

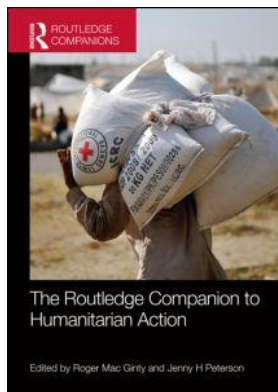
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3

CRITICAL READINGS OF HUMANITARIANISM

Ryerson Christie

Introduction

Critiques of humanitarian action have become common, but they tend to be remarkably limited in scope. If we distinguish between humanitarianism as an over-arching narrative governing forms of engagements with the Global South from humanitarian practices, we find a dramatic discontinuity in the academic attention paid to the subject. As BS Chimni (2000) argues, humanitarianism has come to be one of the most commonly used modifiers of international actors and activities, now describing NGOs and militaries, the delivery of food and police equipment, and the provision of refugee camps and democracy. Given the expansion of humanitarianism since 1990, and its role in both mandating and justifying the use of military force, it is not surprising that critical engagement with humanitarianism has grown. However, because critical scholars tend to focus on the roles of states and traditional security agents, the vast majority of critical engagement has been directed at the measures taken in the name of humanitarianism, rather than on the conceptual frame itself. This chapter looks at the ways in which critical scholars have tended to examine humanitarianism, and asks whether this engagement is distinct from more traditional ‘problem-solving’ approaches. It then argues that because much of the work does not challenge the underlying ‘common sense’ of humanitarianism, critical scholarship can serve to strengthen the legitimacy of humanitarianism.

Humanitarianism in tension

As other chapters in this book illustrate, humanitarianism appears to be facing a crisis of confidence, with extensive criticism of its operationalization from numerous standpoints. Here we are seeking to explore the different ways in which critical and problem-solving theories have tackled these issues. This analysis requires that we first indicate precisely what the subject of study is. Rather than examining hyphenated actions and actors with the humanitarian label, we are centrally concerned with humanitarianism itself.

But what are we then examining? While the meaning of humanitarianism has shifted over time, and what is done in its name has altered dramatically, we work here with the core characteristics that have largely remained intact. The first thing to note is its inherently normative character. It is an ethos of helping others on the basis of our shared humanity – the possibility

that some people might be more or less worthy of saving is simply not entertained. The second component is a recognition of peoples' humanity irrespective of their particular convictions, or the convictions of their state. The implication is that saving lives takes precedence over issues of politics, both practically and ethically. This then translated, at least during the Cold War, into the provision of relief with the aim of saving individuals, 'but not to eliminate the underlying causes that placed them at risk' (Barnett 2005: 724). This in turn demanded that individuals and organizations engaged in humanitarian action needed to be able to reach those requiring assistance, and that this meant negotiating access to those with precarious lives. Classically this has informed the three norms of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Though these have been challenged from the outset by individuals and groups engaged in humanitarian action, they continue to resonate and still shape the nature of the conversation.

In order to explore the differences between problem-solving and critical approaches to the study of humanitarianism it is important to understand what critical scholarship has tended to see as the inherent changes in this form of action. This becomes the terrain of critique, and has largely shaped how the concept has been engaged with.

The evolution of humanitarianism during the Cold War provided the context within which the norms that now govern humanitarianism arose and concretized over half a century. Impartiality (the delivery of aid on the basis of need), neutrality (not directly engaging in local politics) and independence (not being tied to a particular state), though perhaps necessities of their time, continue to define humanitarian ideals, if not its actual practice. Because there was little scope for states to publicly violate sovereignty to alleviate apparent suffering, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) embraced the role of protector. This maintained the separation between the 'humanitarians' and state interventions in the South, allowing for the continued access of groups into areas where peoples were suffering. Though it is a myth that humanitarian organizations had an easy time accessing zones during this period (Magone et al. 2011), the narrative continues to inform debates over saving people. The experiences of this sector have become the basis of our current thinking about what constitutes humanitarianism.

