Universality

Humanitarian action is characterized by a tension between the universality of its pretensions and the particularity of the contexts of its realization. The notion of “humanitarian” builds on the concept of “humanity” and signals the universality of its outlook—implying that it relies on a universal human inclination and also that it applies to humanity as a whole (Fast 2016).

As a variation on an old theme, this universality was emphasized in the United Nations report *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, which was prepared for the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. It is stated that effective action requires a “unified vision”: “In a globalized world, this vision needs to be inclusive and universal and to bring people, communities and countries together, while recognizing and transcending cultural, religious or political differences.” It is maintained that this vision must rely on a notion of “our common humanity”; “that there is inherent dignity and worth in every individual that must be protected, respected and given the opportunity and conditions to flourish” (Ki-Moon 2016: 15–16).

In the humanitarian principles defined by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), “humanity” and “universality” appear separately. In this instance, humanity, combined with neutrality, impartiality, and independence, pertains to how humanitarian law and assistance should be conceived and applied, while universality refers to the global scope of their application (ICRC 2015). The ICRC currently has a near universal reach in this respect, and while most headquarters of large international humanitarian organizations are based in Europe, international and local organizations doing humanitarian work are a global phenomenon (UNOCHA 2018). That said, there is a tension between the ideal of universal reach and the reality of “forgotten crises” and trends in humanitarian action, where certain crises are overfunded and overrepresented. Moreover, the desired universal outreach might be limited by access denial—as reflected in debates about constraints on the humanitarian space.

Surprisingly, humanitarian law and assistance are criticized both for not being sufficiently universal and also for their universal attitude. For instance, Costas Douzinas reminds us that the notion of humanity is itself an invention of modernity, with no universalist equivalent in Greek or Roman thought (Douzinas 2007: 1). Contrary to this universalist image, Didier Fassin describes how humanitarianism as we know it today is integral to broader social and political developments in Europe over the past few decades, and is not a timeless manifestation of empathy and care (Fassin 2011).
Yet there is a universal dimension to the basic humanitarian objective of assisting people in desperate need, independent of their identity or self-interest. This objective does not rely on a particular notion of humanity or humanitarianism but rather on inclinations towards charity and compassion. The ways in which humanitarian practices turn these inclinations into ideas and actions are nonetheless always formed by their cultural and political settings, both at the sending and receiving ends. Jacinta O’Hagan and Miwa Hirono (2014), for instance, describe how the emergence of new humanitarian actors and arenas in Asia has resulted in new “cultures of humanitarianism,” without necessarily undermining international humanitarian cooperation (O’Hagan and Hirono 2014). Others have demonstrated how any humanitarian practice involves a degree of political instrumentalization when being realized, entailing a great diversity in political features and consequences of humanitarian governance (Dijkzeul and Sandvik 2019). Indeed, the supposed universality of humanitarianism lends itself well to the facilitation and justification of political agendas.

Moreover, bureaucratic and technological rationales form humanitarian engagement. On the one hand, this contributes to the universality of the assistance, given its reliance on universal rules and standards. On the other hand, bureaucracy and technology represent a non-universal modern rationality that may depart from predominant political rationalities and technologies in those arenas where humanitarian organizations operate (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010).

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References

Is humanitarianism a feature of modernist utopias? Does international humanitarian law express utopian designs? Certainly, global consensus about humanitarian interventions, namely of the military kind, does not exist, and these interventions have always involved strategic, normative, and empirical considerations. Still, humanitarianism is deployed in the name of humanity (Feldman and Ticktin 2010), and different routes are open to us if we wish to explore its links with the utopian trope: the religious moorings of humanitarianism that instruct us to help those in need, the idea of the sacredness of human life, a secular common humanity that transcends all nationalities and boundaries, the core principles of humanitarian action, or the universality of human rights. All are symbolic horizons that inform a myriad of humanitarian configurations and gestures on the ground. No doubt, when seen as an ethos, humanitarianism has had sweeping ambitions, propelling the end of the slave trade, the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the so-called “laws of humanity.” The humanity that grounds humanitarian law, and the humanness that informs humanitarian moral reasoning, have sanctioned all sorts of saving interventions in post-disaster and conflict settings (Fassin 2011). Discursive and visual tropes have also been deployed at great length to galvanize global compassion and the “gift” of aid. The constellation that emerges from this cursory review is quite extraordinary, but this is not to say that institutional humanitarianism is devoid of all sorts of self-interested, neo-imperialistic, hypocritical, and power-driven ambitions. However, this is not the point. The idealistic, universalizing, and aspirational contours of humanitarian reasoning are readily identifiable; what needs to be elucidated here is its relation to utopia.

In common parlance, utopia refers to a desirable yet impossible state. One could argue that were we to live in a fully realized utopia, there would be no