

Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism by Michael Barnett

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Empire of Humanity is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to include the history of humanitarianism in a single-authored, single-volume book. This is a very courageous effort and the author, political scientist Michael Barnett, should be commended. Barnett has facilitated immensely the task of the current as well as the next generation of scholars, historian and non-historians, as he provided them with a starting point. *En passant* it is worth noting that if a political scientist felt the need to write such a book, it is largely because historians (myself included) have not been up to the task.

As any other historian, a book covering two centuries of Western humanitarianism in less than three hundred pages intrigued me. I was curious to see if such a *tour de force* could be accomplished in a consistent and coherent way. In fact, the reader quickly finds out that Barnett's book deals with a number of topics related to humanitarianism and its history: Humanitarian as an ideology, as a profession; humanitarianism and its relation with the state and various international systems; humanitarianism and religion (Christianity) and faith-based organizations; the history of humanitarian organizations. In his introduction and in a public conference at the Elliot School of International Affairs on 5 April 2011, Barnett admitted that his book is like humanitarianism: It began fairly modest, and it expanded beyond his wildest dreams.¹ This statement reveals how Barnett perceives the history of humanitarianism as well as the ambition of Barnett's research. Contrary to the allegedly self-expanding nature of humanitarianism, this review leaves aside Barnett's analysis of moral, ethical, and other normative statements and focuses on the historical analysis.²

The fact that the author places terms like "Empire" next to "humanity" and "humanitarianism" undoubtedly renders the title provocative. Barnett argues that "humanitarianism more closely resembles empire than many of its defenders might like, but because it is an emancipatory project, this accusation does not fit quite as well as many of its harshest critics suggest" (p. 8). The reader then finds out that Barnett has not written a history of humanitarianism since the late eighteenth century, but a history of Anglo-American humanitarianism since the Abolitionist campaign. The book claims to be global and transnational, although what Barnett often means by global is a broad level of analysis. Transnational it might be, because

1. *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, <http://media.elliott.gwu.edu/video/208> (latest access on 23 January 2012).

2. Readers curious to know more about the ethical and philosophical arguments mentioned in the conclusion, can consult a review article published on the *Nation* by David Rieff. It is very clear Barnett has left Rieff unconvinced (Rieff, David (2011) "The Wrong Moral Revolution: On Michael Barnett," the *Nation*, 24 October 2011, available online, <http://www.thenation.com/article/163800/wrong-moral-revolution-michael-barnett> (latest access on January 23, 2012).

the author focuses on a particular variety of humanitarianism whose actions were undertaken beyond national borders. However, Barnett often overlooks the national and local history of humanitarianism. And, clearly, humanitarianism in Europe and in Northern America did not emerge, thrive, or fail identically. Moreover, defining U.S. humanitarianism as imperial, at least before the war against Spain at the end of the nineteenth century and the occupation of Cuba and the Philippines, would have benefitted from further explanation. For instance, the humanitarian endeavors of white U.S.-Americans with respect to “Negro Education” could in fact be defined as imperial, though they are not mentioned in this book. The reader is left wondering about the connections between humanitarianism and charity, voluntary associations, welfare, and educational programs set up and active at the national level and the “empire of humanity,” as well as the reasons why humanitarianism went transnational at various ages in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Perhaps, the author should have clarified that he intended to focus on Western or Anglo-Saxon humanitarianism of the transnational or international variety, admitting that other forms of humanitarianism, even within the West, never trespassed national frontiers. There was nothing ineluctable about the expansion of humanitarianism as an ideology, a profession, or a movement. In fact, in English and in French, the adjective “humanitarian” maintained a negative connotation for almost the entire nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, Wilberforce and his abolitionist Clapham Sects were derisively labeled, “the saints” by fellow Britons. As far as the English language is concerned, “humanitarianism” was rarely used before the 1900s, even by those who, by today’s standards, were performing humanitarian actions.

