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Depoliticizing humanitarian action: motives, practices, consequences

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CORBET Alice

DESPORTES Isabelle

Colloque IHSA du 3 au 5 novembre 2021 à Sciences Po Paris,

Humanitarian Studies Conference,

Panel « **Depoliticizing humanitarian action: motives, practices, consequences** »,

le 4/11/2021, 9h-12h

Lien de la conférence : <https://conference.ihsa.info/>

Abstract :

This panel explores the politics of humanitarianism through the less common entry point of 'depoliticization'. Why do humanitarian actors aim to shape and/or present their interventions as 'not political'? How do they do it? What are the consequences, including for conflict -and disaster- impacted populations?

The separation of humanitarian action from politics is one of the founding stances of humanitarianism. It aims to maximize humanitarian independence and neutrality, thus increases acceptance and access, including in conflict settings. Yet, humanitarian claims of non-involvement in politics have been dismissed by some as misleading, naive, or counter-productive. Some political scientists have argued that depoliticization is just another form of politics.

Possible themes to be addressed include self-censorship dilemmas, the standardization, technicalization and bureaucratization of aid, and what it means to be 'neutral' when intervening in situations of protest and/or authoritarianism. We particularly welcome contributions that discuss the depoliticisation of aid in light of current humanitarian trends, such as localization and the expectations of less powerful civil society actors and populations in need, the increasingly blurred lines between humanitarianism, development and peace-building, or the neoliberalisation of aid and role of private sector entities.

The first panel slot (9-10.30 a.m.) will focus on case studies following an introduction to the topic, with

paper presentations by Marina Sharpe, Jasmine Burnley on Myanmar and the Rohingya, and Andrew Cunningham on Belarus.

The second panel slot (11-12.30) approaches the topic of depoliticisation through thematic angles: neoliberalism with a presentation by Bertrand Bréqueville, inclusion of indigenous people in disaster management with a presentation by Anuszka Mosurska, to finally open up with possible alternatives to depoliticisation, with a presentation by Sophie Roborgh on 'humanitarians of the revolution'.

The (Core) Humanitarian Principles: Content, Character and Contemporary Controversies: Marina Sharpe ;

Norms and ideas in the Rohingya Internally Displaced Persons Crisis: Jasmine Burnley ;

How do INGOs approach depoliticizing aid in politicized environments? Case study of Belarus and TB
Author(s): Andrew Cunningham ;

When neoliberal rationality transforms humanitarianism into an ideology that depoliticizes: Bertrand Bréqueville ;

Humanitarians of the revolution - Politics and principles in grassroots medical humanitarianism in protest settings: Sophie Roborgh ;

How expert new media depoliticize disasters involving Indigenous peoples: Anuszka Mosurska.

Abstracts :

The (Core) Humanitarian Principles: Content, Character and Contemporary Controversies

Submitted by Marina Sharpe

That all humanitarian action should be undertaken in accordance with the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence has become a truism, which exempts the principles from fulsome critical scrutiny. What the humanitarian principles really mean and particularly where they come from is rarely addressed. This lacuna transcends academic disciplines and even affects practitioners. (For example, in the depiction of the 'core humanitarian standard' in the latest Sphere Handbook, 'humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence' encircle beneficiaries, however the four principles are not otherwise discussed in the Handbook's 400 plus pages.) In scholarship, the lack of analysis is particularly pronounced in the (Anglophone) international law literature. There is little international law scholarship on the humanitarian principles, and seemingly none that addresses all four principles together in one work; the legal analyses that do exist focus on impartiality and

neutrality, perhaps in part because the important judgement in Nicaragua addressed the former principle and both principles have autonomous international humanitarian law meanings. This paper responds to this gap by critically analyzing the historical origins, legal character and normative content of the humanitarian principles. It then invokes this analysis to demonstrate how stressing the principles' legal character is one way to depoliticise them and to frame discussion of whether such depoliticization even desirable.

Norms and ideas in the Rohingya Internally Displaced Persons Crisis

Submitted by Jasmine Burnley

The humanitarian sector has evolved in ways that have changed its size, significance, agents and subjects: its deepening complexity and the emerging commitment to bridge the divide between humanitarianism and development have created a heavily populated ecosystem of diverse actors, and blurred the boundaries of who participates in a response. But despite these transformations, humanitarianism continues to be governed ostensibly by the humanitarian principles, which promise some form of insulation from politics. The residue of this discrepancy and depoliticization, is a disconnect between how humanitarian responses are expected to operate, and their day to day political realities, cut through with multiple assumptions around what works and distinct ideas about what a crisis is. This research examines the case of the Rohingya Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) crisis and finds that normative interpretations of the principles as well as powerful ideas around the construction of the crisis played a significant role in determining how the response was shaped, contributing to the depoliticization of human rights violations; and preventing the international community from recognising the overtly political project of discrimination orchestrated by authorities, with implications for its ability to strategically coordinate or advocate to Government. This case raises questions for how interpretations of the principles intersect with political realities on the ground, and of the power of ideas in formulating and typecasting crises in ways that depoliticise and crowd out non-conforming evidence for why an emergency has occurred and what may be sustaining it.