As has been pointed out elsewhere (Duffield 1994), the end of the Cold War both presented problems to the New World Order while settling the major ideological debate that had prevented state action. So we had the devolution of states that had either been absorbed by major powers following WWII, and the end of support for a number of regimes, which resulted in civil conflicts across the Global South. At the same time, the emergence of a liberal peace provided scope for intervention where there had previously been none. This in turn brought the old guard of humanitarianism into close cooperation with state actors who found themselves strange bedfellows (Wheeler 2000; Rieff 2002). While it appeared that the traditional humanitarian actors were initially calling the shots, determining where intervention should occur and how aid should be delivered, this did not last.

The involvement of states brought a shift away from negotiated access and neutrality along with new concepts in the language of international relations: humanitarian *intervention*, and *new humanitarianism* (Rieff 2002; Newman 2009; Weiss 2007). The growth of peacebuilding has meant that various forms of actions undertaken in the name of humanitarianism were no longer strictly concerned with the alleviation of suffering, but also of redressing the assumed causes of the threats to life. This has resulted in missions, led by states – often specifically led by militaries and involving the use, or threat of use, of force – in the name of humanitarian action. Regardless of one's particular views, we are clearly in a moment of tension in humanitarianism with ongoing debates about its continued relevance and how it can be (or whether it should be) rescued. This is precisely the point where this chapter seeks to enter, laying out two very different types of academic engagement with this issue.

Problem-solving theory versus critical theory

There are two broad approaches to engagement with humanitarianism, which can be broken down according to Robert Cox's (1981) delineation between problem-solving and critical theory, with the two standing in opposition to one another on the basis of their commitment to change. Much has been made of this separation, and it provides a useful heuristic device to demonstrate that there are different means of engagement with the social world.

Before proceeding it is important to first lay out the basic tenets of problem-solving theory to facilitate the assessment of when particular approaches cross this apparent divide. Problem-solving theories are those which treat significant components of the world around us as a given. To understand a problem to exist requires an agreement on its nature, which in itself fixes the conceptual boundaries of the problem. Though this orientation accounts for the vast majority of the academic and policy engagement with the concept, it does not mean that there is broad agreement with either what is being pursued, or how it should be achieved. Despite Cox's preference for critical engagement, he did not decry problem-solving. Indeed, he was explicit that it has an important role to play. However, problem-solving is unable to bring about substantive change to the structures that might underpin the very issues we are trying to redress.

When it comes to the subject of humanitarianism, those studies that are trying to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action are clearly problem-solving. Certainly this accounts for the vast majority of literature on humanitarianism. The major debates that take place are cast within the frame of either improving its operation, or recovering it from the corrosive effects of state interference. As Bellamy (2003: 335) argues, the central debate has revolved around a 'key defining characteristic ... not the scale or nature of human suffering but whether that suffering requires outside intervention to alleviate it'.

Critical theory

Critical scholars, in contrast, are not interested in tinkering, but, following Cox's formulation, are traditionally interested in significant structural change. This demands a questioning of the ways in which common sense is constructed, and how 'truths' are reproduced. According to Foucault (1980: 131), 'truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power ... each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true'. This distinction also needs to be read in relation to Cox's (1981: 87) fundamental premise that power is always for someone and for some purpose. With this in mind, critical theories seek profound alterations of established relations of power.

Beyond this limited distinction of critical approaches there are fundamental debates about what precisely makes an approach or theory critical. There are those who argue it requires a post-positivist and perhaps even non-foundational position, which reject meta-narratives of what international politics is, asking instead how international practices constitute power and how such power is experienced (Booth 2005: 10). Others focus on the centrality of an emancipatory project trying to empower communities. This is indicative of Krause and Williams' (1997) delineation of critical theories, which for them 'begins from an analysis of the claims that make the discipline possible – not just its claims about the world but also its underlying epistemology and ontology, which prescribe what it means to *make* sensible claims about the world'. Here it is useful to turn to Roxanne Doty's (1993) differentiation of the sorts of questions scholars ask. Distinguishing between 'why' and 'how possible' questions, she sees critical scholars as engaged in a more sustained challenge of the basis of what constitutes a legitimate line of enquiry. Rather than asking why something has come to pass, she privileges

the exploration of the content of the question, and the power relations both assumed and hidden in such questioning.

