dimensions of the power of humanitarianism, offering a mixture of care and control. Humanitarian governance justifies its power over others in the name of their welfare -- but when does concern for others lead us to want to take control of their lives? In addition to varying historically, the willingness to interfere can also vary according to the type of humanitarianism, comparing emergency and alchemical humanitarianism. We then proceed to examine humanitarian governance in several critical areas: humanitarian intervention; emergency relief; and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Requirements. All students must come to class prepared to contribute through discussion - which requires you to have read and reflected on the materials assigned for that class session. I will not give a grade for participation, but those who demonstrate through their class participation that they have read and considered the materials will help their cause. All students must email 3-4 questions or observations that are provoked by the reading by the Tuesday evening immediately prior to Wednesday’s class.

You must write two short papers (20% each) that are 5-page responses to the readings for the
week. Each week I have identified a question to form the basis of your paper.

Your principal assignment is a research paper (60%) of your grade. You have several “age appropriate” alternatives: write an article that might be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal; develop a research design that might be useful for your dissertation prospectus; write a review essay or literature review in order to better understand the contours of a particular controversy.

Readings. In addition to articles and chapters that are available through blackboard, the following books have been ordered and are available at the University Bookstore:


Office Hours. My office is at 501J ESIA but I will be holding my office hours at 479 Monroe on Wednesdays 10:00-12:00. The best way to reach me is either after class or by email at barnett@gwu.edu. My phone number is 994-9301.

Section I: The Principles and Logics of Humanitarian Governance

January 18 What is the Humanitarian World?

This introductory week will provide a “guide” to humanitarianism with the additional aim of getting everyone up to speed for the workshop on January 20-21. Toward that end, I will review some of the central debates in humanitarianism as a field of action and as a field of study; discuss the controversy regarding the boundaries of humanitarianism; and offer a very idiosyncratic historical overview.

International Committee of the Red Cross. Codes of Conduct.
Barnett, Empire of Humanity, Chapter One.

**January 20-21 Mapping the World of Humanitarianism Conference. Attendance is mandatory.**

**January 25 Humanity**

Everyone seems to love humanity. Everyone seems to want to protect humanity. Everyone seems to want to improve humanity. So much humanity. So much inhumanity. What is humanity? *Guest Participant: Ilana Feldman*


*Short Paper Question: Where does humanity come from?*

**February 1 What Does Compassion Say about our World?**
Presumably one measure of our “humanity” is our depth of compassion for distant strangers. If so, an argument can be made that the rise of humanitarian governance suggests that our sense of humanity has expanded. What evidence? If so, why? Does compassion suggest that our world is more civilized?


Short Paper Topic: What accounts for the rise of concern for distant strangers?

February 8 Does Humanitarianism Require Faith?


Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, Chap. 11


Re-skim Cladis on Durkheim.

Short Paper Topic: Does the possibility that humanitarianism collapses the distinction between secular and religious discourses into a pile of faith have implications for how we understand the constitution of global affairs?

February 15 Humanitarian Governance
The institutionalization and internationalization of compassion has given rise to what Didier Fassin calls a humanitarian government: “humanitarian government: [T]he administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle that sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action.” What are the organizing principles of humanitarian governance? What is this sort of governance supposed to accomplish? and how?


Short Paper Topic: What are the ethical limits of humanitarian governance?

February 22 Alchemical Humanitarianism

There are many kinds of humanitarianism, but the most important two types – according to Barnett – is emergency and alchemical humanitarianism. What distinguishes them? Do they have different origins? Do they have different logics? Do they make different kinds of choices? What are the global factors that favor one over another? Are these distinctions without a difference? What are the organizational, situational, and global factors that might account for moments when their boundaries harden and when they become more porous? In the first of two weeks dedicated to exploring these issues, we begin with alchemical humanitarianism.

Barnett. Empire of Humanity, Chapters, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10.
Mark Duffield. Global Governance and the New Wars. Chapters 1-5, 10.

Short Paper Topic: Alchemical humanitarianism has a tremendous amount of pull. What is the primary driving force?

March 2 Emergency Humanitarianism

Emergency humanitarianism pertains to desire to save lives that are hanging by a thread. Emergencies can occur because of natural and humanly made disasters. Natural disasters do not often stir much political controversy or difficulty getting access to the affected populations. Relief during period of violence and war raise all kinds of complications. Perhaps most important is how to gain access and protect the affected populations. There are three categories of people that need protecting. There are soldiers. In fact, the common lore is that
humanitarianism began with the ICRC and the desire to spare soldiers unnecessary suffering. There also are civilians. Here the distinction between combatant and civilian plays a critical role in deciding who deserves protection. And, then there are the aid workers.


