

# Non-State Humanitarianism: From Colonialism to Human Rights

## *Workshop Report*

9 April 2013

---

**Report on Workshop 1 of the ‘Non-state Humanitarianism: From Colonialism to Human Rights’ international research network: ‘Setting a Research Agenda’.  
University of Birmingham, 15 March 2013**

**Organisers:** Matthew Hilton (University of Birmingham) and Kevin O’Sullivan (National University of Ireland Galway).

This network is generously funded by a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) research networks grant, with additional support for this workshop from the University of Birmingham.

URL: <http://nonstatehumanitarianism.com>

Report by **Andrew Jones** (University of Birmingham; [ajj989@bham.ac.uk](mailto:ajj989@bham.ac.uk)), and **Kevin O’Sullivan** (National University of Ireland Galway; [kevin.k.osullivan@nuigalway.ie](mailto:kevin.k.osullivan@nuigalway.ie)).

---

From Solferino to Syria, Bengal to Biafra, over the last two centuries non-state humanitarianism has become one of the defining characteristics of international action. In recent years historians and observers from within the NGO sector have begun to unpack and uncover the complexities of that narrative. The ‘Non-state Humanitarianism’ network brings together these two strands of inquiry to examine the myriad dimensions of humanitarian action in a transnational historical context. In so doing it also attempts to connect those worlds – NGO and academic – in a spirit of collaboration, to ask how best can humanitarian aid draw on history to respond to its present-day needs?

On 15 March 2013, participants met at the University of Birmingham for the first of four workshops in the network. In his introductory remarks KEVIN O’SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) emphasised the importance of collaboration: to bring histories of humanitarianism into conversation with the humanitarian sector, and to encourage a spirit of ‘co-production’ that would match academic interests with those of the NGOs. He underlined the need to develop a broad research agenda for the network as the key aim of the day’s discussions: what questions to ask, what research themes to prioritise, and how to maximise its future impact.

### **PLENARY: JEWISH INTERNATIONALISM AND FAITH-BASED HUMANITARIANISM**

In his plenary lecture MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) addressed the question of American-Jewish internationalism and the lessons it offers for our understanding of faith-based humanitarianism. Barnett described the emergence of Jewish internationalism as a response to two challenges: (1) The Jewish problem – how to keep non-Jews from persecuting Jews; (2) The Jewish question – how should Jews exist in the world? From the eighteenth century onwards, these questions were asked within a European system organised increasingly around the nation-state. In the United States, Barnett argued, the Jewish experience was different – with different consequences for Jewish identity. American Jews tend to be profoundly liberal and suspicious of traditional political power. As a religious community they emphasise a political

theology that ties text to context. Jewish identity therefore tends towards pluralism, social justice, and an emphasis on cosmopolitanism over nationalism.

But what does all this tell us about faith-based humanitarianism? Barnett suggested four key themes. (a) The need to carefully unpack its various threads. The core elements of Jewish humanitarianism are a humanitarianism of suffering, but also a humanitarianism of solidarity. (b) The need to situate humanitarianism alongside other cosmopolitan projects, to account for the totality of these projects, and to explain why some were favoured at certain historical points and not others. (c) The need to ask: why humanitarianism, and why at a particular moment? The American-Jewish turn to social justice over the last two decades appears unsurprising when we consider Islamic and Christian humanitarianism were also on the rise. Yet there are also specifically Jewish trends that help to explain these developments, not least the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the turn away from human rights towards a depoliticised project of humanitarianism as a more attractive way to 'do good'. (d) The importance of projects like humanitarianism for strengthening collective identities at home. In the Jewish case, Barnett argued, faith-based humanitarianism tended to strengthen the faithful on volunteers' return from the field.

### **NON-STATE HUMANITARIANISM IN THE AGE OF EMPIRES**

The first roundtable discussion of the workshop focussed on the dynamics of 'Non-state humanitarianism in the age of empires'. ELEANOR DAVEY (Overseas Development Institute) provided an outline of the ODI Humanitarian Policy Group's 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action' project (2011-15), which attempts to construct global narratives of humanitarianism that move beyond an existing Western focussed narrative. Davey warned against a reliance on overly-rigid categories in the way we think about humanitarianism: the separation of 'relief' from 'development', assumed distinctions between 'faith-based' and 'secular', 'state' and 'non-state', and a de-historicised approach to rights. Extending her discussion of diversity, Davey argued that a tendency to neglect both the diverse forms of 'empire' and traditions of humanitarianism outside Europe and the Third World has led to too-narrow an understanding of humanitarianism. She called for an accessible narrative that accounts for the different ways in which imperial powers operated and interacted, as well as an investigation of the imperial humanitarian history of Australia, New Zealand and North America. Davey also reflected on the importance of history in two additional senses: to understand how beneficiary identity has been constructed (for example, the influence of Indian famine codes on programming in other parts of the British Empire); and to ask what the era of empires might tell us about the potential future irrelevance of the major players in the humanitarian system. How and why have some institutions become obsolete? Davey concluded by challenging analysts of the humanitarian sector to think of history as a living influence, not just a backdrop or a receding pathway.

