

HUMANITARIANISM: UNDERSTANDING THE GREY AREA

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Abstract

Humanitarianism has been touted as the awakening consciousness of community living. It addresses the cry for help of the populace ravaged by war, disasters and instability. This concept has seen a prodigious growth over the last century. The mushrooming of myriad organizations and institutions has led to nations and people understand the growing importance of helping each other in this mesh of an interconnected and interdependent world. This research article aims to throw light on this highly debated concept and the use of it by nations to legitimize their actions and intervention in other sovereigns. The evolution of humanitarianism has proved to be a curve ball and it is up to discerning individuals to weigh the pros and cons encompassing humanitarianism.

Keywords

Humanitarianism, Consciousness, Sovereigns, War, Disaster, Help, Intervention.

Introduction

Humanitarianism relates to the evolution of an international humanitarian order, given life by the desire of people to relieve the suffering of beleaguered individuals and protect life by highlighting the pillars of compassion, 'responsibility to protect' and obligation of the international community towards its weakest members. Non-governmental organizations, states and even the private sector have identified their social responsibility and initiated humanitarian actions. The scope of humanitarianism has widened to include human rights, development and

public health. At present the focus is on identification of the international humanitarian order by contrasting it with international security, which has been purged from unnecessary war and conflicts, and the liberalized economic order. The existence of a humanitarian government has brought about a distinct international humanitarian order shaped around mechanisms, regimes and campaigns that emphasize on human welfare and alleviation of suffering. This research article also attempts to explain the expansion of the international humanitarian order through the lens of various international theories and the overlap of humanitarianism's relationship with power, politics and ethics and the questionable universality of humanitarianism.

Expansion of Humanitarianism

The expansion of the international humanitarian order has taken place on a massive scale. Thinkers and scholars of different schools attribute myriad reasons to the magnification of the scale of humanitarianism. When probed through the lens of realism humanitarianism seems rooted in the belief that states support those humanitarian actions which serve their interests, while liberal peace building emphasizes on role of market, democracy and human rights for curing the ills of state, rendering 'saving of lives' akin to 'saving of societies'. Marxist theories condemn humanitarianism's part in the superstructure that aids capitalism and tries to contain the marginalized sections of society, thus preventing revolutions which would purge the society of its evils, while constructivist theories point out the moral progress achieved through humanitarianism. Politicizing of humanitarianism being inevitable, it has now become associated with power, complicating its relationships with ethics. Nations, now, openly support and fund intervention into the sovereignty of other nations under the garb of providing aid. With humanitarianism developing outside the western world, its universality has become apparent, making it a global development.

Humanitarianism cannot be succinctly understood by definition alone. States finding useful cover for intervening in the matters of another sovereign is the realistic approach to understanding humanitarianism. The 'responsibility to protect' is the new ideological prop for Great Powers to assume control over their weaker counterparts. The relation of humanitarianism

to concepts of international order suggests that humanitarianism is a solution for maintaining international peace and security by promoting democracy and a better peace order in weak or failing states. Liberal ideas accept that democratic states do not wage war against one another; hence the development of liberal peace building, i.e. intervention in weak states is justified in the name of establishing democracy to create peaceful and progressing societies. This, however, resembles the liberal imperialism of colonial powers justifying their invasion in Asia, Africa in an attempt to civilize the barbarism of such states. Marxist theories blatantly question the role of humanitarianism in development of societies. Humanitarianism has been identified, from this vantage point, as an attempt of the capitalists to integrate and mollify the grievances of those existing on the margins, thereby containing them in the process, preventing any adverse affects on the bourgeois. Profiting from disasters is the mantra of humanitarianism action supported by the capitalists. Critical theories emphasize on the moral awareness that has become possible due to humanitarianism. People are now aware of the suffering of others, thereby giving way to a new international humanitarian order based on obligation, rather than interests. And now, the cause of human welfare justifies interventions in failed states. Evaluation of humanitarianism as an emancipator or a reactionary response to global suffering forms an important part of this research article. Though initially humanitarianism was defined by humanity, compassion and impartiality, its excesses has now become obvious. The negative connotation implied by realists, critical theorists and Marxists reduce humanitarian actions as camouflage for states to maintain power. Imperialism and colonialism found their justification in humanitarian actions, i.e. civilizing the barbarians, while today's humanitarians continue this tradition by justifying intervention in the name of democracy, human rights, peace and markets. However, defining humanitarianism as a black and white concept would be unjust. The different dimensions of humanitarianism make it a grey area; hence, it is best to be alert as to the consequences of humanitarianism without negating the good made possible by it.

Though humanitarianism has been traditionally defined as devoid of power and ethical in nature, the separation of power/politics from humanitarianism is impossible; the acts encompassing it, such as state intervention, have political overtones. The refusal to be silent to atrocities or suffering of others is itself political. It is a myth to assume that humanitarianism is practiced on an apolitical basis. But when humanitarianism has become akin to politics and

thereby power, it is difficult to establish its relations with ethics. Ethics are determined by the powerful actors, in turn making it politicized.

The saving grace of the concept of humanitarianism is an increase of aid agencies in the Middle East and parts of Asia, making it accurate to assume that humanitarianism is now branching out of the western-dominated world, entering a new stage of internationalization and becoming more universal and applicable.

Conclusion

The scale and scope of humanitarianism has seen a paradigm shift from compassionate and humane acts based on impartiality, neutrality and independence to involvement in politics and power play and this article has contrived to elucidate this point significantly. The expansion of humanitarianism, that erstwhile tried to insulate itself of politics, finds ground in an attempt of states to eliminate root causes of conflict that put individuals at risk. This dimension has led to the growth of humanitarianism outside of western-dominated regions. The various international theoretical approaches to evaluating humanitarianism stated in this article pave a path for acolytes to initiate their understanding for the complications and misassumptions related to humanitarianism.

Briefly put, the emerging international humanitarian order, though rooted to its foundation based on compassion, care and humanity, has seen a development of global scale. Acts of kindness towards those in distress is now viewed through multiple lenses to understand the dimensions and results (positive or negative) of humanitarianism. The division of the world into those who are weak and those who have the responsibilities to save them has put things into perspective, making humanitarianism not a revolution, but an evolution of the international society for the better.

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