The final piece of the critical studies puzzle is the commitment to historicity. The idea here is that relations of power are neither inevitable nor natural. Instead, power, and for some, discourse itself, is historically grounded. This is a rejection of the possibility of an over-arching truth, and is in fact profoundly empowering in its implication that things can change (though clearly with difficulty). While humanitarianism is often presented as arising from eternal ethics of responsibility, the concept itself is, for the critical theorists, embedded in history. As Edkins (2003: 254) states: 'Humanitarianism is not a timeless truth but an ideology that has had particular functions and taken different forms at different times in the contemporary world. It is crucial to locate any discussion of the concept and its political impact historically'. It is this awareness and particular form of enquiry that facilitates the prior questions of how it might operate to empower some peoples over others, and how it might privilege particular viewpoints.

While on the face of it, it may appear that the division between problem-solving and critical theory is clear, in terms of humanitarianism it is much more difficult to ascertain where the boundaries lie. Critical approaches to the topic should ideally call into question the base of humanitarianism, explaining its assumptions with an eye to the reproduction of power. Yet, and here is the difficulty, because much of the literature is focused on critiquing the rise of state-led humanitarianism (and particularly to military-led humanitarian interventions), it is difficult to ascertain whether it is consistent with problem-solving or critical engagement.

Up to this point the basics of critical scholarship have been sketched out in general terms, and care has been taken to avoid alienating what is a broad range of scholarship with a vast range of commitments on where to look for the practice of power and politics, and what subjects are to be prioritized. At the risk of offending colleagues, I will group academic material into a few distinct groups for heuristic purposes. These are rough divisions and the internal divisions can be as wide as those across the critical/problem-solving divide. Nevertheless, the subsequent groupings accord to both shared political and methodological commitments as well as those with whom individuals tend to be in conversation with. This last point relates to whom the authors cite and engage with, as well as the specified sites within which they choose to interact (journals, conferences, workshops and so forth).

The division breaks the scholarship down into those focusing on identity politics and sovereignty, feminist scholarship, Critical Security Studies (with a capital 'C'), and bio-politics. A final and unconventional grouping will be added to this mix which includes those interested in the repoliticization of humanitarianism. Controversially though, I will also argue that these bodies of work are often more closely aligned to problem-solving when it comes to humanitarianism. This arises because of a lack of focus on the core concept.

Critical theory and identity politics

There is within critical approaches to international relations and security studies a sustained engagement with questions of identity, in particular with the ways in which narratives and practices of international interactions serve to re/produce narratives of 'inside/outside' and of delimiting 'us' from 'others'. As RBJ Walker (1993) demonstrated, the construction of the sovereign state determines who belongs inside the state, and those who live beyond it. While critical scholarship has concentrated on foreign policy making and security practices, some scholars have included humanitarianism into their purview. David Campbell (1997) argues that humanitarianism is an important component in the modern reproduction of state sovereignty. Jenny Edkins has picked up on this point, arguing that '[h]umanitarianism is an example of how

sovereignty is maintained by the very forces that appear to contest it. Humanitarian action is complicit in the reproduction of sovereign politics, since it maintains the very separation upon which sovereignty depends' (2000: 38). This set of approaches highlights the ways in which humanitarianism is imbedded within the broader practice of international relations, and only makes sense in relationship to a global system of sovereignty.

In addition to the examination of links between humanitarianism and foreign policy, we have a range of scholars drawing on post-colonial literatures that assess the ways in which humanitarianism emerged within the context of imperialism (Tester 2010; Lester 2002), and relies upon and reproduces the Southern victim as requiring our assistance. Frédéric Mégrét (2009) has shown how the colonial view directly informed the emergence of humanitarian law, and Tester (2010) argues that it continues to inform the modern British imagination of its place in the world and its sense of humanitarian obligation. The broad argument, echoing Edward Said, is that the moral character of humanitarianism is inevitably linked to broader representational practices which privilege the experiences of the West.

Feminist engagement with humanitarianism

The next area of systematic critical engagement with humanitarianism arises within feminist scholarship, which aims at exposing and redressing the ways in which international and domestic policies serve to re/produce social, economic and political relations. Particular attention is paid to the manner in which these relations are often articulated and experienced along gendered lines (though these can interpolate with race, class and age), and there is a common political project of upending patterns of patriarchy. Whether it is assessing how refugee camps reproduce gendered divisions of labour, how victims are feminized, how international rescue relies on patriarchal representations of the West, or how domestic abuse and sexual violence are de/stressed in favour of violence against men, feminist scholarship seeks to expose the ways in which humanitarian practices are wrapped up in broader gender politics. Rather than seeking to map the breadth of feminist analysis, this section highlights its engagement with humanitarianism, and asks whether it is consistent with critical or problem-solving approaches.

