Is Humanitarianism Being Politicised?
A Reply to David Rieff

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This morning I have the more than usually difficult task of debating with someone who is n't here! Unfortunately, because of David's illness, I am required to speak up for myself and also to represent the views of my imaginary opponent. But although David is flat on his back in New York, we do have the very powerful contents of his book to represent him. So what I will try to do is summarise the main arguments of his book first and then take issue with them as I would have done if he had been with us.

But, if I am faced with a difficult task, am I also faced with a difficult question? I think not. Surely, it will come as no surprise to anyone in this room that humanitarianism is being politicized. It always is. The question for our discussion is a self-evident one. Asking if humanitarianism is politicized is like asking any number of other self-evident questions. Does it rain in England? Is Holland flat? Is the Pope a Catholic? Humanitarianism is always politicized somehow. It is a political project in a political world. Its mission is a political one – to restrain and ameliorate the use of organised violence in human relations and to engage with power in order to do so. Powers that are either sympathetic or unsympathetic to humanitarian action in war always have an interest in shaping it their way.

For me, the "politicization of humanitarianism" is not an outrage in itself. Ethics and politics are not opposites. I believe that there can be good politics, bad politics and some politics that are better than others. So for humanitarianism to be a political project is not a contradiction or necessarily a problem. The real questions for our debate are the ones that follow from this recognition. These are the ones raised in David's book.

- Who is politicising humanitarianism today, how and to what end?
- Does the predominant politicization of the day matter to victims?
- If so, what can humanitarians do about it?

David's book gives a determined answer to the first question by describing a predominant and, for him, corrosive form of politicization by western power. He

thinks this politicisation does matter to victims and does not think there is much we can do about it. Indeed, according to David the crisis is extreme. It is all too late. The patient is already dead!

A Bed for the Night

David's book reads like a lament. It is like a funeral oration beside the coffin of a dear friend. Since Bosnia in 1992, he argues, wave after wave of politicization has finally killed the pure ideal of an "autonomous and independent humanitarianism" that modestly tried to bring an element of kindness, care and witness to the horrors of war. This was a project that aimed, at least, to give a few people a bed for the night amidst their suffering.

But his lament is more anguished still because it emerges that humanitarians willingly gave up this virginal humanitarianism unto death. He uses the corporate language of mergers and acquisitions to describe the politicization of humanitarianism as a "friendly takeover". It was a calculated sacrifice by many humanitarians to get them into the bigger business of the armed protection of threatened civilians and neo-liberal state construction. In other words, humanitarians sold their idea to the predominant political agenda of interventionist or containist western power or imperialism. David points out that such an elision of humanitarian and state political interest is not unprecedented but has a direct ancestor in the relationship between European mission, philanthropy and colonialism in the 19th century.

So, how did this happen again in the last 10 years of the 20th century? First, we humanitarians let the politicians use our humanitarian ideal and profession as a "flag of convenience" to do very little but contain violence in Bosnia and Rwanda. Then, western political power moved on and used the humanitarian ideal as a "warrant for war" in its invasions of Kosovo and Afghanistan, swiftly bringing in humanitarian organizations to signal that western war is a distinctly humane and altruistic violence.

Thus, in 10 short years we have sold our profession and become coopted by political power so that David, in the shortest sentence in the book, is left tragically to wail: "Poor humanitarianism". Like Christianity before it, he regrets humanitarianism's arrival at its "Constantine moment" when it passed from a movement of private, charismatic faith to state-based orthodoxy. All that is left now is David's useful idea of "state humanitarianism".

But not quite all, because alone among all humanitarian organizations, MSF did not sell! It held on to its autonomous and independent humanitarian ideal and practice. Like Noah and his ark, Rony Brauman has been busy gathering both male and female humanitarians from all corners of the earth – MSF Australia and Doctors without Borders in the USA. David's view of humanitarianism today is a remnant theology. We are all doomed, but Rony and MSF will make it to Mount Ararat and (assuming the Turks give them a permit!) will restart pure humanitarianism once again. In the remnant theology of Star Wars, one imagines Rony as Obi Wan Kanobi hiding out in

Paris, entrusted with the enlightenment and training of Fiona Terry as his own Luke Skywalker. Medicins sans frontiers mais avec la force!

A Response

So, there is my wholly humanitarian (humane, impartial, neutral and independent) summary of David's important book! Now we come to my examination of the issues he raises in four main areas:

- What is our essential humanitarian ethic and idea – the aim of our profession?
- How is it politicized today both positively and negatively?
- Does this politicization matter to victims?
- What can we do about it?

First, we need to look at **the humanitarian idea and its ethic** before deciding if it has been politicized to death by neo-liberal co-option.   The humanitarian idea is primarily a small one about restraint and limit to the use of organized violence in war. The basic ethics of the idea are well summarized in the Code of Conduct's first four articles. The humanitarian ideal prioritises the saving of human life universally by virtue of individual need and to operate this ethic it moves neutrally and independently within war – both doing things and saying things to realise its ideal.