As any historian dealing with the *longue-durée*, Barnett pays attention to the ruptures and continuities. The more Barnett learned, he writes, the more convinced he became that the 1990s were hardly unprecedented—indeed they contained some well established patterns (p. 5). Humanitarianism was not a wholly private affair before the 1990s. At that time, no longer satisfied with keeping alive the “well-fed dead” and feeling obligated to help traumatized societies find peace and justice, many aid agencies embraced post-conflict reconstruction, human rights, development, democracy promotion, and peace-building. In the 1990s, humanitarian organizations ventured into the formerly taboo territory of politics, whereby they cooperated and coordinated with intervening states. In doing so, moments of destruction were treated as opportunities for political change and adopted functions that had once been the exclusive preserve of governments. This story, Barnett convincingly argues, despite the historical amnesia of humanitarian practitioners, was not new. Unfortunately, despite having put forward such a promising argument, he pays less attention to the inherent tensions and unintended consequences of the ideas and actions that individuals, groups of people, or institutions sought to impose on foreign peoples and communities living beyond national borders.

It is worth noting that Barnett’s analysis of paternalism could have offered a fruitful link between national and transnational humanitarianism. He defines paternalism as the interference with a person’s liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values of the person whose liberty is being violated. Humanitarian action is dedicated to helping others, and it frequently does so without soliciting the desires of those perceived to be in need. If Barnett had conducted a systematic exploration of paternalism

in the various “humanitarian ages” included in the book, it could have represented the thread of a promising and persuasive *longue durée* analysis. Especially because he convincingly argues that paternalism did not disappear with the beginning of the twentieth century or with decolonization. Unfortunately, as is the case with some of the other themes, issues, and analyses addressed, paternalism is dealt with unevenly.

Barnett argues that three ages of humanitarianism have taken place one after the other. He does not explain why a new “age” came into being and what persisted from the previous into the new age. I have several reservations regarding what Barnett has identified as the first age, the age of “imperial humanitarianism,” encompassing the late eighteenth century to the end of the Second World War. The author does not explain why this lengthy period has been encompassed in a single age. What did Wilberforce and his contemporaries have in common with Phil-Armenian groups³? What did the latter have in common with Nansen and the League of Nations? And what did Nansen have in common with CARE or Oxfam? Barnett does not explain that the perceptions held by the Britons and Russians of humanitarianism were not necessarily identical. He does not mention that, not surprisingly, Leopold II King of Belgium and E. Morel and Roger Casement defined themselves as humanitarians and allegedly acted on behalf of Congolese populations. He does not mention Islamic charities that were active beyond national and imperial borders as well as Jewish humanitarian and philanthropic organizations active in Europe and beyond, since—at least—the early nineteenth century.

The second age, “neo humanitarianism,” spans from the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cold War. It is hard to grasp how and why this age is less “imperial” than the previous one. Although European empires collapsed and died, Western humanitarianism continued to thrive through nongovernmental and governmental organizations and alongside the humanitarianism of the Soviet and/or Communist brand. This is an aspect that is overlooked by the author. In Barnett’s book, the third age of “liberal humanitarianism” goes from the end of the Cold War to the present day. As far as Great Britain and the U.S. are concerned, this age is as liberal as the first “age.” However, Barnett explains, once again, that after 1990 humanitarians began considering how to build peace after war and slipped into building states. Unfortunately, he has not studied the undertakings and programs of several humanitarian groups that had similar ambitions during the late nineteenth century, within European colonial territories and beyond them, such as the multilateral interventions and territorial occupations of Ottoman Crete and Macedonian provinces. As far as the interwar period is concerned, Barnett overlooks the work and ideology of European organizations such as Save the Children as well as organizations such as the American Near East Relief (later renamed the Near East Foundation). This organization set up rehabilitation and reconstruction programs and focused on educational programs that were intended to “educate” the future leaders of that region of the world to enhance peace and international cooperation.

