

Humanitarianism and Changing Cultures of Cooperation. Centre for Global Cooperation Research, Duisburg; Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut KWI Essen, 05.06.2014-07.06.2014.

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Humanitarianism – as a concept and as a practice – has become a major factor in world society: It channels an enormous amount of resources and serves as an argument for different kinds of interference into the “internal affairs” of a country. It is therefore a fertile testing ground for successful and unsuccessful cooperation across borders. At the same time, humanitarian action is a form of cooperation that is rooted in cultures of gift-giving, even though they are sometimes exploited for strategic aims.

Against this backdrop, the Centre for Global Cooperation Research, in cooperation with the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI), organized the conference “Humanitarianism and Changing Cultures of Cooperation” from June 5-7, 2014. As suggested in the title, the aim of the conference was to shed light both on humanitarianism, its ambivalences and dilemmas, and its relevance for questions of global cooperation. Special thanks to Nadja Krupke and Annegret Kunde for their help with collecting the material from the conference and editing the report.

Presenters came from the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Germany and Uganda. Among the speakers and audience there were both junior researchers and internationally renowned scholars, some of them with a long experience both as academics and practitioners.

During the conference, three clusters of topics emerged: The question of motivations, legitimations and aims of humanitarian actions, the meaning of new global contexts and the emergence of new actors. These issues were discussed from different disciplinary angles including history, philosophy, anthropology, political science and sociology.

With regard to the motivation and legitimation for humanitarianism, the lecture by FRITZ BREITHAUPT (Bloomington) turned to the question of empathy and its “dark sides”. Referring to Nietzsche’s description of the “objective man” and also drawing on findings of cognitive science and his own narrative theory of empathy, Breithaupt argued that a culture of unlimited empathy would lead to collective self-loss and therefore the loss of a subject worthy of empathy. The commentators (Frank Adloff, Erlangen-Nürnberg and Christine Unrau, Cologne / Duisburg) questioned the incompatibility of empathy and “having a self” and suggested differentiations between empathy, compassion, emotional contagion and idolization.

Questions concerning the basis of humanitarianism were also discussed. JOCHEN KLERES (Gothenburg) discussed the relationship between certain “feeling rules” (compassion / pity / solidarity) and hegemonic paradigms of humanitarian aid from a perspective of the sociology of emotions.

In the panel dedicated to “Histories of Humanitarianism”, FLORIAN HANNIG (Halle) pointed out that empathy itself is not simply a timeless human capacity, but has a history. He illustrated this with reference to the Biafra crisis and the outburst of empathy it mobilized in Western Germany, not least as a result of massive media coverage and the use of emotionalizing images. As FRANCESCA PIANA (Geneva / New York) pointed out in the same panel, attempts to use pictures and even films to mobilize emotions and to attract support for specific humanitarian organizations can already be discerned in the visual politics of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) after World War I.

However, emotions are not the only foundation for humanitarianism, and universal values are equally important. When it comes to military humanitarian intervention, the question if universal values are the “authentic” motivational basis or the legitimization for actions taken for economic, strategic or other purposes, is of course especially controversial. This became clear in the discussion ensuing after JEFF ROQUEN’s (Bethlehem / Pennsylvania) presentation, in which the Spanish-US war of 1895-1898 was interpreted as “America’s first humanitarian intervention”.

Universal values are at the core of both religious and scientific motivations and standards for humanitarian action. The shift from a paradigm of religious charity to a paradigm of science was exemplified by CHARLOTTE WALKER-SAID (New York) in her presentation on the development of humanitarian action in relation to the African child at the end of Empire.

As the historical spotlights illustrated, humanitarianism has always been influenced by the overall political and ideological context. However, a “standard narrative” of legal humanitarianism has existed for at least a century and a half, based on the paradigmatic commitment of the ICRC and its principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and uni-

versality. As THOMAS G. WEISS (New York) pointed out in his lecture, this narrative is in crisis. To illustrate this claim, he drew attention to the developments of militarization, politicization and marketization, which make it impossible for humanitarians to cling to the “Standard Operating Principles”. Against this background, Weiss argued for a “learning culture” for practitioners, and consequentialist ethics more oriented to responsible reflection than rapid reaction. As he put it in a pithy inversion of the standard exclamation for cases of (apparent and real) catastrophes: “Don’t just do something. Stand there.”

Those problematic developments of humanitarianism were also taken up in the panels, especially the one entitled “Humanitarianism, Peacebuilding and the Military. Cooperation and Complicity.” If we define cooperation as working together in order to reach a common goal, then the coalitions between humanitarian NGOs and the military is certainly at best a borderline case of cooperation. As ANTONIO DONINI (Boston / Geneva) argued in his presentation on “Deep lessons from Afghanistan”, non-cooperation, keeping separate from the military and its agenda might therefore be the best recommendation for humanitarians. He showed that the entanglement of both the UN mission and the humanitarian NGOs with NATO activities is only the last chapter of a “long history of instrumentalization”. As a result, humanitarians “wasted their welcome” and were increasingly seen as Western imperial agents.