How do INGOs approach depoliticizing aid in politicized environments? Case study of Belarus and TB

Submitted by Andrew Cunningham

A recurrent theme for the few international humanitarian NGOs working in the Former Soviet Union involves how to 'depoliticize' themselves within highly political contexts. One of the most difficult cases is Belarus, where the issue of complicity is a major question as the government leans towards

increased

authoritarianism.

There is a sense by many that working on a technical-medical issue such as TB treatment is somehow 'safe' from political manipulation. But in a context like Belarus, is this possible? Isn't the mere presence of an INGO, and one which works very closely with the regime, in itself a political statement or act? If it were possible to depoliticize the organization's actions in such a context, how would this work?

This paper explores how INGOs go about discussing and debating the issue of complicity, and the role the concept of depoliticization plays in these debates. A triangle is imagined -- between the organization's mandate to provide assistance, the agenda of the government, and the medical requirements of the disease. An interesting question is -- what role does the disease itself play in the depoliticization process? The focus is only the role of medical programming in the depoliticization process.

When neoliberal rationality transforms humanitarianism into an ideology that depoliticizes

Submitted by Bertrand Bréqueville

The research question is: how does the impregnation of neoliberal rationality within humanitarianism make it a vector of depoliticization?

The intellectual environment of the 1970s - based on anti-totalitarianism - allowed humanitarianism to take off and neoliberalism to become hegemonic concomitantly. There is a historical relationship between the two. Humanitarian NGOs are increasingly permeable to the influences and interests of neoliberalism.

We analyse different situations: those bringing social rights into a humanitarian logic, those inducing an uninhibited relationship with the profit sector, and those imposing on humanitarian NGOs concepts that neoliberalism has appropriated and shaped (social protection, resilience, empowerment...).

Resilience is a good example of a concept, seemingly neutral, but which tends to depoliticize.

Resilience refuses to see the systemic nature of crises. It places responsibility for their own situation on the people concerned.

Humanitarianism is even more easily influenced as its doctrine, based on neutrality, is a factor of inertia. In contact with neoliberalism, the humanitarian doctrine turns into ideology in the pejorative sense of the term.

Humanitarian actors may well present their interventions as "not political". The main problem is the

depoliticization that humanitarianism itself generates in different ways. It is time for the humanitarian sector to question the underlying nature of its relationship to neoliberalism.

Bibliography: Bertrand Bréqueville, *L'humanitaire sous l'emprise du néolibéralisme*, Editions Charles Leopold Mayer

How expert new media depoliticize disasters involving Indigenous peoples

Submitted by Anuszka Mosurska

Attempts to shift the ways disasters have traditionally been managed away from authoritarian, top-down approaches toward more bottom-up and inclusive processes involve viewpoints from marginalized groups. Therefore, there have been calls for greater inclusion of Indigenous peoples in disaster management. In theory, this suggests a shift in power structures, where the role of experts is contested. However, in popular imagination Indigenous peoples are often misrepresented, for instance through tropes of Indigenous peoples as custodians of the environment or especially vulnerable to environmental change. These matter because they can result in policies and practices in disaster risk reduction that do not capture the complex realities of Indigenous peoples' lives. To understand these, we present a critical discourse analysis of the news media from 2015-2020 focusing on how Indigenous peoples in disasters are represented. We find a principal framing of disasters as natural phenomena that are addressed through humanitarianism and technocratic interventions, which are justified by framing governments and NGOs as caring for Indigenous peoples. This renders Indigenous peoples helpless and depoliticizes disasters. However, we also identify weaker, competing discourses that focus on systems of oppression and self-determination. These frame disasters as political by discussing the role of colonialism in disaster creation.

Humanitarians of the revolution - Politics and principles in grassroots medical humanitarianism in protest settings

Submitted by Sophie Roborgh

This paper engages with the question of neutrality among grassroots medical humanitarians in protest environments. It explores medical volunteers' conceptualisation of their engagement and the nature of their activities in numerous settings subjected to recent protests, including in Chile to Myanmar, Belarus, Sudan, and Hong Kong. The paper explains how volunteers reconcile their (often explicit) political support for the protesters and adherence to humanitarian and medical ethics, giving a new interpretation to the merging of politics and care provision in humanitarianism. This merger, which I

have coined midani humanitarianism, after the field workers on the squares (Midan/Maidan), which are often the centre of protests, is recognisable across a wide array of settings in recent anti-government protests. In doing so, it elaborates the coming about of a humanitarian ethic that is developed from the ground up, with a more flexible approach towards the overt incorporation of politics within humanitarian practice.