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Editorial Introduction: Understanding Modern Humanitarianism

Over the last thirty years there has been an unprecedented gathering of academic interest around the topic of modern humanitarianism. The issues congregated here suggest that some significant changes are taking place in the political currency of social problems and in our shared frames of cultural self-understanding. When studying modern humanitarianism we are involved in charting the moral character and institutional formations of global civil society (Calhoun 2004; 2008; DeChaine 2002; Delanty 2000; Kaldor 2002). This is further understood to provide us with insights into the presiding rationalities within structures of global governance (Narkunas 2014; Fassin 2012). On many accounts, the study of modern humanitarian principles and practices is important for the extent to which it serves to expose the dynamics set in contemporary power relations; and especially where these are held to be justified on the grounds that they operate to promote ‘human rights’ and/or the ‘the good of humanity’.

A considerable amount of research is conducted on the understanding that ‘humanitarianism’ refers to a moral doctrine that guides the actions taken by a discreet group of international organizations committed to the relief of global human suffering and to the activities of a selection of agencies providing development assistance to alleviate conditions of poverty on a global scale. It is now heavily associated with the intergovernmental agencies of the United Nations and allied international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children and the International Committee of the Red Cross (Barnett 2010). In this context a ‘conventional narrative’ sets the terms for analysis and critique (Barnett 2011; Lester and Dussart 2014; Skinner and Lester 2012;). Here the founding moment of modern humanitarianism is identified in the efforts made by Henri

Dunant to establish a permanent system of assistance for the casualties of war following his shock encounter with the wounded, dead and dying on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859. The wellspring of modern humanitarianism is understood to lie in an original concern to organize and consecrate a particular form of civil action on behalf of the casualties of modern military conflict; one guided by principles of impartiality (the quality and quantity of aid is set to correspond with people's needs), neutrality (humanitarian action is motivated by a direct response to the suffering of people and nothing else besides), and independence (humanitarian action operates above the fray of politics). From here, it is argued that through the twentieth century it is possible to chart a process in which the original aims and objectives of modern humanitarianism have been abandoned and have been replaced by new imperatives and agendas. The institutionalization of humanitarianism within state-like organizations and its incorporation within the apparatus of inter-state relations and militarized interventions is understood to have transformed its moral identity and social functions (Barnett 2010: 173-97). Contemporary humanitarianism is portrayed as an intrinsically, and perhaps irredeemably, political movement that is caught within a spiralling crisis of legitimacy; at least, that is in relation to its willingness and/or ability to comply with Dunant's conception of the humanitarian mission for the Red Cross (Barnett and Weiss 2008; 2011; Rieff 2002). In this context, critical scholarship tends to be designed with the aim of interrogating issues of humanitarian principle; and further, with a commitment to expose how these are left compromised and corrupted when set into practice. Moreover, a considerable amount of this literature is concerned to explain how humanitarian interventions, whilst outwardly presenting themselves as motivated by compassion and as virtuous commitments of care, actually operate as governmental forces of oppression. Thus, largely speaking, it is humanitarianism as a form of political ideology that is held out for debate (Bornstein and Redfield 2010; Fassin 2012; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Kapoor 2013).

More recently, however, this critical scholarship has come under a challenge to reflect more deeply on the historical lineage of its cultural standpoint and terms of debate. It is argued that current research into modern humanitarianism is critically and analytically hamstrung due to an excessively ‘presentist orientation’ (Green 2014). It is further argued that insofar as they operate with little concern for the problem of understanding the origins of modern humanitarianism and its history, contemporary scholars are unable to recognize the range of forces that contribute to its social appeal and how these are now set to inhabit our consciousness and direct our behaviors. Here researchers are challenged to account for the so-called ‘humanitarian revolution’ of the eighteenth century, and to provide more carefully elaborated accounts of how this has been further consolidated and developed over the last two hundred years or so (Pinker 2011). This is issued, moreover, not only out of a concern to refine our understanding of the distinctive character of twenty-first century humanitarianism so that we are alerted to its continuities and ruptures with earlier movements and traditions, but also, with an interest in exposing the genealogy of the critical discourses that have developed in response to statements of humanitarian principle, cultural representations of humanitarian sentiment and the multiple social movements that have taken steps to institutionalize humanitarianism as a component of our politics (Moyn 2014). It is argued that we need to engage with a critique of critique that examines the values that are advanced as counterposed to humanitarianism in a bid to evaluate their human worth and practical consequences. Here we are made to adopt a standpoint in many longstanding debates surrounding the human values at stake in the attempt to broker rationality with sentiment; and particularly in connection to the ways this is played out in the relationship between critical thought and moral conduct (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016).

It is often the case, moreover, that while operating with these interests, scholars are alerted to the fact that much remains to be further revealed and better understood within our cultural and social history. For example, it is argued that the study of modern humanitarianism requires the development of a better sociological and historical understanding of emotional states and conditions, and further how these are set to be configured through our interactions with communication technologies that involve us in the struggle to make adequate moral sense of ‘distant suffering’ (Boltanski 1999; Orgad 2013). It is also argued that in many instances there is a pressing need for us to revise our understandings of the forms of religious experience and sacred culture that are advanced under conditions modernity; and especially in relation to how these are connected to the participation of women in public life (Barnett and Stein 2012; Berlant 2008; Recchiuti 2007). Certainly, moreover, it leaves many hankering after a better understanding of the connections and/or disconnections between humanitarian activism at local levels and the processes through which humanitarian politics has been institutionalized within structures of global government (Bornstein and Redfield 2010).

