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 now exists 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.

This course explores the foundations, logic, dynamics, dilemmas, and consequences of a form of governance that operates in the name of -- and for -- the international community. It begins by examining 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. But, historically and practically speaking, caring for distant strangers varies considerably. Accordingly, we consider the “forces of compassion” – the conditions under which we care, whether today’s human society is more compassionate than was human society two centuries ago, and the tensions that are part of most modern discourses of compassion. 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. Specifically, we will explore the relationship between paternalism and humanitarian governance. Humanitarian governance, after all, 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?

Section II examines features of “creative destruction.” Although destruction might not appear creative, many people invest disasters with religious and spiritual significance, e.g. “acts of God,” and many humanitarians treat moments of destruction as providing opportunities for renewal, redemption, and progress. Creative destruction, then, includes the two elements of humanitarian action – to protect those whose lives are at immediate risk and to prevent future suffering by reducing the causes of harm. These activities, though seemingly beyond ethical reproach, contain their own dynamics and dilemmas, especially when considered in the context of a humanitarianism that is prone toward paternalism. We will explore the possibility that these dilemmas and difficulties increase as the humanitarian intervention moves from the discrete goal of protecting lives at risk to the more complicated task of trying to restructure states and societies to remove the causes of conflict, injustice, and avoidable pain. This section, then, considers the debate over humanitarian intervention, the dilemmas of emergency relief, the “liberal peace,” post-conflict peacebuilding and statebuilding, and whether processes that are expected to place more power in the hands of increasingly democratically-oriented states are merely reproducing existing power inequalities at the local level or introducing new ones at the global level. If power is scaling up and away, then the immediate question is: where is
accountability? Lastly, we consider whether a humanitarianism that operates in the name of the “international” community and “universal” values is synonymous with Christianity and the West.

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 final grade. All students must write me an email identifying 3-4 questions or observations that are provoked by the reading by the Sunday evening immediately prior to the Monday seminar.

There are three written assignments for this class. You must do one reaction paper, worth 20% of your grade. There is a term paper that will comprise 50% of your grade. Because students in this class have different professional goals, and are at different stages in their professional development, I am going to give you some freedom to determine for yourselves what topic and what kind of exercise would be most beneficial. Formats can include research designs, research-length articles, extensive literatures reviews, and the like. Topics can include anything that can be reasonably subsumed under the category of humanitarianism, and I can get to decide what is reasonable. Lastly, there is a final exam worth 30% of your grade.

Readings. There is a fair bit of reading in this course. You must do the reading for each week before coming to seminar. There are several books, articles, and essays assigned for the course. We will be reading all or most of the following books, which are on reserve and available for purchase.


Office Hours. My office is at Rigot 11. I will have office hours Thursday 10:30-12:30 and by appointment. The best way to reach me is either after class or by email – mbarnett@umn.edu. Colin Nippert is the teaching assistant for the course. His office is in Rigot 38 and his office hours are on Wednesdays from 12:15-14:00. His phone number is 022 908 5951 and his email is colin.nippert@graduateinstitute.ch.

Section I:
The Principles and Logics of Humanitarian Governance

February 16 Introduction

February 23 Why Care?

March 2  Nineteenth Century Roots of Humanitarianism


Paper Proposal Due.

March 9  Twentieth Century Roots of Humanitarianism


March 16 Humanitarianism: Its Goals and Principles

International Committee of the Red Cross. Codes of Conduct
March 23  Humanitarian Governance?


Section II: Creative Destruction

March 30  Humanitarian Intervention


Evans, The Responsibility to Protect: Chapters 1-6, 10.

Short Paper Choice #1: Is the “Responsibility to Protect” a norm? If not, why not and what would have to occur for it to become a norm? If so, how did this happen?

April 6  Emergency Relief


Hugo Slim. 1997. Doing the Right Thing: Relief Agencies, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Responsibility in Political Emergencies and War, Disasters, 21, 3, 244-57

April 20  Liberal Peace


April 27  Post-Conflict Reconstruction


Read the following in Roland Paris and Tim Sisk, eds., The Dilemmas of

Short Paper Choice #2: You are the head of a post-conflict unit in [insert country of your choice]. Write a 3-4 page briefing paper identifying which post-conflict activities during the first six months require most weight and why.

May 4 Post Conflict Reconstruction: Liberation, Domination, or Paternalism?


May 11 Accountability and Participation


May 18 It’s a Small World After All?


Carlo Benedietti. 2006. Islamic and Christian inspired Relief NGOs: Between tactical collaboration and strategic diffidence?” Journal of International Development, 18, 849–859

Final Papers Due.

May 25 Final Exam.