

## Five shades of grey: variants of 'political' humanitarianism

**Miriam Bradley** Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals, Spain

### Abstract

Humanitarianism is a contested concept. Should humanitarian action seek to address only the symptoms of crises, or also their causes? Can humanitarian agencies best achieve their goals through a commitment to neutrality, or should they take a self-consciously political approach? This article argues that debates about the desirability of more ambitious approaches to humanitarianism have been clouded by a lack of conceptual clarity. Showing that the ICRC perspective is not as apolitical as often presented, and that so-called 'political humanitarianism' conflates four conceptually distinct ways of being political, the article suggests that a black and white characterisation of approaches to humanitarianism as either political or apolitical is more accurately rendered as (at least) five shades of grey. Distinguishing the different variants of 'political' humanitarianism matters—and the article highlights how their conflation has marred normative debates on the desirability of different approaches.

**Keywords:** classical humanitarianism, new humanitarianism, ICRC, neutrality, humanitarian principles, political humanitarianism, consequentialism, deontology, speaking out, state sovereignty

### Introduction

Humanitarianism is a contested concept, and the question of what it means to be humanitarian is at the heart of normative debates in the field of humanitarian policy. There is broad agreement that humanitarianism is about alleviating the suffering of distant others in the context of humanitarian crises (Calhoun, 2008, p. 79; Slim, 2015, p. 45), but there is much less agreement on two linked questions. First, what objectives can properly be considered humanitarian goals—should humanitarian action be limited to addressing the symptoms of crises, or should it also seek to address their causes (Fox, 2001; Barnett, 2018, pp. 326-327)? Second, what can rightly be considered humanitarian means for the pursuit of these goals and, in particular, what is the proper role of principles and politics—can humanitarian agencies best achieve their goals through a commitment to neutrality, or should they take a more self-consciously political approach (Harroff-Tavel, 1989; Barnett, 2018, pp. 328-333)? The answers to these questions define the main boundaries of international humanitarianism, boundaries which are highly contested. This contestation is as old as modern humanitarianism, but peaked following widespread recognition that aid had often done more harm than good in the complex emergencies of the 1990s, for example through the instrumentalization and manipulation of aid by Serb forces in Bosnia, and the use of refugee camps in Zaire by those who had led the Rwandan genocide to re-group, re-arm and launch attacks across the border (see Weiss, 1999; Fox, 2001; Rieff, 2002). It is most recently exemplified in debates over the outcomes of the 2015 World Humanitarian Summit (UN Secretary-General, 2016; DuBois, 2018).

The humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence define the parameters of 'classical humanitarianism', exemplified by the policy and practice of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Humanitarians and humanitarian action conforming to these principles are sometimes said to be apolitical. For example, writing about humanitarianism prior to

the 1990s, Michael Barnett tells us that the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence 'rendered humanitarians apolitical' (Barnett, 2011, p. 2). Fiona Fox writes of 'apolitical, neutral humanitarian relief' (Fox, 2001, p. 275). Thomas Weiss writes of the 'apolitical practices and principles' of the ICRC, and of 'classical proponents of apolitical humanitarianism' and 'apolitical classicists' even as he argues that in the post-Cold War era, humanitarian organizations have not been apolitical in practice (Weiss 1999, pp. 1, 3, 13, 14, 20).

According to several commentators, the ICRC perspective was widely shared until the 1990s, at which point a division arose between 'classical' humanitarians like the ICRC, and those who advocate a more 'political' humanitarianism, sometimes referred to as 'new humanitarianism'. In 1999, for example, Thomas Weiss claimed that the ICRC position was 'giving way to the notion that the two types of action—political and humanitarian—cannot and should not be dissociated' (Weiss, 1999, p. 7). Two years later, Fiona Fox claimed that aid workers were queuing up to sign up to 'new humanitarianism' and David Chandler told us that a 'new-humanitarian' consensus had 'succeeded in redefining humanitarian policy' (Fox, 2001, pp. 275, 276; Chandler, 2001, p. 678). In 2005, Michael Barnett similarly affirmed that during the 1990s humanitarian agencies got swept up into the world of politics (Barnett, 2005, p. 724).

This story is not entirely wrong, but it obscures much of the nuance in different variants of humanitarianism. The term 'political' can mean many different things, and the conflation of different ways of being political has generated conceptual confusion. This article sets out to clear up that confusion. It argues that humanitarianism can be political in at least five distinct ways. What is often referred to as 'classical' or 'apolitical' humanitarianism is actually political in many respects, and four additional ways of being—through unintended consequences; in the pursuit of transformative goals; speaking out about human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law (IHL); and compromising state sovereignty— political tend to be conflated under the label of 'new' or 'political' humanitarianism. In clarifying and distinguishing these different ways in which humanitarian action can be political, and how they relate to one another, this article not only provides a clearer conceptual underpinning for the normative debates, but also contributes to literature which defines or characterises different approaches to humanitarianism in practice.

The contribution to the normative debates is two-fold. First, the analysis in this article challenges the all-or-nothing terms of the 'classical' vs. 'new' humanitarianism debate. Acknowledging unintended consequences does not logically lead to the pursuit of transformative goals, for example, and eschewing transformative goals does not preclude speaking out about IHL violations or providing humanitarian assistance without state consent. Second, the article suggests that the differences of opinion are not as intractable as they may seem. Classical/apolitical humanitarianism is often characterized as an approach grounded in deontological ethics and new/political humanitarianism as one of consequentialist ethics (Duffield, Macrae, and Curtis, 2001, p. 271; Slim, 2002, pp. 251-252; Gordon and Donini, 2015). However, such dichotomies are overly simplistic. Many of the arguments against adopting deliberately political approaches are not grounded in deontological ethics, but rather in concerns about the consequences of such approaches. At the heart of the contestation, then, is not so much different conceptions of what is good, but rather empirical questions about the impact of different courses of action.

The article also speaks to literature that seeks to understand and categorize actually existing humanitarianism. Existing typologies tend either to focus on only one or two ways of being political and/or to presuppose particular relationships between different ways of being political. For example, Weiss distinguishes “classicists”, “minimalists”, “maximalists”, and “solidarists” in a typology which assumes that the position of any given actor along one of four axes (engagement with authorities, neutrality, impartiality and consent) determines its position on the other three (Weiss, 1999, p. 4). The more a humanitarian agency advocates embraces public confrontations with authorities, for example, the more they will abandon neutrality and impartiality, and the less they will pursue consent. In such a typology, then, there is no scope for a position which prioritizes impartiality and limited goals at the same time as overriding state sovereignty. Chandler distinguishes two strands of “new humanitarianism”: a solidarist strand which ‘deepens’ humanitarianism through commitments to speaking out about human rights abuses and to working without state consent where necessary; and a developmentalist strand which ‘broadens’ humanitarianism through the pursuit of the kinds of longer-term transformative goals associated with development work or conflict resolution (Chandler, 2001, pp. 682-689). While he does not explicitly discuss relationships or interactions between these two strands, both are assumed to involve subordinating relief to wider strategic goals (Chandler, 2001, pp. 689, 694, 695-696). According to such a characterization, then, if humanitarians embrace advocacy or work without state consent, they also pursue transformative goals. Barnett and Snyder identify four variants of humanitarianism in a two-by-two taxonomy, which characterizes humanitarianisms according to whether or not they seek to alter governance arrangements on the one hand, and whether or not they seek to change the incentives and constraints facing local actors on the other (Barnett and Snyder, 2008, p. 146). Both dimensions in this taxonomy are concerned with goals rather than means or methods, and it has nothing to say about other ways of being ‘political’, such as speaking out about IHL violations or operating without state consent.