In sum, it is argued that the study of modern humanitarianism involves us in some important and potentially radical revisions of our cultural and social history. It is further claimed that in many instances these are liable to provide us with new orientations towards the present and with new perspectives on the possible futures that await us. The articles featured in this special issue all share these convictions. They also serve as examples of forms of scholarship that are seeking to break with terms of debate that operate in an exclusive mode of denunciation. Whilst involved in critically questioning the values, practices and representations of humanitarianism, they are all invested in the attempt to re-think and reappraise its social meanings and its involvement in reconfiguring the bounds of human sociality and political aspiration. In each

instance writers attend to many conflicts of interpretation and contestations of value with a concern to expose how these are productive for thought and action.

Michael Barnett has done more than most to devise conceptual schemes for setting contemporary forms of humanitarianism into analytical relief. His publications are particularly important for anyone concerned with the configuration of humanitarianism as an academic field of study (Barnett 2010; 2011; Barnett and Weiss 2008; 2011). In this volume he turns his attention to the ‘humanitarian act’ and its inherent ‘paternalism’. Barnett’s interest lies in analyzing the conditions under which this might be held morally and politically justified. He underlines the importance of a shared ‘sense of community’ as the founding condition on which humanitarian paternalism might achieve legitimacy; or rather, where it can be made debatable as such. By charting some of the many difficulties involved in institutionalizing this as part of the shared experience of international governance, he further goes on to explain why humanitarian action is always liable to court political opposition and moral contest.

In the contribution by Peter Stamatov we are invited to reflect on how divergent political appraisals of humanitarianism are played out within competing accounts of the historical conditions under which people were first inspired to care for the human dignity and well-being of distant strangers. Here he builds on some of the arguments featured in his earlier study of the origins of global humanitarianism (Stamatov 2013). Stamatov contends that in order to piece together an adequate historical and sociological understanding of the cultural politics of contemporary forms of humanitarianism we need to build from a careful study of the ideas and models of action that were handed down to us by the antislavery networks and abolitionist campaigns of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this special issue, he further elaborates on his contention that, insofar as there has been a tendency within Western scholarship to account

for the origins of humanitarianism within a Marxian frame of analysis, then too much is explained away as a mere product of economic determinism. By contrast, Stamatov explores how abolitionism stood in ‘a complex, entangled and antagonist relationship with the economy’, and in this he underlines the importance of moral norms and convictions as relatively independent variables within the spread of humanitarian projects, institutions and practices. Here we are challenged to reconsider the connections between the economic and moral dimensions of human action and how the past still operates to structure conditions of understanding and practice in the present.

By contrast, the article by John Brewer and colleagues highlight the potential for contemporary understandings and evaluations of humanitarianism to be reconfigured as a living social practice that seeks to break with the past in a quest for healing and renewal. Their interviews with victims of violent conflict in Sri Lanka document how humanitarian motives and aspirations operate as a pro-social forces. The effort to set humanitarian conviction in practice is here revealed as an enactment of human values through which society is re-made. By no means does this seek to hide from the fact that such practices often fall short of providing an adequate moral or political redress to the brute fact of human suffering, but at the same time, these are viewed as indispensable parts of the process that facilitates the tolerance, forgiveness and endurance that are necessary for forging the solidarities that make social life possible again in the aftermath of its violent breakdown and destruction.

Claire Moon is similarly concerned with documenting the involvement of humanitarian culture and values within the creation of new social understandings and practices. Accordingly, at the same time as she is engaged with the attempt to understand the complex history of humanitarian convictions and actions, Moon is particularly concerned with their potential to operate as spurs

to the creation of new social justice agendas and unprecedented forms of social recovery. While surveying the recent development of ‘forensic humanitarianism’ as part of the communal response to the atrocities of war, she argues that this ‘configures not only the living but also the dead as the subject of humanitarian concern and object of intervention’; the right of people to be treated with ‘respect’ and dignity’ continues in the grave. Moon highlights how the conjunction between modern forensic science and humanitarianism has created new forms of civic engagement founded on the mission to deliver rights to the dead.

The papers by Moon and Brewer and colleagues serve to underline a key contention that also runs through the work of Stamatov and Barnett, namely that ‘humanitarianism is nothing less than a revolution in the ethics of care’ (Barnett 2011: 18). Wilkinson’s article is written as an invitation to debate the ongoing consequences this holds for terms of social and sociological understanding. He reviews some of the ways in which humanitarian conviction first inspired movements to respond to people’s sufferings as a ‘social question’ and further attends to the involvement of humanitarian values in traditions of social inquiry that aim to expose the moral experience of society to view. Wilkinson’s discussion sets up a critical dialogue with Foucauldian scholarship with a particular concern to attend to a considerable amount of unfinished business in Foucault’s writing on the moral condition of modern humanitarianism and how it can be addressed as an object for critique. By having us attend to ‘the humanitarianism that is contained within the critique of humanitarianism’, Wilkinson contends that we are still very much grappling to understand how this constitutes our moral condition and as well the social terms under which we relate to ourselves and others as ‘human’.

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Barnett, Stamatov, Moon and Wilkinson were first aired for discussion. Special thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers who were generous with their time and offered helpful feedback on the finished articles. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to John Crowley and Madeleine Hatfield for agreeing to feature these in a special issue of the International Social Science Journal and for their guidance in seeing the work through to print.

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