Drawing on his research into humanitarianism and colonial governance, ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) pointed to three areas in need of further attention from historians: the geographies of humanitarianism; the absence of recipient narratives; and the need to better understand the roles of so-called 'new' actors in the humanitarian sector. Since humanitarian concern is a relatively new development, Lester argued, its temporality needs unpicking. But he also stressed the importance of spatiality in understanding the nature of humanitarian action. Lester suggested that the genealogy of humanitarianism – of an 'anti-slavery' mother and a 'European battlefield' father – needs re-assessing, not least to take account of violent experiences in settler/coloniser environments. Networks between donors, practitioners and recipients mobilise sympathy and technology, spanning the earth and connecting many different groups, and are intrinsic to humanitarian intervention. Yet, Lester added, we know too little about the agency of one of those groups: the recipients of humanitarian intervention. He linked the

example of aboriginal societies, in which individuals befriended and mitigated the actions of their colonial ‘masters’, to a key shortcoming of the contemporary humanitarian sector. NGOs know far too little about the long-term effects of aid: their reports are intended for donors, not for recipients, and say too little about local political or social structures, gender relations, and power structures. There is a need, therefore, for more ethnographic studies of humanitarianism. In the same vein, history should also allow us to critique contemporary angst over ‘new’ actors on the humanitarian scene (diasporic communities, military, private sector bodies, and the aid policies of rising powers) as the colonial legacies of aid agencies. The appreciation that Western humanitarian engagement with these actors is by no means new and the pursuit of a more contextualised historical account of the humanitarian sector should lead us to question the supposed centrality of Western aid.

WILLIAM MULLIGAN (University College Dublin) raised a number of important questions on the relationship between humanitarianism and human rights. Although recent research by Samuel Moyn and others suggests that the genealogy of human rights lies in the individualism of the post-1945 era, an alternative description of rights emphasises their origins in the late eighteenth century. But, Mulligan asked, if we accept the latter narrative, how do we understand the link between humanitarian norms and ideas of human rights? Moving to the question of empire and humanitarianism, Mulligan argued that contemporary notions of empire as inherently ‘bad’ render us less able to take seriously the relationship between the two. Humanitarianism advocated expansion of imperial territories, for example – a means of providing the order necessary to conduct humanitarian-based projects – while violent humanitarians constructed enemies of empire and of the humanitarian project as ‘ungrateful’ inhabitants. In that context, Mulligan pointed to two areas in need of additional study: the transnational networks that mobilised public support for humanitarianism (missionaries and anti-slavery protesters, for example); and the competitive nature of humanitarian action. In the nineteenth century religious groups competed to be the ‘best’ humanitarians and were often ultimately interested more in their domestic audiences than their recipients. The same period witnessed the argument that to be a humanitarian was to be European and civilised – in the German case, for example, calls to engage in anti-slavery projects in East Africa were part of an attempt to describe that country as a modern state equal to Britain and France. Mulligan concluded by noting an important lesson from this narrative: that humanitarian action is often a means of constructing self-identity in world politics.

In her presentation on the notion of ‘human extinction’, SADIAH QURESHI (University of Birmingham) raised a number of important questions about the nature of, and justifications for, humanitarian intervention. In the nineteenth century a new epistemological status was assigned to ‘extinction’; now viewed as an endemic process, the label was quickly applied to human beings, and in the process served to naturalise conflict. Qureshi suggested that this development raised a number of key issues for understanding the relationship between empire and humanitarianism. First, it underlines the importance of scientific knowledge and how it is used to underpin forms of humanitarian intervention – the Aborigines’ Protection Society, for example, drew on scientific research to defend the rights of indigenous peoples. Second, it suggests a need to look beyond traditional narratives: who is excluded from these kinds of interventions, and why? In that sense, the story of humanitarianism must also be linked to a broader history of conflict and violence in empire. Finally, the story of human extinction also reminds us of the importance of imperial legacies and identities to the story of humanitarianism. From the late 1960s onwards, for example, the rhetoric of extinction was turned on its head, and the notion that ‘we survived’ provides survivors of ‘endangerment’ with the means to invert the rhetoric of intervention and to call for the implementation of certain kinds of rights. These issues, Qureshi concluded, lead us to question the relationship between modern NGOs and imperial societies: is

the same paternalist rhetoric and language still being used? What useful analytical comparisons can we make? Why does it survive in this guise?

The four presentations were followed by a lengthy open discussion on the theme of ‘non-state humanitarianism in the age of empires’. BENJAMIN WHITE (University of Birmingham) began the debate by underlining the need to define when empires end, not least in understanding how decolonisation altered the role of non-state humanitarianism. PAUL JACKSON (University of Birmingham) commented on these continuities by emphasising the parallels between the situation in the nineteenth century and contemporary British development policy: the unintended consequences of imperial structures were still prevalent, he argued, for example in Uganda. ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) responded to these comments by noting that as empires decline, some projects are cut while others remain. One of these is a sense of entitlement; for example, the idea that Britain is a global power and that humanitarian intervention is an important part of policy alongside the rule of law and nation building. BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) remarked on the ‘double-thinking’ involved in colonial and humanitarian projects – for example French President François Hollande’s recent declaration that France had no interest in Mali – but also its effectiveness in mobilising resources. Reflecting on imperial humanitarianism, he added that the division between donors/practitioners/recipients is largely an imagined product of that era. In response, ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) noted the commercial interests of imperial humanitarianism; evangelical missionaries appealed to commercial interests, in the rationale that a stable frontier would lead to flourishing trade.

SAMIKSHA SEHRAWAT (Newcastle University) then emphasised the importance of the imperial context for understanding humanitarian action. Humanitarian organisations are still imperial projects, she argued, and still talk with an imperialist voice. Engaging with these issues as academics can provide a context to talk about the role of beneficiaries. JULIANO FIORI (Save the Children UK) remarked on his discomfort with the imperial/post-imperial division. The notion that empire should come to an end contributes to depoliticised narratives within NGOs. But he was equally uncomfortable with defining NGOs as imperial projects – while they may contribute to the dynamics of capitalism, he argued, such a definition is difficult and lacks nuance.

BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) noted that NGOs are simultaneous to empire, much like missionaries, and asked whether the notion of obsolescence is a method to avoid facing the past? ELEANOR DAVEY (ODI) responded that in referring to the notion of obsolescence she had in mind the entire humanitarian machinery – not just NGOs, but the UN agencies, etc. – and its place in the world. New actors exert pressure on different parts of the system. On the issue of avoiding critique, she added that the entire trope of professionalisation cuts off critique, by emphasising delicate tweaking and safeguarding forms of practice over radical change and self-extermination. JULIANO FIORI (Save the Children UK) remarked that the search for new modernity leads NGOs to a troubling place – from one kind of universalism to another, especially for NGOs seeking a more pluralistic approach to different regions.

MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) added to the discussion of imperial/post-imperial continuities by asking: how different is humanitarianism in the age of empire (however defined) to what happened after? Using the terms of the twentieth century to comment on the nineteenth creates problems. For instance, contemporary ideology of the state stresses its role as protector, welfare provider, carer, and service provider. We must account for the fact that the nineteenth century state did not have this dominant role. When BRONWEN EVERILL (University of Warwick) challenged this assumption, MICHAEL BARNETT (George

Washington University) rephrased it as a question of who is authorised to act. One of the tragedies of the Indian famine in the nineteenth century, he argued, was that British colonial authorities usurped local groups traditionally responsible for famine. ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) commented that humanitarian rationalities move across state limits. PETER GATRELL (University of Manchester) remarked that considering the nineteenth century age of empires necessitates consideration of the territorial expansion of Russia and China. This was not just a story of overseas empires like the British and French cases, but also a history of political entities that occupied large territories across the globe. In the same vein, we must also take the question of periodisation into account: the state became 'big' in the 1930s partly due to the Great Depression, but also due to the rise of the Soviet Union – a particular type of state which we cannot write out of twentieth century geopolitics.

Continuing the discussion on the role of the state, MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) commented on the need to examine the relationship between citizens and state in Western democracies. The key characteristics of the two golden ages of philanthropy – the Victorian era and post-1989 neoliberalism – raise interesting questions about the relationship between inequality and society. BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) remarked that the standard of fundraising complicates the story further. Put simply, we have not done enough to explore in detail how and why money flows. In terms of the volume of aid, for example, the 'golden age' may well be the short twentieth century when the Soviet Union and colonial powers competed to send aid, resources and personnel to Africa. BENJAMIN WHITE (University of Birmingham) added that in relative terms the largest ever sum raised by British humanitarian campaigning was the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. This was a significant fundraising campaign with minimal state involvement – in the middle of a period when humanitarianism gave way to state intervention.

BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) returned to BRONWEN EVERILL's (University of Warwick) earlier comments about the universality of welfare in the nineteenth century. Rossi argued that historians such as Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank point to the different logic of empires and states: different types of identities with different rights and duties. The idea that all citizens should have the same rights – humanitarianism predicated on egalitarian notions of the poor, and on basic rights – is an important axis to reflect upon when considering the periodisation of humanitarian intervention. BRONWEN EVERILL (University of Warwick) replied that welfare was probably not universalistic in the twentieth century; domestic humanitarianism is constantly in flux.

WILLIAM MULLIGAN (University College Dublin) then returned to the NGO/missionary relationship, and to question the idea that they were interested in the same issues. Missionaries spoke about the conversion process, he argued, rather than simply aiding the impoverished.

MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) asked why the Indian diasporic community was more important in the nineteenth century. ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) replied that by the late nineteenth century there was a large Indian community across the Empire, with well-developed channels of communication between communities and points of origin, although there has been little research into the nature of these connections as yet. MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) asked if these patterns were specific to India, or whether they existed in other communities. WILLIAM MULLIGAN (University College Dublin) replied that similar phenomena were visible among Muslim communities, for example in the Balkans in 1912-13. ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) added a further question: should remittances be seen as distinct from humanitarianism?

Returning to an earlier discussion, MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) commented on the proliferation of ‘new’ actors in the humanitarian field, but added that ‘new’ actors were also not so ‘new’. WILLIAM MULLIGAN (University College Dublin) commented that networks of humanitarian aid could also be troubling to imperial authorities – many colonial officials believed that networks were being created that could overthrow empire, despite this having no basis in reality. BENJAMIN WHITE (University of Birmingham) reflected on this issue in the context of Muslim refugees in the Ottoman Empire. Humanitarianism shaped notions of state responsibilities – the extent to which the Ottoman authorities took responsibility for large numbers of refugees raised questions of what they should do for the agricultural poor in other areas, turning refugee concerns into questions of state responsibilities. In that context, PETER GATRELL (University of Manchester) added, we need to think deeply about the nature of the state and what it means. Adding to this discussion, EMILY BAUGHAN (University of Bristol) noted that humanitarianism is about creating forms of state and citizenship. Welfare creates productive citizens, and therefore creates autonomous nation states. Furthermore economic citizenship is non-controversial. PAUL JACKSON (University of Birmingham) contributed a further dimension by observing that DFID currently runs projects with non-state actors that were originally created by the colonial state.