The rest of the article proceeds in five main parts, each of which corresponds to a shade of grey—that is, a distinct way in which humanitarianism can be said to be political.<sup>1</sup> The first section outlines the parameters of classical humanitarianism, as practised by the ICRC, explaining the rationale for the so-called principles of humanitarian action, and arguing that even classical humanitarianism is a political project of sorts. Each of sections two to five sets out a distinct way in which humanitarian action can and sometimes does diverge from the ICRC approach, and in which it can also be said to be political. By clarifying what is at stake in the different normative positions, the analysis in these sections sheds light on the distinctions between these variants of ‘political’ humanitarianism and the relationships between them. While the analysis is primarily at the conceptual level, empirical examples are used to illustrate different positions and possibilities. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting the ways in which the conflation of distinct ways of being ‘political’ has clouded debates around whether and how international humanitarian agencies should be political.

### **1. Classical humanitarianism<sup>2</sup>**

Classical humanitarianism is characterized by adherence to the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These principles are central to the identity of the ICRC, the archetypal classical humanitarian agency, and many other agencies have also adopted them. The International Court of Justice, in determining whether activities were humanitarian or not in its 1986 decision on *Nicaragua vs the United States*, declined to offer its own definition, instead defining ‘humanitarian’

in reference to what the ICRC does. Even those who contest the value of these principles in humanitarian action tend to state their position in contradistinction to the ICRC perspective (see, for example, Weiss, 1999). As such, the ICRC position is a good starting point for understanding what these principles mean, and the ethics and logics behind them.<sup>3</sup>

For the ICRC, humanity is the essential principle from which the others flow, and which articulates the ultimate and sole aim of humanitarian action: ‘to prevent and alleviate suffering, protect life and ensure respect for the dignity of people in desperate situations as a result of conflict or disaster’ (Labbé and Daudin, 2015, p. 186). According to ICRC doctrine, the principles of humanity and impartiality are both substantive principles, defining the objectives of humanitarian action (Pictet 1979, 8). Hugo Slim similarly characterizes these two principles as collectively constituting the humanitarian goal (Slim 2015). However, the principle of impartiality can additionally be understood as a more practical principle, in that it further specifies and operationalizes the principle of humanity, introducing the notions of non-discrimination and proportionality. For the Red Cross, impartial humanitarian action is understood to be that which ‘makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions... It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals in proportion to the degree of their suffering and to give priority according to the degree of urgency’ (Pictet, 1979, pp. 4, 27).

While the principle of impartiality offers greater specificity than the principle of humanity, there is sufficient ambiguity in the way the principle is formulated and understood for it to be consistent with multiple different distributional commitments. Non-discrimination will often be a necessary condition for prioritizing those with greatest need or responding in proportion to need, but it is not a sufficient condition. Moreover, these last two goals can conflict with one another, and aid agencies may incorporate other considerations—such as efficiency—under the rubric of impartiality (Parfit 1997; Rubenstein, 2008). In practice, aid agencies interpret impartiality in different ways according to their mandates and expertise—they do not respond to suffering wherever it may be found, but limit themselves to suffering in humanitarian emergencies—and the ICRC mandate, for example, limits it largely to contexts of conflict and violence (Bradley, 2016, pp. 43-45). Furthermore, they are often unable even to implement their own interpretation of the principle, given limited availability and comparability of information on needs and suffering, difficulties accessing populations in need, and funding restrictions (Bradley, 2016, pp. 45-49). Nonetheless, for classical humanitarians, assistance and protection should—as far as possible—be distributed according to some general rules, which centre on consideration of relative levels of need and suffering (potentially across time as well as space), and may include consideration of efficiency or effectiveness (i.e. the capacity of the aid agency in question to address particular needs and suffering), but must exclude consideration of race, nationality, behaviour and beliefs. The rules must treat meeting needs and relieving suffering as intrinsically valuable, and exclude consideration of their instrumental value.

As the humanitarian goal, the principles of humanity and impartiality are seen to be desirable in and of themselves, while neutrality and independence are usually only considered to be of instrumental importance, with their proponents expecting them to facilitate the acceptance of humanitarian actors by armed parties to conflict (Pictet, 1979, pp. 9, 31). The principle of neutrality prohibits taking ‘sides in hostilities or [engaging] at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature’ (Pictet, 1979, p. 4).<sup>4</sup> Arguments in favour of neutral humanitarian action mainly revolve around access and acceptance in conflict contexts (Slim, 2015, pp. 66-67). The general logic

is that the parties to armed conflict will be more likely to accept humanitarian action if it does not interfere with that conflict, and that such acceptance will facilitate the access which is necessary if aid is to be provided impartially. The principle of independence entails operating autonomously, independent of influence from other actors with a vested interest, including states and international organizations (Pictet, 1979, pp. 40-41). Independence is seen to support impartiality directly: if action is to be impartial, based on criteria of need alone, it cannot also be driven by other motives, and hence must not be influenced by actors with ulterior motives. Additionally, independence supports the neutrality that is deemed necessary for impartiality: if action is to be neutral, it should not be influenced by anyone with an interest in the conflict or other contentious political issue.

Collectively, these four principles define a form of humanitarianism that is intended to be non-threatening to authorities and armed actors in the context of armed conflict (Leader, 2000, p. 2; Thürer, 2007). However, even the kind of strictly principled humanitarian action espoused by the ICRC represents a liberal project, and its goals and values can only be understood as apolitical from *within* a liberal framework (Barry, 1990; Hopgood, 2019). The humanitarian ethic of valuing human life above other goals, and of valuing all lives equally is a fundamentally political—and liberal—ethic with the principle of humanity characterised by ‘radical equality’ (Slim, 2015, p. 56; Bradley, 2019; O'Brien, 2005). Furthermore, the ICRC seeks to influence public policy and international law to the extent that it relates to the organization’s mandate to protect civilians in conflict contexts and other situations of violence, in particular when it relates to the development or implementation of IHL (Bradley 2016, 57; Forsythe 1977, 2). As the ICRC Director of Operations put it in an official statement, the ‘ICRC is not neutral in the face of violations of international humanitarian law’ (Krähenbühl, 2004, p. 511). Such efforts to influence policy and law can only be understood as not engaging in controversies of a political nature if the value and mandate being promoted are shared by intended beneficiaries, warring parties and donors—that is to say, if they are not controversial (O'Brien, 2005, pp. 201-202).