Barnett emphasizes the differences between “alchemical” and “emergency,” which seems to represent the *trait-d’union* between the three ages. He argues that the principles, nature, methods, objectives, scopes, and actions of various humanitarian groups, during the three

3. Phil-Armenian or Pro-Armenia organizations were advocacy groups acting nationally or transnationally on behalf of Ottoman Armenian populations. The reason why these groups were referred to as Phil- or Pro-Armenian is related to another very well known movement: The Phil-Hellenic movement that had been active since the 1810s in various European countries and in the U.S. on behalf of the Ottoman Greeks.

ages can be divided into these two categories. The emergency type of humanitarian limits itself to saving lives at risk, whereas the alchemical kind adds a desire to remove the causes of suffering. The tension between these types of organization is, per se, a topic of at least another monograph. Barnett could have provided his readers with examples of when, since the nineteenth century, emergency turned (or did not turn) into alchemical humanitarianism. Had Barnett chosen to expand his research on this front, he could have explained how development and modernization became intertwined in doctrines of anticommunism during the Cold War. He would have certainly noted that *ante-litteram* “development” predated the Cold War period and were undertaken by several U.S. (and some European) organizations on a large scale. These organizations, as well as their European counterparts put forward a well-known discourse on “modernization”—admittedly articulated in several forms. Anti-communism also played a role during the interwar period, which goes unnoticed in this book even if many humanitarian programs of the 1920s and the 1930s, including the settlement of refugees and needy population far away from urban centers were enhanced with the aim of keeping pauper populations away from Communism.

Barnett’s efforts to explain why humanitarianism emerged at the end of the eighteenth century (Chapter Two) are laudable. He relies on a solid historiography and has made a sensible synthesis. Unfortunately, his focus on the intellectual history of humanitarianism, its religious and enlightenment roots, and in general humanitarian thought disappears in the following chapters and is replaced by a focus on the history of humanitarian actions and of humanitarian actors (mainly organizations). As to the generalizations concerning the slave trade and the early nineteenth century, what is true about British humanitarianism is not necessarily true for many other European countries. Hence, if the objective of the book were to write a history of international Western humanitarianism, it would have been appropriate to compare and contrasts various countries.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, Chapter Four) is Barnett’s archetypical example of “emergency humanitarianism.” Although this is a solid chapter, it does not expand on the reasons of the successes and failures of ICRC with respect to so many other alchemical organizations. This chapter also marks the transition from intellectual history to the history of humanitarian organizations. Chapter Six presents an institutional history of various NGOs. The criteria of selection should have been explained in more detail. Nonetheless, the aim successfully highlights some of the fundamental tensions in the relationship between NGOs and sovereign-states and the increasing role of the state since 1919 and more particularly after 1939. Barnett also explores the differences, similarities, and tensions between faith-based and secular organizations, including the competition for resources, which would become one of the crucial problems determining the survival or the death of NGOs after 1990. Chapters eight to ten cover the period from the end of the Cold War through to the present. Barnett’s attention shifts toward humanitarian intervention—a topic that has hardly been dealt with in historical perspective. It would have been better to engage with this topic in the introduction, and avoid devoting a chapter, which does not do justice to such a complex issue.

Barnett’s book shows how important it is for social scientists to discuss topics such as “humanitarianism” and how the work of a historian could be enriched by the insights,

conceptualizations, and reflections of political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists (and vice versa). Among the weaknesses of the volume, the unevenness of his structure and a number of thematic and chronological choices need to be mentioned. Ruptures and continuities between these three alleged “ages” of humanitarianism are not consistently pinpointed. Barnett ended up writing the history of self-proclaimed humanitarian actors, such as NGOs. This book resembles more a history of some (a selected few, some secular and some faith-based, generally Anglo-Saxon) humanitarian organizations. The book floats in a limbo where operational—humanitarian and imperial—projects of the nineteenth century are ignored, and an intellectual history approach is forgotten for the twentieth century. Finally, Barnett’s claim that humanitarianism’s history is modern international history is debatable. At most, humanitarianism is an intriguing feature in modern international history, one that should be critically examined from a pluri-disciplinary perspective.