Historians have been writing about humanitarian causes for a long time. However, Michael Barnett’s *Empire of Humanity* has provided fresh stimuli for such work. Written by a political scientist, the book reflects the desire to historicise contemporary humanitarianism and uses insights from different disciplines to this end.  

Elizabeth Borgwardt, for instance, has praised Barnett as «a strong voice [...] [in] a growing chorus of historically informed social scientists who skilfully use archives and comfortably traverse the usually too-rigid boundaries that define the disciplines of history, political science and sociology». At the same time, the recent publication of several themed journal issues testifies to the ambition to place humanitarian practices within their national, imperial and historical contexts. Such initiatives raise the possibility of further research from comparative and transnational angles.

Surges of scholarly activity usually necessitate conceptual and terminological clarification. What do we mean when we speak of «humanitarianism»? What is the term’s analytical value when applied to different time periods? By «humanitarianism», we have come to understand the way in which notions of shared humanity result in organised efforts on behalf of others. Yet the nature and perception of such efforts varied widely. Historians of humanitarianism must resist the temptation of portraying individual undertakings as steps towards the *telos* of a modern humanitarian field. Instead, it is necessary to consider why groups and individuals launched initiatives in support of people who were often quite far removed from them – be it spatially, culturally or socially.

We know that «humanitarianism» entered the political lexicon in the early nineteenth century – a time when «organized compassion became part of the every-
It may therefore be tempting to view humanitarianism as a relatively recent phenomenon and to consider it as distinct from Christian notions of charity or philanthropic acts of giving. However, charity, philanthropy and humanitarianism were and remain overlapping phenomena. As Bertrand Taithe has suggested, the «humanitarianism born of universal Christian love» and the secular variant «descending from the Declaration of the Rights of Man» are alike in that they «emphasise the opening of the world to western intervention, the porosity of borders to the expression of compassion, a free trade of benefaction which can serve both western morality and, implicitly, political and commercial interests too».

The use of the «humanitarian» label coincided with the rise of anti-slavery – a movement that is often portrayed as the earliest manifestation of humanitarianism. This, however, should not obscure the multiple dimensions of such activism: ideas about Christian charity, a longing for personal salvation and the quest for a moral reshaping of British society sat side by side with the impulse of basic human compassion.

John Oldfield has recognised these links with regard to anti-slavery petitions: «Religious considerations dovetailed neatly with what we might call a broader humanitarian response.» Alongside the anti-slavery movement, historians usually mention a second strand of early humanitarianism, namely the wartime efforts for wounded soldiers and civilians. The foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863 normally takes centre stage in such accounts. Its historical role continues to affect the organisation itself: Neville Wyle has pointed to the Red Cross’s «reliance on a notion of its past glories». Henry Dunant’s organisation provided an institutional guise for efforts to help those afflicted by war. In many cases, the religious impetus to this activism was just as prominent as it had been – and continued to be – in the movement against the slave trade. Indeed, Jürgen Osterhammel has described anti-slavery as «an important precursor» for the Red Cross, viewing both of them as contributing to – in Francis Lyons’s words – an «international social conscience».

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, «humanitarian» could still be a label for mockery or abuse for seemingly naive and bothersome meddlers. Since
then, public discourse has arguably shifted in the opposite direction, associating the term with just and noble causes. Such connotations make it all the more important to shed critical light on the motivations of the people who portrayed their own efforts as humanitarian. The contributors to this journal encourage further reflection on the ways in which groups or individuals campaigned on behalf of others. In doing so, the authors adopt an actor-centred approach. Barnett – whose own study also focuses on actors rather than the recipients – has distinguished two ways in which we can classify their actions: «emergency» and «alchemical» humanitarianism. Whereas the former aims to help others in their hour of need – from disaster and famine relief to support for war victims and refugees –, the latter conceives such action within the wider context of plans for a «better» world.\(^\text{11}\) Barnett acknowledges that the discourse of «apolitical» relief efforts is largely a myth: he confirms, for instance, that aid agencies «had always been political creatures in one way or another».\(^\text{12}\) Nonetheless, he suggests that the «foundational purpose of humanitarian action, to relieve suffering, is an act of humanity, not politics».\(^\text{13}\) This is why one of Barnett’s key concerns is humanitarianism’s apparent «politicisation» in more recent times. By this, he means the way in which during the 1990s, even ostensibly apolitical organisations ventured into the political realm. Our approach is different: rather than dealing with relief organisations that, over time, developed overt political agendas, we examine humanitarianism as a form of politics. Even when groups and organisations presented their causes as matters of urgent aid and assistance, their views on domestic politics and the international order shaped their campaigns. Political causes could be dressed up in humanitarian clothes and, conversely, humanitarian battles could be waged with political armour.

