Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism. *Michael Barnett*

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Michael Barnett’s *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* provides an insightful analysis of humanitarianism and humanitarian action focusing on its evolution and globalization especially after World War II. With this work, the author aims at joining the debate on the dilemmas of humanitarian action by providing a comprehensive and complete overview of how humanitarian action evolved both in its theory and practice but by going back to what Barnett calls the “beginning of humanitarianism”.

This is an openly ambitious book but one that is at the same time openly limited by choices that the author puts forward since the beginning: it does not aim at offering a theory of humanitarianism; it rather develops a framework that allows the reader to think about the different dynamics, trends of humanitarianism. There is also present throughout the book a clear distinction between humanitarianism and other forms of action such as charity; thus presenting what humanitarianism is and what is not. Also, and by affirming its Western bias, Barnett chooses not to do an analysis of all forms of humanitarianism rather focusing on an international humanitarian order that is rooted in the West’s globalized history.

With the implicit argument that “any notion of progress and a moral community requires a readiness to come to the assistance of those in need and that benevolence is the clearest sign of a moral community and progress” (13), this book aims at being one of the first accounts of modern humanitarianism, reading it from its origins and through an analysis of geopolitics, capitalism, and ethics thus, becoming a must-read for all of those interested in the topic of humanitarianism. For his purposes, Barnett identifies what he calls the three ages of humanitarianism: an age of imperial humanitarianism from the late eighteenth century to WWII, an age of neohumanitarianism from the end of WWII to the end of the Cold War, and finally an age of liberal humanitarianism that remains until today. By presenting and analyzing the differences and similarities between these various stages, the author also aims at shedding
light on the trends and tensions that have always characterized humanitarian action regardless of its age. Throughout his analysis, the author openly rejects both a romantic and cynical view of humanitarianism, treating it rather as a morally complicated issue often defined and influenced by the passions, politics and powers of its times (p7).

The point of departure is that any act of intervention is an act of control and therefore humanitarian governance should not be seen as an exception. In this sense, and by linking and tying up humanitarianism’s most ancient roots to its more contemporary trends and challenges, this book also focuses on the expansion of tasks within the humanitarian umbrella, namely building states and peace and on the challenges it poses to humanitarian workers and their goals. Liberal humanitarianism is presented here as a reflection of how politics has co-opted humanitarian action for its own interests and despite the links between these two, the author draws attention to the importance of distinguishing politics of humanity from the politics of the State; and that is why Barnett calls for a need to rethink the relationship between politics and humanitarianism. Bearing these links and trends, Barnett thus seeks understand if and how these developments in humanitarian action have actually humanized the world of politics or if they on the other hand politicized the humanitarian world. The view of humanitarian action as “one half Trojan Horse, one part opiate” (p7) is here particularly revealing of the author’s position when it comes to bringing humanitarianism and politics together. In fact, he questions and analyses the generally accepted binary of ethics vs politics with humanitarian organizations deliberately or not venturing into the world of politics with all the consequences this move entails for both theory and practice of humanitarian action.

The book also tests the view of modern liberal humanitarianism as some sort of empire since they both share some characteristics, namely an urge to control others by crossing borders and acting on a “top-down” basis by deciding on who is to be assisted and how. Nevertheless, as Barnett puts it, humanitarian governance differs from empire since, it ultimately aims at its own destruction on the basis that humanity is what ultimately matters. Humanitarianism is thus presented here as nothing less than a revolution in the ethics of care, led in the name of an international community that is far from being universal, transcendental, and cosmopolitan. In this sense, Barnett believes that the history of humanitarianism is actually modern international history with all the impacts and consequences it entails.

Issues like the (non) use of force in the name of humanitarianism and the dilemmas it posed in places like Bosnia, Rwanda, or Kosovo, or the relation between human rights and humanitarian action (presented in the book as closely linked but not synonymous) are also analyzed in varying degrees in this book. This is thus a fundamental book for all those who work with humanitarian issues, both academics and practitioners, since it not only explores with rigor and detail the main trends of humanitarian action, but also because it sheds light on the most urgent and important challenges and dilemmas to be addressed when it comes to reinforcing and improving the international humanitarian system.