*Short Paper Topic: Are emergency humanitarians more “pure” than alchemical humanitarians?*

**March 9  Do Humanitarians Have Dirty Hands?**

The problem of dirty hands confronts how public officials act in a world that is messy, provides plenty of opportunities for opportunistic behavior, allows for considerable expediency and selecting the path of least moral resistance, fulfilling one moral duty might mean violating another, and requires the justification for what might be viewed as unsavory behavior under ideal circumstances. At this moment we are primarily concerned with how humanitarians choose between different ethical commitments.
*Guest Participant: Jennifer Rubenstein.*

*Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed*. Chapters to be assigned.
Jennifer Rubenstein. Book Manuscript. Chapters to be assigned.
Read the following from a forthcoming special issue of *Journal of Applied Philosophy*: Chiara Lepora and Robert Goodin, “Grading Complicity in Rwandan Refugee Camps”;

**March 16 Spring Break**

**March 23 The Once and Future Humanitarian World**

How might we most accurately characterize the organization of the humanitarian architecture? Is it a hierarchy, as suggested by the concept of empire? Is it a network, as
implied by the tendency to see the architecture as populated by NGOs? Or, is it a market, in which something of a “hidden hand” coordinates the interactions between independent suppliers and consumers? Are there parts of the humanitarian world that are better characterized as one rather than another? What accounts for the varying mix, historically and regionally speaking? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?


UN OCHA. “The Four Pillars of Humanitarian Reform.” ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docId=1146894


Short Paper Topic: Does the conference “Mapping the Humanitarian World” provide any evidence for the emerging organizing principles of the humanitarian architecture?

March 30 Humanitarian Intervention in Theory

In the first of two weeks on humanitarian intervention, we examine the concept of humanitarian intervention in relationship to international relations theory. Different schools of thought have different things to say about the real or fictitious nature of humanitarian intervention, how changing patterns of humanitarian intervention are caused by broader changes in international affairs, and whether humanitarian intervention can be seen as a normatively desired outcome.


April 6 Humanitarian Intervention in Practice

The humanitarian sector has been fiercely divided over the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, whether any use of military force can be properly labeled humanitarian, whether force should ever be used in the defense of human rights, how humanitarian actors should relate to military actors (if at all), if military force creates more harm than good, and how violence signifies and creates a cosmopolitanism.


Short Paper Topic: How might the internal debate in the humanitarian community about humanitarian intervention inform the debate among international relations theorists about humanitarian intervention?
April 13  Emergency Relief

We examine three separate issues regarding emergency relief. First, emergency relief presumes that we know an emergency when we see it. Do we? How do we understand the social construction of an emergency? What are the constitutive effects of an emergency? Second, what are the dilemmas in providing emergency relief? Third, emergency relief can be understood to include not only getting life-saving materials to vulnerable populations, but also protecting vulnerable populations. But how are vulnerable populations identified?


Short Paper Topic: All the readings give partial blame to the humanitarians for creating and recreating vulnerable populations during war. Is this fair?

April 20 Post-Conflict Order and the Road to Hell

At some point, hopefully, an “emergency” turns into a post-conflict setting. Although sometimes this development signals to a humanitarian organization that it is time to exit, almost all maintain some sort of presence and help with the transition and work toward creating a more stable and peaceful environment. Most of the responsibility for helping states and societies avoid backsliding into conflict goes to the UN and other regional organizations, and the assumption is that they are best set up (either because of knowledge or resources) to tackle the challenge. Yet their record is not all that good, and it is particularly disappointing when it comes to the goal of creating more democratic states. Why?

Autissere: Read Entire Book.

Short Paper Topic: If peacebuilders don’t know what they are doing, and keen doing the wrong thing over and over again, then should they just get out of the way?

April 27 Peacebuilding as Governance

Last week looked at the issue of trying to keep post-conflict states from sliding back into conflict. This week looks specifically at the modes of intervention, both in practice and in theory, and considers whether and how the concept of “governmentality” helps us understand post-war peacebuilding.


Short Paper Topic: Can humanitarians escape “humanitarian governance”? Should they want to? What would that mean?