SAMIKSHA SEHRAWAT (Newcastle University) commented that after the rolling back of empire, the language of ‘development’ in the Third World survived in different configurations. NGO engagement with the concept contributed to the construction of the notion of the ‘state’ in the global South along lines consistent with Western conceptions.

EMILY BAUGHAN (University of Bristol) commented that Eastern Europe is key to our understanding of this period in the history of humanitarianism. An emphasis on empire can obscure this, she warned, yet the region was a testing ground for many humanitarian ideas.

KEVIN O’SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) returned to the issue of funding raised earlier in the discussion. He argued that we must be careful to think not just in terms of what NGOs do, but also what their perceived roles are. He gave the example of Trócaire (an Irish Catholic NGO), which in the early 1980s suffered from stark differences in opinion between what they *should* be doing (feeding starving children) and what they *were* doing (supporting advocacy and social justice groups).

KEVIN O’SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) also returned to the issue of how history can become a ‘living presence’ for the humanitarian sector. ELEANOR DAVEY (ODI) replied that this question was one that the ODI was consistently grappling with. Concrete examples help to show the need for history by bringing context into the discussion of how responses are shaped. But there are further questions to be tackled: how to generate discussion outside the boundaries of this network, for example. JOHN BORTON (ODI) added that funding is a very significant factor here. If the purpose of humanitarian organisations is to ‘do good’, spending money on historical analysis is simply not on the agenda. He gave the example of the evaluation process – a vehicle for making immediate sense of a complex, messy reality – as an area in which funding is very limited, and in which the proliferation of NGOs has made the situation worse. The question he posed, therefore, is whether there can be research without a grant.

MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) asked if one of the lessons of history of this project is that competition has restricted NGO activities. JULIANO FIORI (Save the Children UK) responded that competition within the aid industry has increased and taken on a new form with the recent proliferation of aid agencies. KEVIN O’SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) added that this competition arguably recreates the competition between missionary societies in earlier

periods. BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) remarked that universities need grants to undertake research, which does not include per diems (daily allowance for expenses). There are very serious financial issues at stake in the development sector, such as the massive consultancy salaries on offer. If this money was used to create employment opportunities in target countries, instead of paying development salaries, she asked, would we see an improvement in poverty? There is no incentive from the donor perspective to end this aid, as it would lead to significant unemployment.

## **POST-IMPERIAL HUMANITARIANISM: THE RISE OF NGOS**

The second roundtable discussion explored the evolution of the contemporary NGO sector in the post-Second World War era. DANIEL COHEN (Rice University) described the immediate post-1945 period as ‘the age of proliferation’, during which the displaced persons (DP) crisis in Europe served as a testing ground for modern humanitarian interventions. Yet, Cohen argued, the lessons of this period remind us of the need to question our assumptions about NGOs and how they operate. First, we must be aware of the myriad layers to the term ‘non-state’ actors. The UN recognised the role played by NGOs in DP camps in Europe in the 1940s, and hired them as consultants. In the same period American NGOs quickly identified with US foreign policy objectives, while many Jewish NGOs came to identify with Zionism. Second, we must be careful not to over-emphasise the degree of secularisation in the non-state humanitarian sector. The history of human rights, for example, is rooted in Christian principles, while the immediate post-1945 era was marked by the predominance of faith-based organisations in delivering relief. Third, we must question the notion that humanitarianism was depoliticised between the end of the war and the rise of Bernard Kouchner and Médecins sans Frontières at the end of the 1960s. Humanitarianism was political when it wanted to be; see the strong political identification with anti-communist victims and exiles, for example. To illustrate the importance of these three threads, Cohen drew on his research into relief efforts in the Middle East in 1948. There, the World Council of Churches co-ordinated relief efforts, Anglo-American missionaries framed humanitarianism as a matter of human rights, and impartiality was a wilful decision to escape the dilemma of political choice.

PETER GATRELL’s (University of Manchester) contribution emphasised the importance of understanding the geopolitical context in which non-state actors operate. The post-1945 era witnessed a proliferation of ideas attempting to re-shape the world after the defeat of fascism in Europe and Asia, for example, while the narrative of decolonisation occurred alongside one of re-colonisation (China in Tibet, the Soviet Union in eastern Europe). The institutional matrix within which NGOs operated was equally important. Institutions were not simply bystanders, operating in a vacuum; they advanced political claims even when claiming a non-political position. Gatrell suggested that we think of NGOs and aid agencies as a choir: sometimes they worked in harmony, other times they were discordant. But that should lead us to ask: who was the loudest, who was pushed off the stage, who wrote the words, and who listened? Returning to the theme of politics, Gatrell also pointed to the extent to which ‘development’, though framed as a secular project, is bound up with ideas of citizenship and freedom. NGOs played an important role in constructing those concepts. To illustrate his arguments, Gatrell pointed to two particular episodes. In the 1940s and 1950s the UNHCR was accused by some Islamic organisations of favouring Western NGOs and refugees in the Middle East, but several of those same organisations were simultaneously backed by funding from the American CIA. The Algerian crisis in the 1950s and early 1960s further emphasised the tensions within the humanitarian sector, not least the relationship between international agencies like the UNHCR, NGOs, and the issue of state sovereignty. Gatrell concluded by arguing that we must integrate the narratives of Cold War and decolonisation into our discussions on relief and development. These contexts placed significant constraints on actors and the choices they made.