As a whole, the articles in this issue raise three critical questions. First, they examine tropes and ideas that fed into the construction of humanitarian causes. In this context, the authors consider solidarity as a factor that differs from compassion. Second, the authors offer ample empirical material on the workings of humanitarian activism, both in terms of specific actions and broader strategies. These questions are closely connected with the final line of enquiry – the ways in which activists viewed the objects of their campaigns. In what ways did they identify with these groups and make their cause their own?

1. Creating a Humanitarian Cause: Between Solidarity and Outrage

The study of specific institutions and associations is one way of approaching humanitarianism. Yet there is another, equally important dimension that requires examination: humanitarian campaigns are discursive formations. While often re-

\(^{11}\) Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 22.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 5–6.

sponding to great suffering, humanitarian causes require a public – and they are therefore constructed through speeches, appeals and reports. In some, but not all cases, humanitarianism formed part of the politics of outrage and used «tropes of indignation». In other words, humanitarians argued that rapid political action was required so as to prevent further atrocities. Linked to this dimension, there has been a growing interest in historicising humanitarian intervention. It is striking that «atrocity campaigns» feature only sporadically in Barnett’s work – even more so when one considers the prominence of this kind of humanitarianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, activists argued the case for Congo reform, criticised the nature of their own country’s warfare in South Africa and attacked the Ottoman Empire’s treatment of particular ethnic and religious groups. In many such instances, activists drew on photography to provide graphic evidence and stress the urgency of their cause. These campaigns shared features with earlier forms of activism: missionaries revealed conditions in the Congo – yet their involvement in humanitarian work predated the Congo reform campaign. Moreover, campaigners evoked the language of the anti-slavery struggle, be it with regard to the «new slavery» in the Congo, or by drawing attention to captivity in the Ottoman Empire.

Pierre-Yves Saunier has argued that it is necessary to study how activists have «defined, defended, contested, embodied, [and] embraced» their «horizons of engagement» and how they framed their commitment in the language of «general interest» or «universal» significance. The articles in this journal issue illustrate how campaigners cast their causes as matters of humanitarian concern. Examples include the victims of the Napoleonic Wars, the fate of the Doukhobor sect in Tsarist Russia, the Ukrainian victims of Polish «pacification» policies in 1930, and the threat to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples during the 1960s and 1970s. The number of affected individuals varied widely, as did the nature of their plight. However, in each of these campaigns, the language of scandal featured prominently:

14 Taithe, “Reinventing (French) Universalism”, 152.
19 For an example of the former, see E. D. Morel, The Congo Slave State: A Protest Against the New African Slavery; and an Appeal to the Public of Great Britain, of the United States, and of the Continent of Europe, Liverpool 1930.
be it the reference to war-related starvation, the critique of Tsarist despotism, the portrayal of a violated national minority or the denunciation of «ethnocide». In other instances, it is the absence of such language that is striking: as Isabella Löhr’s contribution shows, the British Academic Assistance Council avoided the humanitarian argument when dealing with refugee scholars from Nazi Germany, instead placing the emphasis on public or academic utility. Angéline Escafré-Dublet points to another kind of silence: her work on social aid for North African immigrants in 1950s and 1960s France shows how charitable bodies sought to avoid the highly political contexts of decolonisation and colonial warfare. Such examples underline the diversity of how humanitarian causes could be represented – and they make it necessary to consider the ways in which these causes were pursued.

2. Mechanisms and Strategies

Beyond the language of «scandal» or «utility», how exactly did activists mobilise for their cause? While some protagonists in the present journal issue launched practical aid efforts, most of them were primarily campaigners. Their advocacy often crossed national borders. Humanitarians are usually seen as acting on behalf of «distant others», whereas action in the domestic sphere is denoted by terms such as «charity» and «welfare». According to Barnett, humanitarianism aims at «assistance beyond borders, a belief that such transnational action was related in some way to the transcendent, and the growing organization and governance of activities designed to protect and improve humanity». These features explain why research on «transnational advocacy networks» can offer insights into the strategies of humanitarians. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have drawn attention to the use of «information politics» as a major element of such networks. The quest for support means to foster links across national borders and to gather information that can be used to promote a particular cause.