ADAM BRANCH (Kampala) drew attention to the processes of transnational militarization in Africa, which is going on under the motto of “protection”. As he pointed out, this motto, which emerges as the common denominator of intervention in Africa by Western governments and NGOs, often with the consensus of African governments, is not only indeterminate enough to please everyone, but also the symptom of an end of meaningful politics.

The opposition of humanitarianism and politics was also central for the contribution by KAI KODDENBROCK (Duisburg). He presented various hypotheses to explain the fact that humanitarianism is constantly expanding, despite its various crises. In tracing the basics of a “political economy of humanitarianism” he also drew attention to the convergences of dealing with “the needy” in both industrialized countries and so-called “vulnerable areas”.

A hypothesis that emerged from these discussions was that the boom of humanitarian aid, which can be discerned from increasing budgets, might be an answer to the end of the great narratives and ideologies, since it is constrained to the more “modest” goal of saving lives and “limiting the damages”. However, the idea and practice of humanitarianism seems to be in crisis itself: One major reason is the increasing difficulty of correctly identifying victims, helpers and perpetrators, a fact that was already pointed out by VOLKER HEINS (Duisburg / Essen) in his opening remarks.

But also the motivational and ethical basis of humanitarianism is becoming as shaky as that of the ideologies of the past: Even humanitarian commitment requires a motivational basis, the definition of aims and the belief in the possibility of positive change, however withered this belief may have become. If all this is lacking, we are left with teleological residues such as claims to efficiency and excellence. This is a possible explanation for the otherwise bewildering findings presented by ANDREA SCHNEIKER (Siegen) and JUTTA JOACHIM (Hannover): They showed how the self-descriptions of humanitarian NGOs and those of private military and security companies converge until they become almost interchangeable: Both emphasize their excellence, experience and performance.

However, this bleak picture of multiple crises was challenged from various perspectives. For one thing, as Adam Branch pointed out, the loss of

vision, ideology or teleology might be true for a postmodern West, but certainly not for other parts of the world. In Africa, people do struggle for change and a post-political, disillusioned Western cynicism should not undermine these efforts.

An exhortation not to fall into cynicism was also at the core of the lecture by political philosopher SEYLA BENHABIB (New Haven). She emphasized the fact that an ever growing number of persons is living in semi-permanent refugee camps and denied the “right to have rights”, as it was famously put by Hannah Arendt. In view of their plight, cynicism with a view to global human rights is, according to Benhabib, “understandable but not defensible”. She argued that despite the weaknesses, some progress in moral and legal cosmopolitanism is discernable and the call for a global radical legal reform is meaningful.

Another aspect of the changing global context of humanitarian action is the rise of the norm of “Responsibility to Protect” which AIDAN HEHIR (London) analyzed with a view to the developments of the Arab Spring. In his presentation, he called for a “more modest appraisal and a better understanding of the norm R2P”, instead of both the exaggerated hopes followed by unavoidable deception and the cynical attitude of “I told you so”.

The macro-perspective on global legal norms was complemented with various case studies on emerging actors in humanitarianism, which threw a spotlight on successful and unsuccessful cooperation across religions and seemingly competing value systems. For example, sociologist MATHIS DANIELZIK (Essen) showed that “culturally sensitive” attempts of Western NGOs to cooperate with local religious authorities in campaigns against female genital mutilation might have unintended consequences and be counter-productive. Against this background, he argued in favor of overcoming the fruitless debate of “relativism versus universalism” in intercultural cooperation.

Anthropologist MAYKE KAAG (Leiden) focused on another testing ground for intercultural cooperation in humanitarian activities, namely the engagement of Islamic charities from the Gulf region in Africa. One of the results was that Arab NGOs with a Salafi orientation clashed with Sufi oriented populations especially in Senegal. Issues of (perceived) racism and superiority on the side of the Arab NGOs hampered successful cooperation in some circumstances, but there were also instances of interpersonal trust relationships which managed to overcome those conflicts.

DEVON CURTIS (Cambridge) focused on the emergence of another major player in humanitarianism and development, namely China. In her paper, which was based on fieldwork in Beijing, Kinshasa and Goma, she questioned both the overly positive perception of China as an alternative to Western paternalism and the overly negative perception of China as a threat to Africa. Instead, she highlighted the parallels between Chinese and Western engagement, which can also be observed at the level of attitudes, beliefs and prejudices about Africa.