## **2. Unintended political consequences**

Critics of the classical approach often point to the unintended political consequences of principled humanitarian action, highlighting the fact that neutrality comprises at least two distinct elements: neutrality of intent; and neutrality in impact and outcome. This is a source of confusion in both the normative debates and in efforts to classify and define different variants of humanitarianism (or the approaches of different humanitarian agencies). However much the ICRC and other ‘classical’ humanitarian agencies seek to avoid supporting contentious actors or issues, action that is neutral in intent (at least in as far as contentious actors and issues are concerned) may not be neutral in outcome, unintentionally assisting one side or another in a conflict, and in some cases increasing violence and prolonging conflict.

Governments and rebel groups across the world have sought to manipulate aid to further their political and military goals, and aid has attracted violence from those who seek to divert it. In the worst cases, aid may prolong conflict, resulting in more death and suffering than would otherwise be the case, by sustaining one or more parties to conflict. In the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70, for example, Biafran secessionist leaders gained material benefits from humanitarian aid as well as legitimacy from negotiating with relief agencies, arguably enabling the insurgency to continue much longer than it would have been able to in the absence of such support (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009;

Stremlau, 1977). In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, perpetrators of genocide hid among the civilians in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, gaining control of the aid distribution systems within the camps, taxing and diverting aid, and using the camps to re-group, re-strengthen, and re-arm (Terry, 2002, chapter 5; Lischer, 2003). Elsewhere, aid has assisted counterinsurgency strategies by speeding depopulation or feeding armies and militia. In Ethiopia 1983-5, for example, humanitarian assistance was used to facilitate forced relocations away from rebel-held areas, and to feed government forces (de Waal, 1997, pp. 123-124; Keller, 1992, p. 621).

More generally, the provision of international assistance may reduce the need for government spending on meeting its population's basic needs and hence free up government resources for military spending. In the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, both government forces and the Tamil Tigers used aid convoys to shelter and camouflage their military movements, and in the aftermath of the war, international aid was used to support military-controlled camps in which IDPs were effectively interned by the government with complete restriction on movement (Keen, 2009, 55; Internal Review Panel, 2012, pp. 90-91). More recently in Syria, the provision of food aid by international humanitarian agencies has arguably relieved the regime and certain rebel groups of the need to provide food to the civilian population, altering patterns of accountability and influencing political dynamics (Martínez and Eng, 2016).

It is probably impossible to operate in a conflict context without having some impact on conflict dynamics, but it is unclear just what the magnitude of such impacts are. In a few high-profile cases, such as those cited above, the effects of aid on conflict dynamics may have been significant, and in the worst cases, aid may have done more harm than good for the people it was intended to support. However, in most cases, aid is a relatively small component in the wider political economy of conflict (Slim, 2015, p. 185; Keen, 1998b). Likewise, while negotiating with international aid agencies may unintentionally lend legitimacy to one side or another in a conflict, it is not clear to what extent this happens in practice, or what the broader impact of any such legitimacy is on the course of the conflict.

Some proponents of a political humanitarianism that deliberately eschews the principle of neutrality suggest that, in defending a commitment to neutral humanitarianism, the more classicist organizations deny that their presence and activity has political consequences. According to Thomas Weiss, for example, the ICRC believes 'that humanitarian action can and should be completely insulated from politics' and has underestimated 'realpolitik among states and factional politics within them' (Weiss, 1999, pp. 2, 3). More recently, José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng have claimed that aid organizations operating in Syria largely deny their aid has political impacts (Martínez and Eng, 2016).

However, the naïveté of classical humanitarians has been overstated. After the experiences of the 1990s, including in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and the publication of Mary Anderson's *Do no harm* (Anderson, 1999), it is difficult to imagine any of the major international humanitarian agencies being so naïve as to the unintended consequences of their work. The many and varied ways in which aid has been instrumentalized have been well documented.<sup>5</sup> The idea that the provision of humanitarian aid may free up resources that the warring parties can instead devote to military action is not new, and neither is it news to the ICRC. When Henri Dunant, one of the founders of the ICRC, invited Florence Nightingale to promote the Red Cross cause in England, she responded

critically on the basis that, in taking on what was properly the responsibility of the military, the efforts of voluntary societies would make it easier for militaries to wage war (Hutchinson, 1996, p. 40). And as two senior ICRC officials affirmed in 2015: 'Humanitarian action has never taken place in a political vacuum—it has always been politicized and instrumentalized' (Labbé and Daudin, 2015, p. 184).

Even those who seek to adhere closely to the principles of neutrality and independence, then, are aware of the potential for the aid they provide to have controversial consequences with a bearing on partisan political agendas, most notably when it is instrumentalized by other actors in pursuit of ends other than those encapsulated in the principles of humanity and impartiality. There may be some disagreement as to the *magnitude* of unintended consequences (Keen, 1998a, p. 320; Stockton, 1998, pp. 355-356; Maxwell, 2012, p. 199), but the bigger difference is between those who believe that humanitarian actors can and should use this political leverage in pursuit of broader, more transformational aims, and those who believe that it cannot or should not be so used. In other words, even if humanitarian action is never truly neutral in outcome, should aid agencies aspire to minimize the wider impacts of their work as far as possible, or should they eschew neutral intentions in an effort to do greater good in the longer term?

### **3. Pursuing transformative goals**

One of the main ways in which contemporary approaches to humanitarianism are said to be political is through the integration of humanitarian relief with peacebuilding and development. As Barnett has put it, 'during the 1990s humanitarian agencies began to accept the idea that they might try to eliminate the root causes of conflicts that place individuals at risk' (Barnett 2005, p. 724). Indeed, in much of the literature on 'new' humanitarianism, the inclusion of transformative goals is central to its definition. According to Chandler, for example, the 'new humanitarian NGOs' aim 'to fundamentally transform non-Western societies to tackle the underlying causes of violence' (Chandler, 2001, pp. 695-696). Most recently, on the pages of this journal, Monica Adami has told us that 'new humanitarianism ... aspires to create "positive peace"... [and] ... tries to address the root causes of underdevelopment and poverty' (Adami, 2021, pp. 404, 406). The pursuit of transformative goals means moving from a classical humanitarian focus on addressing the symptoms of humanitarian crises to addressing their causes, which requires a move to alter existing governance arrangements, meaning that intentions would no longer be neutral.

Arguments in favour of such a move are grounded in frustration with a humanitarian project that only addresses the symptoms of humanitarian crises without doing anything about their causes, and in the idea that if aid will inevitably have political consequences, neutrality has failed and should therefore be abandoned. In respect of the first of these grounds, there is a clear moral logic to seeking 'to prevent suffering rather than simply repair it' (Slim and Bradley, 2013, p. 4). As Fiona Fox puts it, it 'is easy to see traditional humanitarian aid as a vicious circle in which agencies continue to apply sticking plasters without healing the wound' (Fox, 2001, p. 284). Both 'classical' and 'new' humanitarians agree that humanitarian problems invariably demand political solutions, but they differ in terms of who they believe should contribute to those political solutions. Preventing the suffering that arises from humanitarian emergencies usually means ending conflict, fostering development, or both. These are the core tasks of several international actors, such as UN Peacekeeping and the UN Development Programme, whose ethos and *modus operandi* are quite

different from those of humanitarian actors. Classical humanitarians believe that their work should be kept separate from that of these other actors, while new humanitarians believe they can and should contribute to political solutions.