This journal issue provides several examples of humanitarian «information politics». Norbert Götz shows how during the Napoleonic Wars, activists in Britain disseminated information on suffering civilians in mainland Europe. Meanwhile, Charlotte Alston, Stefan Dyroff and Jochen Kemner draw attention to pamphlets such as Christian Martyrdom in Russia (on the plight of the Doukhobors in the 1890s) and Polish Atrocities in West Ukraine (on the Polish «pacification» of 1930), and periodicals such as Pogrom and Survival International (on the fate of indigenous peoples). The authors also mention the role of newspapers, for instance The Times’s coverage of the relief campaign for the German population (1814) and its publication of Leo Tolstoy’s appeal for the Doukhobors (1895). In some cases, individual reporting could be significant, as exemplified by Frederick Voigt’s journalism on

21 Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 10.
22 M. Keck / K. Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: Ad-
Poland in the 1930s and Norman Lewis’s coverage of indigenous peoples in the 1960s.

In many instances, information politics was entwined with the politics of outrage. By contrast, Isabella Lühr points at the practical uses of information: the British Academic Assistance Council supported German refugee scholars by registering and advertising their qualifications, thus helping them find placements with host institutions. More generally, the pivotal role of information in humanitarian endeavours raises questions about power and authority. Privileged access to information provided actors with a justification for raising their voice. Indeed, humanitarian actors often claimed specific expertise regarding the objects of their concern. For instance, in the late 1960s, Western anthropologists mobilised on behalf of indigenous peoples in Latin America; as activist scholars, they fostered ideas about indigeneity and cast particular groups as «endangered». Escafré-Dublet’s article on the French organisation AMANA offers another example: while supporting North Africans in metropolitan France, its founder stressed the expertise he had gained as a missionary, and the organisation produced periodicals containing statistics and anthropological material on the immigrant population.

Information was not compiled for information’s sake: in an age of mass politics, it could help shape public opinion. At the same time, it was deployed in the engagement with «target authorities», forming a major part of the «leverage politics» of transnational advocacy networks. Such target authorities were not confined to the national level. Campaigns that addressed the situation of ethnic or national minorities during the interwar years, for instance, could call upon the League of Nations. International organisations provided a forum where specific issues could be raised – the case of indigenous activism is a prominent example. The birth of the United Nations has also been important in another respect: recent scholarship has highlighted the construction of universal rights in the post-1945 period. The history of human rights needs to be viewed as different from humanitarianism and minorities protection – however, these phenomena are not altogether distinct. Many campaigners simultaneously stress needs and rights.

3. Strangers and Selves

Why did humanitarians proclaim their concern for groups that differed from them in many ways? Religious motivations could be one aspect: after all, charity and universalism were intrinsic to many belief systems. Some of our authors do indeed discuss religious actors, from the British and Foreign Bible Society to Quaker phi-

23 Ibid., 18–22.
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27 Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 34.

28 Charlotte Alston and I are currently editing a special issue of the European Review of History / Revue Européenne d’Histoire which explores transnational solidarity and the politics of the left.


32 Rodogno’s Against Massacre traces the debates on intervention and non-intervention in cases that involved the Ottoman Empire.
redrawing of borders after the First World War. The condition of minorities in purported «national» states was but one consequence of the break-up of the old multinational empires; another was the refugee issue which led to the creation of a body that arguably stands as one of the League of Nations’ most prominent humanitarian achievements: the High Commission for Refugees and its successor, the Nansen International Office for Refugees.\textsuperscript{34}

While humanitarians often provided support across national borders, the nation continued to serve as a major frame of reference: even the Red Cross – which is often seen as the classic type of humanitarian organisation – is composed of national entities while its International Committee enjoys a very distinct relationship with the Swiss government.\textsuperscript{35} Regarding the interwar years, it has been argued that many governments realised that humanitarian aid could help nations to project a public image while also helping with particular political and economic aims.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, with regard to efforts during and after 1945, Jessica Reinisch has argued that «international relief programmes in fact aimed to strengthen national units, since nation-states appeared to be the only viable components of the postwar order.»\textsuperscript{37} The contributions to this journal issue highlight the significance of national categories: as Isabella Löhr shows, the arrival of refugees from Nazi Germany was presented in terms of a potential contribution to national academic culture. Furthermore, in 1960s France, aid organisations for migrants upheld a language that stressed the virtues of assimilation to French culture. In such instances, the response to arrivals from abroad hardly seemed like an application of Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan law of hospitality.