While there is a substantive engagement with humanitarianism (Hyndman 1998; Hyndman and de Alwis 2003; Gurd 2006; Grabska 2011; Orford 1999; Repo and Yrjölä 2011), in general much of this work falls short of a fully critical engagement. Despite Hyndman and de Alwis' (2003: 215) assertion that 'every humanitarian project, in its design, method, evaluation, and impact, is gendered', there are very few works that deal specifically with *humanitarianism* as a gendered concept (Orford 1999; Hyndman and de Alwis 2003). This is not to say that the topic escapes gender analysis, rather the ways in which it is engaged is at one level of removal from the central concept. As Hyndman and de Alwis argue:

Gender policies in humanitarian organizations provide 'a grid of intelligibility' for field officers and other staff working with displaced populations. They furnish concepts and checklists to assist in the organization and functioning of camps, but they do not generally allow dimensions of gender or culture to change the assumptions of the overall planning framework in which field staff work.

(2003: 213)

There is engagement with the question of gender mainstreaming and humanitarianism (Eklund and Tellier 2012), and scholars who have looked at the impact of specific humanitarian practices on gender relations. Exploring the ways in which international actors incorporate norms of

mainstreaming, while important and laudable, accepts the boundaries of the problem, and cannot then be seen as truly critical.

There is also an important body of work that has critiqued the ways in which international law is gendered, particularly in the field of human rights law. As Diana Gardam has argued, for example, 'humanitarian law, in common with all law, is gendered' (1990: 267). Anne Orford's (1999) work in this respect has been quite influential, straddling human rights and humanitarian intervention. Her exploration of the gendered (and post-colonial) nature of the 'heroic' humanitarian interventionist impulse which 'legal texts about intervention create a powerful sense of self for those who identify with the hero of the story, be that the international community, the Security Council, the UN, NATO or the US' (Orford 1999: 683).

However, much of the feminist work on humanitarianism has a particular problem-solving focus. This often uses the United Nations' gender mainstreaming as a launching point to assess the variable impact of humanitarian measures on women and children. A number of scholars have concentrated on the ways in which refugee camps are particularly gendered spaces (Hyndman 1998; Grabska 2011), illustrating how camp composition impacts on gender relations, and how gender mainstreaming by camp staff has had complex and at times contradictory impacts, the result of which 'was rather limited to "adding women" rather than addressing power discrepancies' (Grabska 2011: 87). This is indicative of much of the feminist analysis in that it is broadly supportive of the goals of gender mainstreaming, and is not inherently engaging with the impact of humanitarianism *per se*. As Hyndman and de Alwis (2003: 212) argue, 'Gender is treated as a portable tool of analysis and empowerment that can be carried around in the back pockets of both international humanitarian and development staff'. Thus, we find substantial engagement with themes of human rights, humanitarian interventionism, significant studies of sites of humanitarianism, for example, in refugee camps, and the gendered impact of forms of humanitarian relief. While feminist thought might be broadly located within critical scholarship, its application with respect to this concept is more often within a problem-solving frame.

CSS and humanitarianism

In the field of security studies it has become orthodox to distinguish between [C]ritical and [c]ritical, where the capitalized version relates to particular theoretical approaches that are rooted within the Frankfurt school, and which often put an emphasis on issues of global political economy. However, Critical Security Studies (CSS) has been surprisingly limited in its analysis of humanitarianism. At its core CSS is committed to an emancipatory project that privileges the weak and marginalized, and that does so within historical context. Drawing on the Frankfurt school in particular, the drive has been one of a defence of the subaltern.

One of the core contributions of this body of work has been its attention to the links with capitalist development (Butler 2011; Haskell 1985; Beitz 1979). Haskell is explicit about the relationship:

the crucial links between capitalism and humanitarianism stem not from the rise of the bourgeoisie *per se* but from its most characteristic institution, the market, and they are bonds created not by class interest but by the subtle isomorphisms and hologies that arise from a cognitive style common to economic affairs, judgments of moral responsibility, and much else.