DANIEL MAUL (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen) returned the discussion to the relationship between micro- (the realm of personal motivation) and macro-level (structural conditions) factors that shaped the humanitarian system. His contribution focussed on the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the lessons it offers for our understanding of the humanitarian sector. He described the AFSC's emergence in the inter-war period, its transition to an agency focussed on development in the 1950s, and the manner in which it had moved out of the ambit of US government influence by the 1960s. Maul drew on the tensions inherent in the AFSC's operations to highlight some broader lessons for our understanding of the NGO sector: between the national and transnational contexts of Quaker operations; and between non-state and state action, in the linkages the AFSC developed with the White House, UNRRA and UNRWA. The AFSC's history, Maul argued, also illustrates the professionalisation of humanitarianism – Quakers are the 'quintessential alchemists', yet the AFSC adopted an increasingly professional, technocratic character. In the 1980s, the organisation was the site of conflict between value-based humanitarianism and professionalism, echoing heated debates in the 1920s about the importance of the neutrality label in a growing humanitarian marketplace. Maul concluded by reminding us that principles are fluid and flexible – they have to be explained differently to different audiences. Meanings shift in changing historical environments.

These presentations were again followed by a lengthy open debate about the nature of non-state humanitarianism in the post-1945 era. DANIEL COHEN (Rice University) opened proceedings by reflecting on Daniel Maul's paper: Quakers are clear on their principles (impartial, non-judgmental), yet are also some of the most daring to pass political judgments in Gaza based on their humanitarian principles. Quakers in some ways do both humanitarianism and politics. Red Cross impartiality is necessary to secure access to battlefields – for Quakers impartiality less a necessity and more of a choice. DANIEL MAUL (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen) replied that the Quakers aim to 'heal the world': they have a clear attitude towards their own role, and how important it is to act in a certain way.

MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) raised two issues for discussion: first, his concern at conceding defeat in conceptualising non-state humanitarianism. The year 1945 is clearly significant, yet we also need to break down that narrative – for example, there are clear continuities between the League of Nations and the UN. In the case of NGOs and the non-state sector, we are often talking about single organisations – how do we periodise them? How do we periodise the sector as a whole? Secondly, Hilton raised the issue of transnationalism – organisations like the World Council of Churches (WCC) may be doing one thing, while national actors such as Christian Aid do something else. When we get to modern NGOs, are they doing anything of interest, or are they simply following the lead set in other spheres, especially the governmental sphere? PETER GATRELL (University of Manchester) added to the discussion of periodisation by commenting on the tautness of chronologies that centre on 1945, but wondered if we would not have to agree that one of the characteristics of the post-war world is the multiplication of NGOs? BRONWEN EVERILL (University of Warwick) also commented on the need to examine the global context in this period (1945-60), and wondered if it was necessary to examine the role of conscription and drafts, for example, in understanding different motivations for joining NGOs? DANIEL COHEN (Rice University) extended the discussion on this subject by remarking that 1945 is a defining moment due to the acceleration of NGO formation. If there was an NGO revolution, it was precipitated by the New Deal and a professionalisation of welfare. The role of armies is crucial – produced and trained NGOs, which then required employment after the war.

BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) returned to the issue of secularisation and commented that much of the historiography assumes that technocracy in relief work equates to secularisation. But, he asked, are we not instead witnessing a technocratisation? It is interesting that we naturally equate the efficiency of Oxfam with secularisation. We use the word 'professionalisation', yet there have always been professionals doing relief work. Perhaps what we mean, he suggested, is specialisation – the breakdown of relief work into specialist skills. BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) pointed to the concept of de-politicisation advanced by James Ferguson (*The Anti-Politics Machine*): by presenting interventions in technical terms, they are depoliticised as a result.

BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) returned the discussion to the question of funding, pointing out that we need to investigate the extent of active investment by the US government into the humanitarian sector – in terms of resources, funding, expertise, and publicity. PETER GATRELL (University of Manchester) added to the professionalisation debate by commenting that UNRRA specialised by section, yet it was also critiqued as amateur. MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) remarked that UNRRA required NGOs to demonstrate that they deserved to operate.

JULIANO FIORI (Save the Children UK) highlighted the question of impartiality. Impartiality was previously a means to access, yet contemporary wars (in Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere) indicate a lack of access to certain areas. In response DANIEL COHEN (Rice University) wondered if an over-emphasis on impartiality might now be a hindrance?

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) commented on a number of themes brought up in the discussion to date. He emphasised the need for the Cold War context to be acknowledged to a greater extent, and he agreed with Bertrand Taithe that the secularisation narrative is also problematic: the extent to which Catholic missionaries were trained in development studies after 1967 (*Populorum Progressio*), for example, provides a very interesting sub-text to this narrative. He also emphasised the need to look beyond the traditional powers for answers to some of our key questions. Nordic narratives of humanitarianism, for example, are largely in the same bracket as Irish narratives – being of the West but not in the big power paradigm. Can we use them to test the extent and strength of a Western humanitarian framework? Finally, he also remarked that the debate about politicisation leads us to question the role of NGOs in globalisation narratives.

ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) returned the discussion to the issue of periodisation. We are not just interested in humanitarianism in practice, he argued, but also in the historiography of humanitarianism. To write histories useful to the sector, we need to think about periodisation. Periodisation itself is part of Western academic practice, and we could get different senses of periodisation for different communities around the world. These narratives could also destabilise existing frameworks for understanding the Cold War, human rights, humanitarianism, and other areas. In that vein, BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) noted that studies of humanitarianism have shown little consciousness of the brand of interventions. We could have a different chronology, based on perceptions of ground – for example, does relief actually work? Does relief lock individuals into situations, or enable getting out of them? If the brand is homogenised, what do people gain from it? BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) added to this discussion by asking how many perspectives are considered 'enough'? Do we truly understand the 'development of development'? Regions, she argued, do not have just one perspective. When we periodise enough times we end up with multiple perceptions of history, yet we also have interlocking moments, such as 1945, where perspectives converge. Historians must choose how many stories to tell. Continuing this discussion, PETER GATRELL (University of Manchester) remarked that refugees may tell a story of displacement at a particular

juncture, for example at a moment of rupture in Palestine. There is a sense of before and after with such moments, which can be critical to the actions of non-state actors and refugees themselves. History can be politicised and claimed by a particular group at a particular moment. But, he asked, does this also obliterate alternative histories?

HELEN LAVILLE (University of Birmingham) queried the tendency to associate 'non-governmental' with good: do we privilege the notion that the state is 'bad' and NGOs 'good'? DANIEL COHEN (Rice University) noted that the appeal of NGOs has a distinctive history, for example, the post-1989 promotion of democratisation. JULIANO FIORI (SCF UK) added that the fetishisation of NGOs requires further study.

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) noted the practical issue of funding historical research on NGOs from within the global South. He also asked about the issue of agency: if individuals and communities on the ground can play off aid agencies against each other, should we be giving them more credit as agents? BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) replied that people always attempt to skew aid to their advantage. However, they ultimately have no control over when and if funding will arrive, and what it will be spent on; the perspective of the donor is dominant, and does not necessarily overlap with recipients. SAMIKSHA SEHRAWAT (Newcastle University) commented on the long history of colonial governments attempting to create 'civil society', as part of the process of modernisation. Regions are constructed as lacking civil society and therefore backwards, justifying imperial expansion. PAUL JACKSON (University of Birmingham) added that civil society does exist around the world, but many of these forms of civil society may not be of a kind that we are willing to recognise or work with. Ugandans disparage white aid workers, and perceive aid not as branded by a traditional NGO, but as part of how the local chief has secured resources for their locality. They have no direct control, but populations with a long history of receiving aid are often very adept at manipulating that aid at all levels (from villages to governments). BRONWEN EVERILL (University of Warwick) asked whether the situation described by Jackson is not too different from the colonial state? PAUL JACKSON (University of Birmingham) replied that in Sierra Leone, there are clear continuities between the imperial and post-imperial worlds. BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) added that there is a perceived continuity between slavery, forced labour and aid in the areas in which she has worked. Forced labour, she argued, was effectively replaced with human 'development'.

## **SETTING THE AGENDA FOR FUTURE STUDY**

The workshop's final roundtable discussion began with four short commentaries on the day's proceedings, followed by an open exchange of ideas on where and how the network should progress from here. MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) opened the proceedings with a comment on the earlier debate about periodisation and its importance, remarking that it is largely perspective dependent. Equally important is the issue of structural change, and the manner in which we understand the relationships between actors and structures. The simple question, what are NGOs?, raises important empirical issues, but also fundamental analytical questions. Yet there was one word that Barnett felt was surprisingly absent from the day's discussions: 'governance'. When humanitarian agencies talk about 'new' actors, he argued, what they have in mind are actors that do not conform to their idea of what humanitarianism is. He pointed to the increasingly prominent role of the private sector and the need to pay more attention to the role of capitalism, national actors, corporations and private foundations in humanitarianism. Finally, Barnett turned to the concept of power – humanitarianism always involves uneven relationships, he argued, and paternalism, but the question we must ask is how humanitarians justify their activities.

JULIANO FIORI (Save the Children UK) began his contribution by reflecting on the importance of a critical historical consciousness to any NGO attempting to realign or reposition itself in relation to power. The ODI's 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action' project was very important in that respect (see Eleanor Davey's contribution earlier in the day), as was Save the Children UK's relationship with Emily Baughan (also present at the workshop) and her work on British humanitarianism in the inter-war period. Fiori remarked on the categorisation of 'thinkers' and 'doers' in the humanitarian system. Academics focus on the macro and political level, while agencies have focussed internally on the technical, often at the expense of the political. In order to make these discussions mutually beneficial, Fiori recommended starting with a simple question: who sets the agenda? The decolonisation of humanitarianism is a very big challenge for NGOs, and is related to the issue of global governance. If there is to be a decentralisation process, what role will existing agencies play in a re-structured humanitarian system? Fiori then turned to the political paradoxes of humanitarianism, not least the extent to which the politicisation of humanitarian action since the 1990s has occurred alongside a depoliticisation of its narrative. How do we re-define our relationship with the political? What is the role of power? And how do we address NGOs without rolling back their advances? In that vein, he also referred to the need to examine the role of the private sector and NGOs' relationships with capitalism, and to address an imbalance in the literature between development and the under-studied field of disaster relief. The instrumentalisation of aid, he argued, is a nut not yet cracked. Finally, Fiori turned to the question of how to inject the long-term view into the humanitarian sector, and suggested holding an additional network meeting on the premises of an NGO.