However, doing anything to, with or for people always incurs a secondary morality. Humanitarian action is no exception. It would be wrong simply to save and protect people in any way. There are good and bad ways to save people that are determined by wider moral goods around their personal, social and economic dignity. You can't just save and leave. You can't just save by cruelly concentrating people in camps. You can't just focus on a few survivalist priorities while driving up local rents and salaries in a way that impoverishes others and starts a brain-drain. You can't just save people without an eye to their continued protection or their future livelihood.

Because of this ethical reality, we recognize a secondary humanitarian morality that is expressed in articles 5-10 of the Code of Conduct. David and other "back to basics" humanitarian Luddites might already regard these ideals as "too developmental" or "too political" or too much trying to be "part of the solution". But this secondary morality is a key part of the humanitarian ethic. As any humanitarian worker will tell you, real relationships between people mean that you cannot just stop helping because they are alive and have not died. Being alive brings with it wider needs and wider moral goods.

If this is the ethic, then **how is it being politicized and does it matter to victims?** David identifies three main forms of politicization and I would add two more.

- **Humanitarian Spend and Priorities**

It is obvious if one looks around the world that humanitarian spend by OECD government donors does not simply follow a *moral geography* of need but also tracks a *political geography* of western geo-strategic priorities around the war on terror or the extension of liberalism. No doubt this is true. States have the money and are simultaneously laden with other moral obligations alongside the humanitarian ethic. If the wider moral considerations of states worry humanitarian NGOs, they don't have to take state money. They could work harder to raise free, unrestricted funds and concentrate their resources where state humanitarianism does not reach. In the meantime, the pattern, coverage and depth of humanitarian action is deeply politicized by the choices of those with money and the choices of those who want it.

Does this pattern of spend matter to victims? Yes, it must mean that the current system is unfair on victims. Many must feel its bias and selectivity in the places it does not reach. Added to which, its unevenness also creates the regrettable phenomenon of the humanitarian invasion which can be deeply disruptive to the economy, polity and dignity of a prioritized state.

- **Integration into State Humanitarianism**

David's argument is at its strongest when he uncovers the increasing integration (or what others call "coherence") between humanitarian organizations and the wider political goals of western power. Such integration is a reality but is it wrong? And is it bad for victims?

In their interventionist policies with its Brahimi doctrine, western policy makers are trying to join-up a range of moral goods in their approach to conflicts and human rights violations. Such joining-up of goods is not a new moral challenge. Almost every agency other than MSF is a multi-mandate agency that has found the imperatives of humanitarianism's secondary morality as compelling as its primary imperative.

Agencies like Oxfam, Care, Save the Children and the UN system are always simultaneously working for other general goods alongside their concern for the humanitarian imperative. So too, of course, are the ordinary war affected people that they are trying to help. Theirs too is a life and world of wider needs and goods which they are struggling to join-up. Is it somehow heretical or deluded for humanitarians and politicians to think like this too? Is such a concern fatal to the humanitarian profession? Can a humanitarian organization only ever be a single-issue organization?

I don't think that integration or coherence is in itself necessarily bad for victims. Indeed, I wish that a concern for the humanitarian ethic and an eye on peace and wider moral goods were always integrated into the policies and practice of those pursuing war. For example, I wish Rwanda had invaded DRC and the RUF had invaded Sierra Leone with a more integrated humanitarian ethic and capacity. Political strategies such as these cry out for much more coherence with other goods, not less. Some state humanitarianism in DRC from the many states invading it in recent years would certainly have been good for victims.

- **Politicisation of Humanitarian Language**

Throughout his book, David is concerned that presenting the humanitarian ethic in the language of human rights makes the profession a more political one.   He also points out repeatedly that the recourse to normative rights-based language and its laws is fruitless and irrelevant in the context of wars that consistently ignore them. In such conditions, David considers that going rights-based is no more than political posturing for humanitarians who should be more concerned with implementing the essential values of their ethic like restraint, compassion and practical help.

Does this politicization of language matter to victims? In truth, it may not make any difference what language we use to argue the humanitarian ethic among ourselves but it may have repercussions when we use it in the politically charged space around civilians in need. Positively, it might be that rights-talk by humanitarians can help to lever western political power into various forms of pro-victim action. Equally positively, if rights-talk is a discourse that allows victims to enter the political realm more powerfully themselves then better still.

More negatively, however, rights-talk has always been like red rag to a bull to certain political regimes. Its use may, therefore, endanger victims and undermine humanitarian access. In such situations it makes obvious sense to talk of values and virtues rather than rights and law. As a terrible example, a former student of mine recently told me that when he was being tortured in an Iraqi jail before the American invasion and mentioned the Geneva Conventions they tortured him even more.

- **The Politics of Humanitarian Rejection**

David's book focuses on humanitarianism's politicization by co-option and take-over. The problem is one of power using humanitarianism too much. But there are also serious problems about power using it *too little* which he tends to overlook. I would like to add to a politicization by rejection to his list. More usually in war, violent politicians and their various fighting forces pursue a very active politics of humanitarian rejection rather than humanitarian adoption and integration.