When international humanitarian agencies seek to contribute to these goals, the idea is to use their aid and influence to affect the course of conflict or development. The provision of aid becomes conditional on its contribution to these broader goals, and a decision is made to ‘trade lives and suffering today for political gains tomorrow’ (Stockton, 1998, p. 356). In many cases, such conditionality has been donor-driven, with operational agencies as more or less willing implementers. With reference to Afghanistan, for example, in 2001 Colin Powell famously said, “NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team” (see Smillie, 2012, p. 38). The international NGOs operating in Afghanistan may have been appalled by this statement, but many of them accepted funding to operate alongside the international military forces, and some agreed to provide assistance explicitly aimed at garnering support for the Afghan government or the international forces, or in exchange for intelligence (Donini, 2011; Featherstone, 2012; Haysom and Jackson, 2013).

The pursuit of these more transformative goals raises a series of objections from those defending a more apolitical humanitarianism. To begin with, there is a normative argument that questions whether ‘the unelected, often unaccountable and usually foreign aid workers’ should be deciding what economic, political, and social goals should be pursued (Fox, 2001, p. 281). As Barnett and Weiss put it, those ‘who come bearing markets, human rights, and elections might be right that liberalism is the answer; and it is equally possible that nineteenth-century missionaries were right about the teachings of Christ’ (Barnett and Weiss, 2011, p. 107). This argument raises a number of important and interesting issues. First, it suggests that neutrality has value beyond facilitating acceptance by parties to conflict and access to populations in need. Second, it offers an argument based on broadly democratic norms against imposing, among other things, democracy—a liberal argument against imposing liberalism—and in doing so highlights the shared liberal underpinnings of classical humanitarianism and its commitment to neutrality on the one hand, and of more ambitious approaches to humanitarianism on the other. Humanitarian action is (implicitly or explicitly) justified on the grounds of emergency claims, which legitimize paternalism (Calhoun, 2009; Rubenstein, 2015; Barnett, 2012). As humanitarian agencies move to pursue goals beyond emergency lifesaving, however, the legitimacy of paternalistic action is called into question. Third, it is worth noting that this argument is not often articulated—with classical humanitarians instead focusing on the purported instrumental benefits of neutrality—and this may be because their shared liberal underpinnings mean both the proponents and opponents of subordinating aid to broader economic, political and social goals are in broad agreement that ‘markets, human rights, and elections’ are the right goals to be pursued.

Even if one accepts that certain goals reflect sufficiently universal values as to be decided upon by outsiders, it is argued that international humanitarian agencies are not capable of predicting long term impacts of implementing conditionality policies (Stockton, 1998, p. 356). In other words, even if elections and human rights are the right goals, it is not clear that international agencies know how to use their aid to achieve these goals. Here, then, both the proponents and opponents of deliberately instrumentalizing aid in pursuit of broader goals are making consequentialist arguments. The debate is not an intractable conflict between two opposing conceptions of the good, but rather an empirical



question of the conditions under which manipulating aid can be expected to yield particular consequences. Anecdotal evidence would seem to support the view that aid agencies have mostly been unsuccessful in their efforts to subordinate aid to wider goals. A long history of instrumentalizing aid to broader goals in Afghanistan, for example, has failed to achieve those goals—which since the overthrow of the Taliban government have focused on garnering support for the Afghan government and the international military forces, as well as stabilizing the country (Donini, 2011; Fishstein and Wilder, 2011; Sexton, 2016). However, a more systematic analysis of evidence could help identify the specific conditions under which aid succeeds and fails in achieving different kinds of wider goals.

Classical humanitarians argue that suffering and deaths in the short term are an unacceptable sacrifice for what is only a *potential* reduction in suffering in the longer term. They point out that pursuing a transformative agenda necessarily allows for the possibility of conditionality, and hence undermines the traditional commitment to impartiality and a universal right to relief, such that it risks creating ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ victims, with the latter group denied aid because they are associated with the crimes of their leaders or because they are not contributing to the wider political goals of the agenda (Fox, 2001, p. 282; Stockton, 1998, pp. 354-355). Here the distinction between neutrality of intent and neutrality of outcome is key. Impartiality depends on neutral intentions, and hence there is a case to be made for working with neutral intentions, regardless of whether that work has non-neutral outcomes (i.e. unintended political consequences).

Finally, the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid to broader policy goals may also reduce access and operational space and security. It is often said that access and operational space depend not on neutrality *per se*, but on perceptions of neutrality (see, for example, Bradley, 2016, pp. 62-63; Terry, 2000, p. 5). However, if neutrality is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing—as a minimum—neutrality of intent and outcome, is it perceptions about the intentions or the outcomes of humanitarian action that play a role in determining acceptance and access? Those who point to unintended consequences as a sign of the failure of neutrality to secure access and operational space assume that it is (perceptions about) the outcomes that are salient, but it is perfectly possible that neutral intentions are at least as important as neutral outcomes. Unintended political consequences only imply such a failure to the extent that outcomes are salient. In contrast, the instrumentalization of aid to wider goals can be expected to reduce access and operational space to the extent that intentions are salient *and*—if the aid contributes to those wider goals (or is perceived to do so)—to the extent outcomes are salient. Once again, this is an empirical question rather than a conflict between opposing ethical perspectives; the arguments for and against subordinating humanitarian aid to the pursuit of broader policy goals are both based on the expected consequences of such subordination.

#### **4. Speaking out about human rights abuses**

In parallel with debates about abandoning neutrality and independence to pursue transformative goals, a debate has emerged about the role of public advocacy, particularly as part of humanitarian agency efforts to protect civilians. In many humanitarian operations, especially in conflict contexts, aid workers witness, or have information about, human rights abuses and violations of IHL. On the one hand, there is a deontological argument based on the idea of a moral imperative to speak out on witnessing abuses, with failure to do so seen to imply complicity with the abuses and a failure in

‘an important moral duty to tell the truth’ (Slim, 2015, pp. 208-210; 2019, p. 75). On the other hand, there is a consequentialist argument based on the idea that improving protection outcomes will, in some cases at least, require public criticism of one or more actors (see, for example, Niland, 2014; Bradley, 2014). Unlike human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, however, the bread-and-butter work of humanitarian agencies (providing lifesaving assistance) requires them to be physically present. This raises a dilemma because public criticism of authorities may have repercussions that threaten access to the victims they seek to support. Humanitarian advocacy is thus ‘frequently juxtaposed with programming, with speaking outweighed against potential costs to programmes, staff and beneficiaries’ (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2007, p. 2). In spite of the potential trade-offs, speaking out against human rights and IHL abuses is now considered by most international agencies to be necessary and important (Slim, 1997, 2015).