Returning to the questions posed by Kevin O'Sullivan at the outset of the workshop (how to match academic with sectoral needs), BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) argued that academics should not seek to provide knowledge for agencies. Historians should write histories of humanitarian intervention in different parts of the world, and humanitarian workers and agencies should read these to be informed about their impact. But those histories should not necessarily be written for them or developed for their critical needs. Turning to the issue of long-term evaluations of aid, Rossi recounted the example of a particular region in Africa where successive donors had built and re-built the same dam, with little institutional memory of its failings. But, she warned, we must be aware that the demand for historical knowledge is not neutral, and that providing information on demand will lead to it being used selectively. We must also do more to articulate the beneficiaries' narratives. Why does history stop at making sense of what the developers are thinking? Do we not also have to ask questions about the consequences of relief work? Finally, Rossi returned to the earlier discussion on funding of NGOs. This is not just a question of which aid agency receives funding. We urgently need to look at other expenses, for example, real estate, services used by agencies, travel costs, salaries. We need to ask how much is actually invested for the sake of reducing poverty among intended beneficiaries, and how much is spent on products produced in the West (cars and computers, for example). And we need to undertake an economic history of humanitarian intervention and aid agencies (both state and non-state).

BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) began his contribution by reflecting on question of efficiency as one of the fundamental anxieties of the humanitarian sector. The sector is complex, but has the technologies and techniques to reflect on itself and its efficiency (or lack of efficiency). Much of this is formulated in an ahistorical fashion. The implication, he added, is that we, as historians, should not be writing commissioned histories, but we should be open to what people want. Taithe then turned to the macro/micro dichotomy mentioned earlier in the discussion. Historians are fascinated by the macro, he remarked, yet it is at the micro level that many of the political games are played out in the NGO sector, and where the boundaries

between the acceptable and unacceptable are policed. At the macro level, we must be aware that universalisms are plural, and we must tease out in greater detail what they mean/what they are – the differences between British universalism, Nordic universalism, and French universalism, for example. We also need to engage more with Foucauldian ideas of biopolitics and governmentality, with the issue of law (humanitarian law and human rights law), and with the role of epistemic communities within the humanitarian sector. How much baggage is carried between one agency and another, one location and another, one site of knowledge of poverty reduction and another? Taithe finished on a positive note: ‘The beauty of this field is that we have only just begun.’

The discussion that followed began with a few short remarks from the panel, before going round the table to solicit comments from each of the workshop participants. JULIANO FIORI (Save the Children UK) agreed with Bertrand Taithe’s point on the need for micro and macro studies. The failings of NGOs are questions of fraud, corruption, efficiency, reputational risks and associated PR risks. BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) commented that NGO accountability is framed along the lines of self-auditing – accountability to aid recipients is not the same process. Returning to the earlier discussion on the relationship between academia and practice, Rossi reiterated her belief that historians should not provide knowledge to individual agencies, but should write independent histories and not out of obligation to any particular agents. We need economic historians to unravel how institutions operate. She remarked on the years of built-up resentment against Western development discourse among young Muslim males in the parts of Francophone West Africa that she is familiar with – despite benevolent intentions, NGO behaviour is interpreted by locals as monopolising jobs and resources. Academics should be aware of such perspectives. BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) also added an additional point to the discussion, remarking that we tend to talk of non-state actors in the humanitarian sector as ‘going abroad’, when clearly since the 1940s they have also looked inwards.

Beginning the comments from the floor, BRONWEN EVERILL (University of Warwick) took up Taithe’s point and suggested a comparison with the manner in which new imperial histories brought the metropole into the frame. It is a useful idea to think of humanitarian NGOs working at home and abroad at the same time.

MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) responded to Benedetta Rossi’s suggestion on the necessity of economic history, yet he was unsure whether it could be done with the materials that are currently available in NGO archives. He then turned to the relationship between history and the humanitarian sector. History is always about politics, he argued; the sector is not determining what historians will do, but in opening a dialogue we can raise different sorts of questions that we might all ask. Michael Barnett’s defence of paternalism, and Benedetta Rossi’s critique of the aid system puts them in potentially dangerous company. Stopping aid is a nihilistic cul-de-sac, Hilton warned, and as academics we are responsible for offering something more.

SAMIKSHA SEHRAWAT (Newcastle University) returned to Benedetta Rossi’s observation by expressing a deep cynicism about aid worker salaries. We should not forget that aid serves a political purpose.

WILLIAM MULLIGAN (University College Dublin) questioned whether humanitarianism undermines itself because of its radical reputation and utopian intentions. For contemporary analysis, how do we establish what is meant by ‘success’ and ‘failure’? In the case of European

anti-slavery politics, for example, the rhetoric established a measure by which humanitarians could criticise European regimes.

ELEANOR DAVEY (ODI) commented that if the term ‘non-state humanitarianism’ is not just a code for NGOs, we should ask whether it could be extended to cover philanthropic foundations and other actors. Turning to the question of accessibility, she asserted that what ODI wants are accessible histories, not biased histories. Historians should be free to advance critiques, but should do so in a language that does not restrict them to their peers.

BENJAMIN WHITE (University of Birmingham) returned to the question of funding, arguing that following the money is a useful approach for historians. There are more historians trained in discourse analysis than economic history. White himself sits uncomfortably in this network, he admitted, as his research is more focused on state than non-state – yet that work may demonstrate that the French colonial state claimed to fund refugees while in practice the money came from humanitarian NGOs and the Syrian government.

JOHN BORTON (ODI) came back to the question of how history can be useful to aid agencies. He noted that as a practitioner he had always considered himself fully familiar with the literature, yet upon starting work on the ODI’s ‘Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action’ project he was surprised at how much he had missed. There is a need to make more of this literature widely available.