The French case draws attention to the civilisational assumptions that underpinned many forms of humanitarianism. As Barnett has acknowledged, civilising missions and paternalism were features of humanitarianism from the beginning.\textsuperscript{38} For instance, humanitarians could easily conceive their efforts against slavery and the slave trade in terms of civilisational hierarchies.\textsuperscript{39} Yet it is not always easy to disentangle the different elements of this relationship. For instance, a recent study of the League of Nations’ relief efforts for Armenian refugees in the 1920s has illustrated the complex and sometimes contradictory interplay between civilisational notions

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Barnett2012} Barnett, \textit{Empire of Humanity}, 57–75.
\end{thebibliography}
on the one side, and the humanitarian impulses that subverted them on the other. Furthermore, as Jochen Kemner shows, even activists who promoted indigenous rights in the 1960s and 1970s did not always stay clear of paternalist attitudes.

The latter example also draws attention to the durable nature of these issues. Tracing the pre-history of modern development aid, Corinna Unger has argued that in the interwar years «the often religiously inspired idea of helping other nations to overcome their «backwardness» was an important motive of non-governmental undertakings». Furthermore, in the 1920s, humanitarian efforts by organisations such as the Imperial War Relief Fund could be «a means to display ongoing imperial unity». Such instances could affect post-1945 work in the field of development, as exemplified by the British contribution to the UN’s Freedom from Hunger Campaign. The fact that humanitarians also formulated critiques of colonial practices or of empire more generally underlines humanitarianism’s malleability.

The underlying ideas of nationhood and empire leave us with the final scale that needs addressing: the self. The adoption of humanitarian rhetoric often tells us more about the individuals who promoted a cause than those who were the targets of their concern. The contributions to our journal issue show different levels of identification with the targets of their solidarities. For instance, relief efforts during the Napoleonic Wars were partly run by German expatriates, but also partly by British people who felt a particular cultural or religious bond with the objects of their efforts. In somewhat related terms, Quakers and Tolstoyans wanted to see the Doukhobors as being animated by principles similar to their own. In the 1930s, British efforts for German refugee scholars evoked the idea of a shared academic identity. And finally, in the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists mobilised on behalf of indigenous peoples partly because their research put them in direct contact with them. Many of these examples seem to confirm an observation made by Rob Skinner and Alan Lester: namely that, in the era of decolonisation, «the politics of western humanitarianism began to shift towards explicit identification with the needs and agendas of the objects of its sympathy».

45 R. Skinner / A. Lester, «Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas», in: Journal of
4. The Humanitarian Cloud

The title of this essay uses the metaphor of a «humanitarian cloud». Similar to a cloud, the contours of humanitarianism are often unclear: at times, it is difficult to delineate humanitarian concerns from Christian charity, or from political expressions of solidarity. On some occasions, the humanitarian cloud can obscure other objects and objectives – including self-interest. Furthermore, like a cloud, humanitarianism is subject to climatic changes: as a result of such external conditions, it might easily shift shape or disappear. However, its interaction with these conditions also produces tangible outcomes. Donations and other expressions of support may either drip or pour; the construction of a humanitarian cause may irrigate channels of support that have previously dried out. Meanwhile, governments and international institutions might find themselves subject to a veritable rainstorm, whipped up by humanitarians who inundate their target authorities with requests or accusations.

There is another aspect to the «cloud» analogy. The growth of «cloud computing» has been a major development in information management. The latter is based on the practice whereby data is stored in a complex network comprised of different computers. The «cloud» extends the capacity of individual storage systems and is flexible in dealing with the demands of users who can access data regardless of their physical location. This, in a way, is not dissimilar from the practices of humanitarians who pooled resources and who used elements stored within the «humanitarian cloud» – be they rhetorical tropes, specific types of information or campaigning techniques. The essays in this journal issue invite further reflection on these processes and their limitations.


Causes and Motivations to Help Friends and Strangers

Inside the Humanitarian Cloud: Causes and Motivations to Help Friends and Strangers

This introductory essay examines humanitarianism as both a concept and a practice. The piece discusses the tropes and ideas that sustained the construction of humanitarian causes – from compassion and solidarity to moral outrage. It subsequently focuses on strategies and mechanisms that sustained humanitarian campaigns, in particular the use of «information politics». Finally, it sheds light on the ways in which activists viewed the objects of their campaigns. In this context, the tension between identification and self-interest emerges as a major theme. The essay seeks to capture the different features of humanitarianism and its protagonists through the metaphor of the «humanitarian cloud».

In der humanitären Wolke: Gründe und Motivationen für die Unterstützung von Freunden und Fremden


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