Public criticism is a very different way of being ‘political’ from pursuing transformative goals, and the relationship between neutrality and speaking out is contested. According to one perspective, neutrality imposes silence (Fox, 2001). However, the ICRC does not share this view, and sees its preference for discretion as distinct from its commitment to neutrality (Plattner, 1996, p. 170). Certainly, public advocacy represents a divergence from the ICRC’s traditional *modus operandi*, which emphasizes confidentiality and discretion (Ratner, 2011). However, while the ICRC has a reputation for silence, in some cases it does publicly criticize the authorities of the countries in which it works, as it did, for example, in Myanmar in 2007 (Bradley, 2016, pp. 170-171). While the ICRC maintains a commitment to neutrality and a (qualified) commitment to confidentiality, this does not mean neutrality and confidentiality are one and the same thing, or that neutrality necessarily precludes public statements. David Forsythe characterizes a commitment to avoiding ‘public condemnation of fighting parties *as much as possible*’ as a third element of ICRC neutrality, in addition to neutrality of intent and neutrality of impact (Forsythe, 2013, p. 65). Moreover, the ICRC preference for silence is grounded in its beliefs about the consequences of abandoning discretion. As Yves Sandoz put it in 1992, when he was a Member of the ICRC Executive Board and Director of the Department for Principles, Law and Relations with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, ‘silence has never been set up as a principle by the ICRC. The question has always been considered from the angle of efficiency in achieving the objective set by the principle of humanity’ (Sandoz, 1992, p. 225).

While public condemnation—or humanitarian advocacy more generally—*can* have transformative goals where intent is not neutral, and the humanitarian agency in question seeks to drive structural change to address the causes of crises (e.g. development or conflict-resolution), it can equally well have limited goals of saving lives in the short term (e.g. increasing access for relief, or reducing the targeting of civilians). The consequentialist argument for public advocacy depends on that kind of advocacy having the potential to induce some kind of change in the conduct of particular actors, and in that sense, humanitarian advocacy has change as its goal. However, that change can be limited and more immediate or transformative and more long term. To put this another way, public advocacy or condemnation can be aimed at addressing the symptoms of a crisis or at addressing the causes. It can bring pressure to bear on those actors contravening international human rights and humanitarian law with the aim of changing the way they conduct hostilities (a more immediate and limited kind of change), but without any aim in terms of resolving the conflict. Aid agencies can criticize the conduct of conflict, without making public statements on which side is more justified in its recourse to violence. Indeed, central to ICRC neutrality of intent is the distinction between *jus ad*

*bellum* and *jus in bello*. Concerned only with the latter, the ICRC takes no position on the former and does not seek to influence the outcome of conflict, only its conduct (Forsythe, 2013, p. 64). Conceptually, then, speaking out can be reconciled with neutrality of intention to the extent that authorities or other actors are criticized for what they do, but not for who they are (and not with the intention of bolstering their opponents). Thus, while humanitarian advocacy can be part of a deliberate strategy to support one or other side in a conflict, or more generally to bring about the resolution of a conflict, this need not be the case.

Even if it is neutral in intent, speaking out may not be neutral in outcome. Where one side is responsible for more abuses than the other, impartial criticism will be unequal and, to the extent that the voice of humanitarian agencies can serve to legitimize, delegitimize, strengthen or weaken the parties to conflict, its consequences will not be neutral. Even without transformative goals, then, humanitarian advocacy may have unintended transformative consequences. However, as we have seen, the issue of unintended political impacts is not unique to advocacy, and classical humanitarians accept that their actions will have political consequences while rejecting the notion that they should exploit their leverage to engineer particular political outcomes. As compared with material assistance, there is perhaps more scope for public statements to prompt external intervention even where that is not the intention of those making the statement—as in 2013, when MSF almost triggered an international military intervention in Syria after speaking out about its experience treating large numbers of patients from neurotoxic symptoms (Bywater, 2017, p. 108). Whether or not impartial advocacy has more or less unintended political consequences than the impartial provision of relief assistance overall is nonetheless an empirical question to which we lack a clear (but efforts to assess the impact of human rights advocacy suggest it is not consistently effective in reducing abuses—see Hafner-Burton and Ron, 2009; Hendrix and Wong, 2013; Murdie and Davis, 2012).

Confusion arises when a commitment to public advocacy, criticism, or speaking out is conflated with the pursuit of transformative goals. For Bridges, for example, ‘humanitarian advocacy is emblematic of the relief community’s desire to move beyond simply treating the symptoms of suffering, and towards tackling the causes’ (Bridges, 2010, p. 1251). This conflation has marred the normative debate about the desirability of different approaches. For example, Fiona Fox includes speaking out as a central component of more political approaches, even as her critique of new humanitarianism focuses almost exclusively on the dangers of subordinating humanitarian action to development and peacebuilding goals (Fox, 2001). Wrongly conflating public advocacy with the pursuit of transformative goals risks clouding normative debates in two key ways. First, those who are opposed to the pursuit of transformative goals for the reasons outlined in the previous section can end up opposed to public advocacy not on the basis of the merits (or otherwise) of such advocacy, but because they see it as inherently linked to pursuing transformative goals. Second, those who are committed to public advocacy can wrongly assume that public criticism of the perpetrators of human rights abuses and IHL violations implies abandoning neutrality and embracing transformative goals.

In sum, addressing the causes as well as the symptoms of suffering is not equivalent to speaking out about abuses, and transformative goals can be pursued without recourse to public advocacy (e.g. making the provision of relief conditional on some conduct expected to contribute to transformative change, or providing or denying material assistance to one side or another in a conflict with the aim

of bolstering or weakening that side), just as public advocacy can be a means to more limited humanitarian goals.

## **5. Compromising state sovereignty**

Just as speaking out has been conflated with the pursuit of transformative goals and the abandonment of neutrality, so too have decisions to operate in contexts without the consent of the national government. Weiss, for example, suggests that more political approaches to humanitarian action reject both neutrality and state sovereignty, claiming that the willingness to compromise humanitarian principles is a corollary of the willingness to compromise state sovereignty (Weiss, 1999, pp. 4, 12). Chandler similarly argues that those humanitarian agencies committed to speaking out and overriding state sovereignty 'are of necessity eroding the principles of needs-based humanitarianism by subordinating needs to the strategic ends of human rights and the struggle against oppressive Third World governments' (Chandler, 2001, p. 685). Certainly, operating on the territory of a state without the consent of that state can be understood as 'political' in the sense that such action contravenes state sovereignty, the fundamental ordering principle of the Westphalian system. However, the analysis in this section suggests that it need not be any more 'political' than classical humanitarianism in terms of generating unintended consequences, pursuing transformative goals or seeking to influence the outcome of conflict, or speaking out about violations of IHL and human rights.