KEVIN O’SULLIVAN (NUI Galway) turned to the question of governance of the humanitarian sector, noting that post-1945 structures were created to link the top down and bottom up, so that organisations such as UNRRA created a global humanitarian system in which NGOs could operate. He also re-stated the question he had raised at the outset of the workshop and that remained an issue for the network to tackle: how we can write histories that will be listened to?

JESSICA FIELD (University of Manchester) commented on the complexity of non-state humanitarianism. The participants had identified many dichotomies throughout the workshop, which can be contrasted between impulse, action, and intent. Would such categories complicate the story further?

PETER GATRELL (University of Manchester) raised another important question: who are the donors and who are the beneficiaries? He commented on the need for new economic histories that could go some way to addressing our questions, and raised a further issue: how are academics and practitioners written into our discussion?

EMILY BAUGHAN (University of Bristol) wondered how many historians think of themselves as solely historians of humanitarianism? We are asking big questions about the nation and imperialism, for example, but were we here to castigate humanitarianism as being imperial in nature? Or can we move beyond such assumptions?

ALAN LESTER (University of Sussex) commented on the need to follow the money that remains on the ground, as well as in the sector. This has been done for the development sector much more than emergency relief. What happens when you parachute in an emergency relief operation, which then clears out again? Following money reconfigures our understanding of history, and British history could be turned on its head. On the question of periodisation, Lester argued, we can go back much further than 1945 to the early nineteenth century as an important moment when humanitarianism in Britain becomes governmentalised, as the Colonial Office

imposed ameliorative codes after the abolition of the slave trade. This act of the state taking on the mantle of humanitarian governance has not been written about enough.

PAUL JACKSON (University of Birmingham) agreed that following the money trail was very important. Through that process we can perceive continuity over a long period of time – the overlays change, yet the situation on the ground does not.

JULIANO FIORI (SCF UK) agreed that economic history is highly important. We need to scrutinise budgets and the question of jobs. Often the problem is the creation of too many jobs – a significant percentage of the Afghan economy, for example, depends on the aid industry in practice. The critique of salaries is common, but it is arguably the range of salaries that is the issue, a problem reflected in many institutions. Returning again to the macro/micro histories issue, Fiori reiterated the need for a history of operations to break down the bigger picture, and reveal the micropolitics of activism.

BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) asked what does following the money really tell us? As historians, humanitarian aid is out there, and we are interested in what it is doing, how it is doing, and we need to understand the priorities and choices being made. Will following the money cast a brand new light on sector? Possibly, he concluded, but possibly not.

MICHAEL BARNETT (George Washington University) commented that practitioners do not really care about what academics have to say – and if it is of no interest to them, he asked, so what? On the issue of paternalism, Barnett remarked that the ethics of care always have a paternalistic aspect. Furthermore, we may also have to consider the idea that NGOs are themselves ‘dinosaurs’ – NGOs came of age post-1945, but INGOs are increasingly bit players due to changing technologies and practices.

BENEDETTA ROSSI (University of Birmingham) observed that the humanitarian apparatus is an enormous and internally diverse business. We have to study the impacts in Africa, but also the economic consequences for donor countries, and we have to do so while suspending moral judgements. There is already a moral judgment implicit in the term humanitarianism, and we have to suspend this, follow the money, look at different types and forms, and examine the impact on recipient economies. There is a perception among recipients that aid has benefitted benefactors; we should not avoid such questions, and should write histories that are useful and readable. The question is, to whom? Histories should also make sense to the societies receiving aid, which means dropping categories useful to NGOs, and using categories useful to local recipients. Books should not prioritise aid agencies.

BERTRAND TAITHE (University of Manchester) commented on the need for historians to debunk the mythology of humanitarianism. Lots of hagiographic stories have been told, and many of these myths form an ugly problematic.

MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) concluded the workshop by thanking the participants and remarking on what was to come next for the ‘Non-state humanitarianism’ network. A report of the workshop would be distributed as a first step; it would then be important to identify the key themes that arose from the day’s discussions. This exercise will then feed into the second workshop of the network, at the National University of Ireland Galway in June 2013.

## **CONFERENCE OVERVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Matthew Hilton (University of Birmingham) and Kevin O’Sullivan (National University of Ireland Galway)

### **Plenary**

Michael Barnett (George Washington University), *What can Jewish internationalism tell us about faith-based humanitarianism?*

### **Roundtable 1: Non-state humanitarianism in the age of empires**

Eleanor Davey (Overseas Development Institute)

Alan Lester (University of Sussex)

William Mulligan (University College Dublin)

Sadiah Qureshi (University of Birmingham)

*Chair:* Christopher Moores (University of Warwick)

### **Roundtable 2: Post-imperial humanitarianism: the rise of NGOs**

G. Daniel Cohen (Rice University)

Peter Gatrell (University of Manchester)

Daniel Maul (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen)

*Chair:* Helen Laville (University of Birmingham)

### **Roundtable 3: Setting the agenda for future study**

Michael Barnett (George Washington University)

Juliano Fiori (Save the Children UK)

Benedetta Rossi (University of Birmingham)

Bertrand Taithe (University of Manchester)

*Chair:* Paul Jackson (University of Birmingham)

### **CONTACT**

Professor Matthew Hilton  
Department of History  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham  
B15 2TT  
United Kingdom

[m.j.hilton@bham.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.hilton@bham.ac.uk)

Dr Kevin O’Sullivan  
Lecturer in History  
School of Humanities  
National University of Ireland Galway  
University Road  
Galway  
Ireland

[kevin.k.osullivan@nuigalway.ie](mailto:kevin.k.osullivan@nuigalway.ie)