CINDY HORST (Oslo) drew attention to yet another actor in humanitarianism who is often overlooked or dismissed as insignificant, namely diasporas. In her presentation, she also drew attention to the role of Western researchers and their various biases, which determine who is visible and who is not in discourses about humanitarianism, also implicitly criticizing the fact that researchers from the global south were conspicuously missing at the conference.

In their concluding remarks, both DAVID CHANDLER (London) and DENNIS DIJKZEUL (Bochum) emphasized that the mix of disciplines, the combination of scholars and practitioners, and the combination of micro- and macro perspectives was fruitful. However, they drew very different conclusions. Without denying the difficulties and complications, Dennis Dijkzeul pointed out that the disappointments with the results

of humanitarianism should not lead to a dismissal of humanitarian action as a whole. David Chandler formulated as one of the conclusions of the discussions on humanitarianism that “whatever we do, we have to do it reflexively”. At the same time though, he raised the question where this reflexivity leads us. Recalling Fritz Breithaupt’s talk on Nietzsche, Chandler suggested that Nietzsche’s “objective man” from “Beyond good and Evil” is not so much the humanitarian, but the scientist talking about humanitarianism, who cannot find a position any longer from where to judge, decide or recommend anything. Nevertheless, scholars from various disciplines do not seem to give up on this complex topic and its implications for global cooperation, which was demonstrated by the vibrant debates of the conference.

Conference Overview:

Welcome

Claus Leggewie (KWI Essen)

Opening Remarks

Volker Heins (KHK/GCR21, Duisburg / KWI Essen / University of Bochum)

Panel 1: Histories of Humanitarianism: Cooperation and Paternalism

Chair: Alexandra Przyrembel (Freie Universität Berlin)

Francesca Piana (Swiss National Science Foundation / Columbia University):

‘A Red Crux on a White Flag’: The Visual Politics of the ICRC after WWI

Florian Hannig (University of Halle-Wittenberg):

The Biafra concern in West Germany: Historicizing empathy

Charlotte Walker-Said (City University of New York):

Science and Charity: Humanitarianism and the End of Empire

Jeff Roquen (Lehigh University, Pennsylvania):

America's first humanitarian intervention, 1895-1898

Käte Hamburger Lecture

Thomas G. Weiss (CUNY Graduate Center):
Humanitarianism's Contested Culture. Pollyanna Is Not a Role Model

Discussants: Dennis Dijkzeul (University of Bochum) and David Chandler (University of Westminster)

Lecture

Fritz Breithaupt (Indiana University):
The Dark Sides of Empathy: Nietzsche's Objection Against Empathy and the Future of Humanitarianism

Discussants: Frank Adloff (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) and Christine Unrau (KHK/GCR21 Duisburg, University of Cologne)

Panel 2: Humanitarianism, Religion and Transculturality: Cooperation and Sensibility

Chair: Claus Leggewie (KWI Essen)

Mathis Danelzik (KWI Essen):

Shaping, marginalizing and cooperating with religious authority: The case of campaigns to end female genital mutilation

Jochen Kleres (University of Gothenburg):

Humanitarianism, Development and Shifting Emotional Climates

Mayke Kaag (University of Leiden):

Islamic charities from the Arab world in Africa: Transcultural encounters of humanitarianism and morality

Panel 3: Humanitarianism, Peacebuilding and the Military: Cooperation and Complicity

Chair: Dirk Messner (German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik)

Antonio Donini (Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and Graduate Center, Geneva):

Deep lessons from Afghanistan

Adam Branch (Makerere Institute of Social Research, Uganda):

Assembling for protection: The politics of transnational militarization in Africa

Kai Koddenbrock (KHK/GCR21, Duisburg):

Reconfiguring Goma: The political economy of humanitarianism and peacebuilding in Eastern Congo

Aidan Hehir (University of Westminster):

R2P after the Arab Spring: The perennial need for UN military reform?

Lecture

Seyla Benhabib (Yale University):

From the Right to Have Rights to the Critique of Humanitarian Reason. Against the Cynical Turn in Human Rights Discourse

Panel 4: New Players in Global Humanitarianism: Cooperation and Competition

Chair: Volker Heins (KHK/GCR21, Duisburg / University of Bochum)

Cindy Horst (Peace Research Institute Oslo):

Diaspora humanitarianism: The invisibility of a third humanitarian space

Devon Curtis (University of Cambridge):

China and the Insecurity of Development in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Jutta Joachim (University of Hannover) / An-

drea Schneiker (University of Siegen):

Private military and security companies: New players in global aid governance

Concluding Remarks

Dennis Dijkzeul (University of Bochum) and David Chandler (University of Westminster)

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