Prior to the 1990s, aid agencies operating in civil wars tended to work on the side of the recognised government, as governments denied access to non-government areas (Duffield, 1997, pp. 533-534). However, there were exceptions which offer insights into the relationship between working without state consent and other ways of being 'political'. For example, a consortium of Christian agencies, Joint Church Aid (JCA), operated relief flights into Biafra from São Tomé during the 1967-70 Nigerian civil war, without the consent of the government (Slim and Gillard, 2013, p. 6). Several planes were shot down by the Nigerian air force, demonstrating the dangers of operating without the consent of those who have the power and weapons to control access. During the conflict and famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s, a number of international NGOs, working under the auspices of the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD) and in close collaboration with the relief arms of the relevant rebel groups, engaged in cross-border operations from Sudan into rebel-held areas (Hendrie, 1989). The identities of the agencies that participated in the ERD were concealed, so that they could also continue working in government-held territory. In both these cases, operating without state consent served to expand rather than reduce operational access, albeit somewhat insecurely in the Biafra case. These two cases also suggest that although compromising state sovereignty to engage in cross-border operations without state consent may go hand in hand with the pursuit of transformative goals and/or with engaging in public criticism of authorities, this is not necessarily or always the case. While many of the agencies involved in JCA explicitly and vocally supported the Biafran cause, many of those involved in the ERD were committed both to limited goals and to discretion (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994, pp. 49-52; Hendrie, 1989; Pérouse de Montclos, 2009).

Of course, state sovereignty can be compromised and overridden as part of a strategy to alter the political balance of power, to bring about development through structural changes, or to affect in some way the course of conflict. In some cases, as for example in Operation Provide Comfort in Iraq in 1991, military force has been used to override sovereignty and facilitate humanitarian access

against the will of the affected state—according to some, it is a short and slippery slope from military enforcement of access to ‘military humanitarianism’ involving the use of military force in pursuit of transformative goals (Chandler, 2001; Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, pp. 89-90). However, compromising state sovereignty to operate in opposition-controlled areas is not *necessarily* done with the intention of supporting the opposition or promoting military intervention. Indeed, in a discussion of cross-border operations in the Syrian context, Hugo Slim and Emanuela-Chiara Gillard argue that the ethics and legality of such operations depend on them being for limited humanitarian purposes, not part of the pursuit of broader political goals, and strictly neutral and impartial (Slim and Gillard, 2013, p. 8).

There are often practical concerns about operating without the consent of authorities. Where those with power (and weapons) deny access, they can pose threats to those who seek to gain access. However, it is important to note that the issue here is the consent of those who control territory and access to that territory, rather than states per se (Bouchet-Saulnier, 2014). As such, it is not a question of respect (or otherwise) for the principle of state sovereignty, but rather a more practical question of access and security. Where non-state actors control territory, and that territory can be accessed without crossing government-controlled areas (crossing the border from Turkey into rebel-held areas of Syria, for example), action without the consent of the state may be practicable. To avoid repercussions from the government in the areas under its control, aid agencies may divide labour among themselves, with some operating exclusively in government-held areas, and others exclusively in non-government-controlled areas.

Operating without state consent may have unintended consequences, but there is no reason why these would necessarily be of greater or lesser magnitude than when operating with state consent. On the one hand, the airlift operated by JCA is widely considered to have played a major role in prolonging the Nigerian civil war, and some consider that the ERD contributed to prolonging the war in Ethiopia (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994, p. 121; Pérouse de Montclos, 2009). On the other hand, *respect for state sovereignty* in a context like the Syrian civil war has been seen to have the unintended consequence of bolstering the state (Martínez and Eng, 2016).

As with respect to public criticism, operating without the consent of the affected state contrasts with the normal ICRC approach. Once again, however, ICRC practice suggests a strong preference for working with state consent, but some flexibility (Forsythe 1997, pp. 243-245). Where state consent for ICRC activity in opposition-controlled territory has not been forthcoming, the ICRC has occasionally operated without that consent (e.g. flying relief into Biafra without permission from Lagos, and participating in the cross-border relief operations from Sudan into rebel-held areas in Ethiopia from 1976 to 1987). Moreover, the ICRC preference for state consent is based on expectations about the consequences of overriding sovereignty, rather than respect for the principle per se (Sandoz, 1992, p. 224). In any case, as stated above, deviation from part of the ICRC approach need not imply deviation from the whole of the ICRC approach.

Examination of the debates and practices regarding respecting or overriding state sovereignty has shown that the kind of ‘political’ implied by operating without state consent may serve to increase rather than decrease access and operational space, and that arguments on both sides are primarily consequentialist. Furthermore, there is no logical reason why either position a priori implies greater or lesser neutrality of intent, and the classical humanitarian requirement (or preference) for state

consent has no direct relationship to neutrality of outcome or to speaking out in the face of violations of human rights and IHL. Indeed, in many contexts overriding state sovereignty may be a necessary condition for achieving neutral outcomes—or, more accurately, for reducing non-neutral impacts (unintended political consequences).

## Conclusions

Whereas much of the literature on politics and principles in humanitarian action posits a dichotomy between ‘apolitical’ and ‘political’ humanitarianisms, apolitical humanitarianism exists in neither theory nor practice, and there are at least five variants of political humanitarianism. So-called classical or apolitical humanitarianism is, in itself, a kind of political project in that it is grounded in a liberal ethic of valuing all lives equally, and seeks to inject that ethic into the very contexts in which it is furthest from being realised. Beyond the political position inherent in the principles of humanity and impartiality, there are at least four additional ways in which humanitarian action may be ‘political’: in its unintended consequences; through pursuit of transformative goals; through speaking out about abuses of human rights and violations of IHL; and through compromising the sovereignty of affected states.

Through discussion of these four additional ways of being ‘political’, the article has also shown that even the most classical of international humanitarian agencies, the ICRC, is not only political in the sense of having liberal underpinnings and its work having unintended political consequences—under certain conditions, ICRC policy allows for public statements about the conduct of authorities; and occasionally the ICRC has operated in territories without the consent of the affected state. Furthermore, the modus operandi of the ICRC has many characteristics, and not every departure from its preferred approach implies embracing transformative goals or eschewing the principles of neutrality and independence. While unintended consequences are likely inevitable whatever strategy is adopted, the other three ways of being political discussed here—pursuing transformative goals, speaking out about human rights abuses and violations of IHL, and compromising state sovereignty—are neither inevitable nor obligatory. They represent choices, and humanitarian agencies can adopt none, one, or any combination of these ways of working.

The conflation of these distinct strategies, under the umbrella of ‘political’ or ‘new’ humanitarianism, has clouded debates about what humanitarian action should look like, and by distinguishing these different ways of being ‘political’, the article suggests a critique several of the normative arguments. First, if neutrality of intent is valuable in and of itself, then the fact that humanitarian action invariably has unintended political consequences does not imply that humanitarians should pursue transformative goals. Second, if a commitment to speaking out about abuses of human rights and violations of IHL and/or a commitment to working without state consent where impartiality requires this (and where practicalities permit) does not imply the pursuit of transformative goals, then making the case for limited goals does not generate an argument for silence or respect for state sovereignty. Third, conversely, arguments in favour of speaking out and working without state consent do not imply arguments in favour of transformative goals.

The article has also shown that many of the remaining debates are not as intractable as they might first appear. Where debates are about different conceptions of the ‘good’, they may be particularly intractable and difficult (or impossible) to resolve. However, the analysis in this article has shown that most are not, at heart, debates between deontological and consequentialist ethical

perspectives, but rather empirical questions about what the consequences of different approaches are, which highlight the need for systematic analysis of several issues. While the question of whether or not to pursue transformative goals is in part a question of deontology vs. consequentialism, those defending limited goals are also making a consequentialist claim about the ability of those pursuing transformative goals to achieve them. The debate about speaking out, once separated from the question of pursuing transformative goals, is mostly not about two different conceptions of what is good. Rather, it is an empirical question about the positive and negative impacts of public advocacy. Likewise, the debate about overriding state sovereignty to operate without the consent of the government where such consent is denied and where there are needs that can be met by, for example, cross-border missions, is not mostly about different conceptions of the good, but rather about the practicalities and wider impacts of working without state consent in specific cases.