(Haskell 1985: 547)

Using the work of Ken Booth as a starting point, Butler (2011) further highlights these relations in the current setting. Interestingly, Butler's work also stresses the favourable view of humanitarianism shared by much of this work, effectively asking how humanitarianism might be recovered.

This embracing of humanitarianism is not surprising; from the early days of international humanitarianism in the 1960s and 1970s the movement resonated with the political left. This is despite the history of MSF, which has undergone periods of tension where internal factions have at times advocated stronger stances on issues of politics (such as decrying communism). Allen and Styan (2000), in an exploration of the French literature on humanitarianism, argue that it was in part rooted in *Tiermondisme*, which Guillot (1994) argues is an attempt to reconcile Marxism after 1968 with Rousseau's concept of the 'noble savage'. This served to effectively equate the poor in the South with the international proletariat. While this particular ideology did not last, it is nevertheless illustrative of the ways in which critical commitments have been attracted to humanitarianism (even while rejecting state-led practices under its banner). We can also see within the work of Beitz (1979) an emancipatory defence of humanitarianism rooted within international political economy (IPE) that calls for intervention – not state-led – on the basis that the patterns of global social relations give rise to a moral responsibility to assist, a point further highlighted by Alex Bellamy (2003: 332).

Critical Security Studies has engaged substantially with the conditions giving rise to the need for humanitarianism, while tending to support its broad aspirations. The critiques of the dynamics that give rise to suffering, and related attacks on humanitarian interventionism, and the roles of NGOs in facilitating interventionism is not an actual critique of humanitarianism as a concept or practice. Rather, it is a critique of the structural dynamics that necessitate humanitarian work. The humanitarian ideal thus remains largely intact.

Humanitarianism and governmentality

The next category of critical engagement is similar in its exploration of the broader system within which humanitarianism is embedded. Drawing on the work of Foucault, this scholarship is interested in the ways in which the governance of society re/produces society in a particular way and rationalizes power (governmentality) by focusing on humanity as biological entity (bio-politics), without explicitly foregrounding his critique of humanism (Guilhot 2012; Walters 2011). This grouping of scholars seeks to understand the ways in which humanitarianism, and associated practices, relates to broader transformations in the governance of human life. Mark Duffield's (1994, 2001) work has been seminal in this respect, highlighting transformations that have occurred since the early 1990s. The shifts from development to the management of conflict, and from security to resilience, that have resulted in the new humanitarianism, have altered our perceptions and engagements with the Global South in ways that have been to the detriment of communities.

Observing the increased role of the state in addressing humanitarian crises in the Global South, Julian Reid asserts that this has resulted in a move away from the traditional norm of an apolitical humanitarianism. He argues that we have seen a politicization (by which he means a takeover by states) of policy. He then sets out that this politicization is best (and indeed can only be) understood within the context of the bio-politicization of life: 'The politicization of humanitarianism is thus fundamentally tantamount to its biopoliticization' (Reid 2010: 395). Reid tracks this shift in part through the ways in which the problems of humanitarianism are being represented. Drawing on Macrae he argues that there has been a shift from humanitarian disasters to humanitarian emergencies (where the impact of this terminological shift has been

left to the imagination of the reader), but that this move to emergencies echoes, or provides for, the ‘transformation of ungovernable peoples into governable populations’ (Reid 2010: 395). Humanitarianism is then transformed into a means of extending the governance of life rather than people, a point that is similar to Thomas Laqueur’s argument that humanitarian discourse became fixated on ‘the pains and deaths of ordinary people in such a way ... that might connect the actions of ... readers with the sufferings of ... subjects’ (1989: 177). This is not, as the biopolitical scholars demonstrate, a positive development. Rather, at its heart it can be disempowering, erasing difference and limiting both the capacity for local agency in identifying and addressing problems, but also in proscribing the limits of what states will try to do. Edkins, following Agamben, asserts that humanitarian action is only able to provide for the bare life, a point she reiterates in asserting that ‘relief is aimed at preserving the life of the biological organism rather than restoring the means of livelihood to the community’ (Edkins 2000: 39). This is one of the few sustained critiques of humanitarianism itself.

Yet even here there is a sense of yearning for the past, for a period of idealized humanitarianism prior to the emergence of the new liberal order where the simple alleviation of suffering became the target for state action in the South. Setting up modern forms of humanitarian action in contrast to the Cold War norm risks romanticizing an imaginary past, reifying its norms without interrogating the ways in which the narrative of humanitarianism fed into and facilitated the very shift that is being decried.