If David is worried that many western politicians are all too eager to abuse the humanitarian ethic by taking it to heart, he should surely be as worried that others abuse it by rejecting it out of hand and giving it no part in their politics. This politicization by rejection is just as much politicization – a "cleansing" of the humanitarian ethic from politics that wants neither humanitarian norms nor humanitarian workers in a given political arena.

The politics of humanitarian rejection is arguably an outcome of the excessive western intregration of which David writes. In many wars with western belligerents and interests, humanitarianism and its personnel are no doubt rejected and targeted precisely because they are identified with the western enemy as "spies", "imperialists" and "infidels" who deserve to die for working to institute western solutions.

Does this politics of humanitarian rejection matter to victims? Obviously, it does. If the reality of state humanitarianism and its integrated actors and goals make it more likely that that humanitarian activity and its personnel are identified with a particular western project of liberal state-building and aggression then it may matter a great deal. If victims cannot be reached when humanitarian activity identified with western power and terrorized away from them then they may well suffer even more. This very practical problem of identity with western belligerence and ideology is the one that has the greatest capacity to unravel contemporary humanitarian action.

But it would be unwise to think that identification with western power is the only reason that the humanitarian ethic is so often rejected by violent politics. Certain political movements have always rejected humanitarianism anyway. Many extreme revolutionist ideologies and their armed forces despise such an ethic for their enemies. They simply do not recognize the humanitarian idea as applying to certain categories of people. And sometimes those that do recognize the ethic see it as likely to derail their greater political project and so dismiss it as an impractical and time-wasting distraction. Other greed-based movements of political violence simply prefer to have as few meddlers and observers as possible around as they ply their violent trade. In short, a politics of humanitarian rejection is certainly not new and not simply the result of contemporary humanitarianism's adoption by western states alongside their use of military force.

- **The Emerging Humanitarian Politics of HIV/AIDS**

Another addition to the current forces politicising humanitarianism must be HIV/AIDS. As Alex de Waal and others have recently pointed out, the massive social, economic and political consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic look set to politicize humanitarian action in wholly new ways in the years to come. Two particular AIDS-related "re-politicisations" of humanitarian action are already on the horizon.

First, de Waal and others are predicting a "governance crisis" in many parts of Africa as the virus kills many vital public servants running African government ministries. Combined with devastating economic and social decline at local level, this could see increased food and livelihood emergencies with little alternative but massive welfare programmes often run by international agencies. In a worst case scenario, this could lead to humanitarianism as government in certain states.

Secondly, the de-socialising effect of HIV/AIDS as it destroys families and community norms, values and structures may produce a newly violent youth that has little to live for and not long to be alive. With their life chances so compressed they may turn to violence to get what they want in the short time they have. New patterns of AIDS-related violence may then develop fast and deep across various societies. For the humanitarian ethic to thrive in such an environment will be a challenge indeed. A politics of humanitarian rejection is more likely in such violence. If the humanitarian ethic does survive in such a setting, it is hard to imagine it doing so without some form of strong political and military backing to protect it while it operated.

What To Do?

So, if humanitarianism will continue to be politicized in some way by excessive adoption or rejection alike what can we do about it. Looking ahead in the light of David's analysis I suggest we humanitarians have a choice of three options: radical, reformist or transformational.

- **The Radical Option**

If David is right and pure humanitarianism is essentially dead but for its remnant, then we could all now go and join MSF and wait for the Ark and its survivors to settle on Mount Ararat. We could reject all offers of government money and communicate our total independence and autonomy from state humanitarianism and our complete disinterest in wider solutions to people's suffering. Then we could simply work on the modest and important ethic of saving a life and offering a bed for the night to people in need wherever we like and wherever the humanitarian rejectionists will have us.

- **The Reformist Option**

Alternatively, we could pursue a middle way around the emerging "good donorship" initiative and try a more honest system that respects "Chinese walls" between different departments of state concerned with different moral goods. We could un-couple humanitarianism from other goods and ensure that the skewed humanitarian spend is ended. And we could also continue to pursue a strategy of "good NGOship" by trying to stick to our principles, live by our Code and resist the temptation to chase ambulances, pose to cameras and drive up rents.

- **The Transformational Option**

Finally perhaps, we could decide to listen to both David Rieff and the humanitarian rejectionists and realise that we are now either too unwelcome or too deeply co-opted to be effectively humanitarian in our present form. We could then consider practical ways to de-colonise humanitarianism and transform its external interventionist style into one of support to indigenous humanitarian capacity within societies at war.

This attempt to roll-back western humanitarianism would concentrate on a shift from humanitarian implementation to humanitarian activism that would work in support of local actors who could own and deliver the humanitarian ethic for themselves as national rather than international organizations. And we could work in solidarity with others who are striving to integrate the humanitarian ethic into the fabric of their own politics by creating norms and cultures that prevent civilianized violence. In this way, we could help to break up the monopoly that western agencies have on humanitarian resources and empower victim societies.

Conclusion

David Reiff has written an important book which will help all humanitarians think about what they are doing and what they believe. It remains to be seen whether you all join MSF!

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