The foregoing analysis prompts the question of why these different variants of political humanitarianism are so often conflated. It is notable that examples of conflation come from both those defending a strictly classical approach (e.g. Fox, 2001) and those advocating the pursuit of more transformative goals (e.g. Weiss, 1999). It is easy to see how the conflation serves the arguments of those favouring an all-or-nothing approach to the different ways of being political, but the question remains why those who take a more nuanced approach—in practice, most of the major international humanitarian agencies—have struggled to articulate their positions and perspectives more effectively. Addressing this question is beyond the scope of the present article, but an interesting and important angle for future research.

### Correspondence

**Miriam Bradley** Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals, Barcelona, Spain. Email: mbradley@ibe.org

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6869-3881>

### Data Availability Statement

This article is based on existing literature and does not use any original data.

### References

- Adami, M. 2021. "Disorder within the humanitarian sector: the old versus new humanitarianism debate." *Disasters* 45 (2): 403-423. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12426>.
- Anderson, M. B. 1999. *Do no harm: how aid can support peace — or war*. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Barnett, M. 2005. "Humanitarianism transformed." *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (4): 723-740.
- Barnett, M. 2011. *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press.
- Barnett, M. 2012. "International paternalism and humanitarian governance." *Global Constitutionalism* 1 (3): 485-521. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/globc1&i=512>.
- Barnett, M. 2018. "Human rights, humanitarianism, and the practices of humanity." *International Theory* 10 (3): 314-349.
- Barnett, M., and J. Snyder 2008. "The grand strategies of humanitarianism." In *Humanitarianism in question: politics, power, ethics*, edited by M. Barnett and T. G Weiss, 143-171. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Barnett, M., and T. G. Weiss 2011. *Humanitarianism contested: where angels fear to tread*. London: Routledge.
- Barry, B.. 1990. "How not to defend liberal institutions." *British Journal of Political Science* 20 (1): 1-14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/193676>.
- Bouchet-Saulnier, F.. 2014. "Consent to humanitarian access: an obligation triggered by territorial control, not States' rights." *International Review of the Red Cross* 96 (893): 207-217. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000041>.
- Bradley, M. 2014. "Sri Lanka: Limited Humanitarian Action — Or a Lesson in the Limits of Humanitarian Action?" *International Development Policy* 6 (1): 149-154.
- Bradley, M. 2016. *Protecting civilians in war: the ICRC, UNHCR, and their limitations in internal armed conflicts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bradley, M. 2019. "All lives are equal but some lives are more equal than others: staff security and civilian protection in the humanitarian sector." *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1 (2).
- Bradley, M. forthcoming. *The politics and everyday practice of international humanitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bridges, K. M. 2010. "Between aid and politics: diagnosing the challenge of humanitarian advocacy in politically complex environments—the case of Darfur, Sudan." *Third World Quarterly* 31 (8): 1251-1269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.541084>.
- Bywater, M. 2017. "Classical and political humanitarianisms in an era of military interventionism and the war on terror: ambiguity, prescription, jus in bello and jus ad bellum." *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies* 8 (1-2): 33-112. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/18781527-00801005>.
- Calhoun, C. 2008. "The imperative to reduce suffering: charity, progress, and emergencies in the field of humanitarian action." In *Humanitarianism in question: politics, power, ethics*, edited by Michael Barnett and Thomas G Weiss, 73-97. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Calhoun, C. 2009. "The idea of emergency: humanitarian action and global (dis)order." IILJ International Legal Theory Colloquium Spring 2009: Virtues, Vices, Human Behavior and Democracy in International Law, NYU Law School. <http://www.iilj.org/courses/documents/2009Colloquium.Session3.Calhoun.pdf>.
- Chandler, D. 2001. "The road to military humanitarianism: how the human rights NGOs shaped a new humanitarian agenda." *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (3): 678-700.
- de Waal, A. 1997. *Famine crimes: politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*. African issues. Oxford: Currey.
- Donini, A. 2011. "Between a rock and a hard place: integration or independence of humanitarian action?" *International Review of the Red Cross* 93 (881): 141-157. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383110000639>.
- Donini, A. (ed.) 2012. *The golden fleece: manipulation and independence in humanitarian action*. Boulder & London: Kumarian Press.
- DuBois, M. 2018. *The new humanitarian basics*. London: HPG/ODI.
- Duffield, M. 1997. "NGO relief in war zones: towards an analysis of the new aid paradigm." *Third World Quarterly* 18 (3): 527-542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599714858>.
- Duffield, M, J. Macrae, and D. Curtis 2001. "Editorial: Politics and humanitarian aid." *Disasters* 25 (4): 269-274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00177>.
- Duffield, M. and J. Prendergast. 1994. *Without troops & tanks: the emergency relief desk and the cross border operation into Eritrea and Tigray*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.



- Featherstone, A. 2012. *Strengthening principled humanitarian response capacities: Afghanistan case study*. Oslo/London: Norwegian Refugee Council/Humanitarian Policy Group.
- Fishstein, P. and A. Wilder 2011. *Winning hearts and minds? Examining the relationship between aid and security in Afghanistan*. Medford, MA: Feinstein International Center.
- Forsythe, D. P. 1977. *Humanitarian politics: the International Committee of the Red Cross*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Forsythe, D. P. 1997. "International humanitarian assistance: the role of the Red Cross." *Buffalo Journal of International Law* 3 (2): 235-260.
- Forsythe, D. P. 2013. "On contested concepts: humanitarianism, human rights, and the notion of neutrality." *Journal of Human Rights* 12 (1): 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2013.754294>.
- Fox, F. 2001. "New humanitarianism: does it provide a moral banner for the 21st century?" *Disasters* 25 (4): 275-289.
- Gordon, S., and A. Donini 2015. "Romancing principles and human rights: Are humanitarian principles salvageable?" *International Review of the Red Cross* 97 (897-898): 77-109. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000727>.
- Hafner-Burton, E. M. and J. Ron 2009. "Seeing double: human rights impact through qualitative and quantitative eyes." *World Politics* 61 (2): 360-401. [href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000136](http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000136).
- Harroff-Tavel, M. 1989. "Neutrality and impartiality: the importance of these principles for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the difficulties involved in applying them." *International Review of the Red Cross* 29 (273): 536-552.
- Haysom, S. and A. Jackson 2013. "'You don't need to love us': civil-military relations in Afghanistan, 2002-13." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2 (2): 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.by>.
- Hendrie, B. 1989. "Cross-border relief operations in Eritrea and Tigray." *Disasters* 13 (4): 351-360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.1989.tb00729.x>.
- Hendrix, C.S., and W. H. Wong 2013. "When is the pen truly mighty? Regime type and the efficacy of naming and shaming in curbing human rights abuses." *British Journal of Political Science* 43 (3): 651-672. [href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000488](http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000488).
- Hoffman, P. J. and T. G. Weiss. 2018. *Humanitarianism, war, and politics: Solferino to Syria and beyond*. Lanham & London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hopgood, S. 2019. "When the music stops: humanitarianism in a post-liberal world order." *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1 (1): 4-14. <https://doi.org/10.7227/JHA.002>.
- Humanitarian Policy Group 2007. "Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur: the challenge of neutrality." *HPG Policy Brief* 28.
- Hutchinson, J. F. 1996. *Champions of charity: war and the rise of the Red Cross*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Internal Review Pane. 2012. Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations action in Sri Lanka. United Nations.
- Keen, D. 1998a. "Aid and violence, with special reference to Sierra Leone." *Disasters* 22 (4): 318-328.
- Keen, D. 1998b. *The economic functions of violence in civil wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keen, D. 2009. "Compromise or capitulation?: report on WFP and the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka." Humanitarian Assistance in Conflict and Complex Emergencies, 23-25 June 2009, Rome.
- Keller, E.J. 1992. "Drought, war, and the politics of famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30 (4): 609-624. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/161267>.