Humanitarianism and the political

The final area of sustained critical engagement is the most complex to discuss as it in part transects the various categories discussed above. There is a shared recognition that there has been a privileging of the voice of the state, powerful elites and large NGOs in the scope and practice of humanitarianism. This is particularly true of humanitarian intervention where governments and state security actors have taken control of the process, aided in many instances by international organizations. However, while perhaps less blatant, it is still the case that the identification of when a people need assistance, and the means of providing aid, is also the purview of the humanitarian elite. This has resulted in a narrowing of the debate of humanitarianism to a specific focus on interventionism, with the scope of argument limited, and the empowering of particular voices.

This process has been described as both ‘politicization’ and ‘depoliticization’, depending on the specific political leanings of scholars and activists. The variable use of the concept aside, there is a shared concern that states are increasingly dictating the terms. This has led Barnett (2005, 2009: 623) and others (MacFarlane and Weiss 2000; Fan 2012) to decry the politicization of humanitarianism, making it subject to the needs and wants of states and other elites: ‘The foundational purpose of humanitarian action, to relieve suffering, is an act of humanity, not politics’ (Barnett 2009: 623). This is most evident in the traditional norms of impartiality, neutrality, humanity and independence. This subordination to the interests of states is seen by many as eroding or eliminating ethical consideration (Barnett 2009: 624; Rieff 2002; Donini et al. 2004; Duffield 2001; Shapcott 2010). The argument here is that humanitarianism inherently transcends politics, that it is based on commitments that are (or at least should be) inalienable. In this way any role of the state that diminishes the primary commitment to the ‘other’ is deeply problematic.

However, there is another set of approaches which calls for the politicization of humanitarianism in a nearly diametrically opposed manner. Here the push is on a reintroduction of *the political* to the analysis and practice of humanitarianism (though the precise nature of *the*

political is contested). The argument is that humanitarianism is inherently about the imposition of particular ways of life, the defence of particular forms of authority and judgements about what constitutes dignity, on people. Because it operates as a universal ideal, it is beyond contestation, delimiting debates of the possible. Furthermore, because it is about helping the other, and has become increasingly associated with state action, particular technical voices are privileged over others. Generals, diplomats, development experts and journalists are empowered to speak on the issues. Against this backdrop, the drive must be to re/politicize humanitarianism; both in terms of the scope of what is being discussed, and to empower a broad range of voices in the debate.

Conclusions

Approaches to issues of international relations are often divided into critical and problem-solving approaches. In applying Cox's distinction to the study of humanitarianism we find that even nominally critical approaches to the topic tend to slip uneasily into a form of problem-solving through the broad acceptance of the charitable impulse. The focus is often on the ways in which the co-optation of humanitarianism by the state has diminished its emancipatory potential, or how its implementation has not served to fracture existing relations of power, yet critical engagement demands an inherent scepticism of any concept that is presented as beyond contestation. The moment an idea becomes an orthodoxy, shaping the terms of debates about human interaction, critical approaches need to systematically explore the power relations it both constructs and obscures. This is even more important when the idea operates in a clearly normative fashion, relying on the idea that its adoption and promotion is inherently morally superior to other forms of human endeavour. If we take seriously the central tenet of critical theory that all theory is for someone and for some purpose, then we need to carefully interrogate humanitarianism in the same way that we explore other practices of engagement between the North and South.

The analysis of the impact of practices undertaken under the banner of humanitarianism is obviously valuable, and focusing on the role of the state in modern interventionism is clearly important. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is the concept of humanitarianism itself that has in part made these possible, and it is in its name that these practices occur. We need to more deliberately and systematically critique the humanitarian ideal, not as a hard-nosed opponent, but as a friend with a shared commitment to principles of empowerment, compassion and charity. But this must be done in a way that is aware of the broader practices within which humanitarianism is embedded, and the historical colonial narratives that ascribe the Southerner as requiring and needing 'our' help. This, then, is a call for re/politicization, not in terms of a privileging of the state, or necessarily a rejection of the central tenets of impartiality and neutrality, but as an opening up of a debate over the meaning and practice of humanitarianism that is not speaking on behalf of those with contingent lives, but that privileges 'them'.

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