- Krähenbühl, Pe. 2004. "The ICRC's approach to contemporary security challenges: A future for independent and neutral humanitarian action." *International Review of the Red Cross* 86 (855): 505-514. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1560775500181015>.
- Labbé, J., and P. Daudin 2015. "Applying the humanitarian principles: reflecting on the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross." *International Review of the Red Cross* 97 (897-898): 183-210. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000715>.
- Leader, N. 2000. *The politics of principle: the principles of humanitarian action in practice*. Overseas Development Institute (London).
- Lischer, S. K. 2003. "Collateral damage: humanitarian assistance as a cause of conflict." *International Security* 28 (1): 79-109.
- Martínez, J. C., and Bt Eng 2016. "The unintended consequences of emergency food aid: neutrality, sovereignty and politics in the Syrian civil war, 2012–15." *International Affairs* 92 (1): 153-173.
- Maxwell, D. 2012. "'Those with guns never go hungry': the instrumental use of humanitarian food assistance in conflict." In *The golden fleece: manipulation and independence in humanitarian action*, edited by Antonio Donini, 197-217. Boulder & London: Kumarian Press.
- Murdie, A. M., and D. R. Davis 2012. "Shaming and blaming: using events data to assess the impact of human rights INGOs." *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (1): 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00694.x>.
- Niland, N. 2014. "Sri Lanka: unrestricted warfare and limited humanitarian action." *International Development Policy*.
- O'Brien, P. 2005. "Rights-based approaches to aid politicization in Afghanistan." In *Reinventing development? Translating rights-based approaches from theory into practice*, edited by Paul Greedy and Jonathan Ensor, 201-232. London & New York: Zed Books.
- Parfit, D. 1997. "Equality and priority." *Ratio (new series)* X: 202-221.
- Pictet, J. 1979. *The fundamental principles of the Red Cross: a commentary*. Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- Plattner, D. 1996. "ICRC neutrality and neutrality in humanitarian assistance." *International Review of the Red Cross* 36 (311): 161-180.
- Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. 2009. "Humanitarian aid and the Biafra War: lessons not learned." *Africa Development* 34 (1): 69-82.
- Ratner, S.R. 2011. "Law promotion beyond law talk: the Red Cross, persuasion, and the laws of war." *European Journal of International Law* 22 (2): 459-506. <http://ejil.oxfordjournals.org/content/22/2/459.abstract>.
- Redfield, P. 2010. "The impossible problem of neutrality." In *Forces of compassion: humanitarianism between ethics and politics*, edited by Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.
- Rieff, D. 2002. *A bed for the night: humanitarianism in crisis*. London: Vintage.
- Rubenstein, J. C. 2008. "The distributive commitments of international NGOs." In *Humanitarian in question: politics, power, ethics*, edited by Michael Barnett and Thomas G Weiss, 215-234. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rubenstein, J. C. 2015. "Emergency claims and democratic action." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 32 (1): 101-126. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052515000096>.
- Sandoz, Y. 1992. "'Droit' or 'devoir d'ingérence' and the right to assistance: the issues involved." *International Review of the Red Cross* 32 (288): 215-227. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020860400070480>.

- Sexton, R. 2016. "Aid as a tool against insurgency: evidence from contested and controlled territory in Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 110 (4): 731-749. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000356>.
- Slim, H. 1997. "Relief agencies and moral standing in war: principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and solidarity." *Development in Practice* 7 (4): 342-352. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4029000>.
- Slim, H. 2002. "Claiming a humanitarian imperative: NGOs and the cultivation of humanitarian duty." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 21 (3): 113-125.
- Slim, H. 2015. *Humanitarian ethics: a guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster*. London: Hurst.
- Slim, H. 2019. "Humanitarian diplomacy: the ICRC's neutral and impartial advocacy in armed conflicts." *Ethics & International Affairs* 33 (1): 67-77. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000904>.
- Slim, H. and M. Bradley 2013. *Principled humanitarian action and ethical tensions in multi-mandate organizations*. Geneva: World Vision International.
- Slim, H. and E.-C. Gillard 2013. "Ethical and legal perspectives on cross-border humanitarian operations." *Humanitarian Exchange* 59: 6-9.
- Smillie, I. 2012. "The emperor's old clothes: the self-created siege of humanitarian action." In *The golden fleece: manipulation and independence in humanitarian action*, edited by Antonio Donini, 17-41. Boulder & London: Kumarian Press.
- Stockton, N. 1998. "In defence of humanitarianism." *Disasters* 22 (4): 352-360. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00098>.
- Stremlau, J. J. 1977. *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Terry, F. 2000. *The principle of neutrality: is it relevant to MSF? : MSF*.
- Terry, F. 2002. *Condemned to repeat? The paradox of humanitarian action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Thürer, D. 2007. "Dunant's pyramid: thoughts on the "humanitarian space"." *International Review of the Red Cross* 89 (865): 47-61.
- UN Secretary-General. 2016. *Outcome of the World Humanitarian Summit*. UN General Assembly: A/71/353, 23 August 2016.
- Weiss, T. G. 1999. "Principles, politics, and humanitarian action." *Ethics and International Affairs* 13 (1): 1-22.

---

<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the literature that the article is responding to, the analysis is focused on the ways in which the work of operational international humanitarian agencies—and not, for example, human rights organizations, states, or military actors—may be political.

<sup>2</sup> This section draws on Chapter 13, 'Politics, principles, and humanitarian action' of Bradley (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> For the original commentary on these principles, see Pictet (1979). For a more contemporary analysis, see Slim (2015, chapters 2 and 3)

<sup>4</sup> The principle of neutrality is the subject of much contestation and much writing. The more thoughtful analyses include Forsythe (2013), Redfield (2010) and Slim (2015, chapter 3).

<sup>5</sup> For a wide-ranging study of efforts to manipulate aid by actors both within and outside of the aid sector, see Donini (2012).