

The ethics of care *versus* humanitarian exceptionalism

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What if we say that humanitarian workers themselves arouse the hostility they sometimes face because of the symbolic and socially dominant relationships they maintain with their local personnel? This is the hypothesis, drawn from his own study, that Arnaud Dandoy, doctor of criminology, has developed here. While the author praises the virtues of the ethics of care over those of Kantian ethics, this is not a basic philosophical exercise, but a prerequisite for a better understanding of the widening gap between humanitarian workers and local populations.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and particularly since 11 September 2001, the humanitarian community has repeatedly deplored the erosion of the humanitarian space. Widespread reports indicate that humanitarian workers are increasingly targeted by criminal and terrorist attacks. These threats, not necessarily the ones of the most recent past, generate a feeling of insecurity that is disproportionate in relation to the real situation at hand¹.

In the face of objective and subjective generalized security threats, and especially of hostility towards humanitarian workers, a managerial and rational approach to risk management now prevails. Experts focus on the easily maneuverable “causes” of these problems without delving into the fundamental roots that necessarily lie elsewhere. From this perspective therefore, a poor man requires aid, but is also to be protected from. Entrenchment and avoidance thus end up becoming the responses to security threats, and, as such, lead to greater segregation and self-containment.

Our study on the relationship between humanitarian workers and their household staff casts a new outlook on the issue of the safety of humanitarians². One basic premise has held that humanitarians are no exception when it comes to having to endure a hostile environment over which they have no control. Rather than pinpointing shortcomings that lie elsewhere, it is a matter of examining the link between humanitarians and their environment. Even though hostility towards humanitarian workers is not foreign to humanitarian action, this hostility stems from the dominant worldwide position of humanitarians in North-South relations, and from interference in the relationship between humanitarians and local populations. Taking a locally identified case in point, e.g. the rapport between humanitarian workers and their household help, our study, as well as this present article, provide the basis for a theoretical and empirical analysis on the issue of safety for humanitarian workers.

¹ Arnaud Dandoy and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, “Humanitarian workers in peril? Deconstructing the myth of the new and growing threat to humanitarian workers”, *Global Crime*, vol. 14, n° 4, 2013, p. 341-358 ; Larissa Fast, *Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2014.

² Arnaud Dandoy, « Des humanitaires et de leurs femmes de ménage. L'éthique du *care* contre l'exceptionnalisme humanitaire », French Red Cross Fund, *Les Papiers du Fonds*, October 2016, www.fondcrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Des-humanitaires-et-de-leurs-femmes-de-menage-l%E2%80%99%C3%A9thique-du-care-contre-l%E2%80%99exceptionnalisme-humanitaire.pdf

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Theoretical foundation of the expertise on the safety of humanitarians

Since the mid-1990s, a significant number of specialists from diverse backgrounds and disciplines have studied from different angles the nature, the causes, the effects, and the responses provided in the face of threats against humanitarian workers. Within the realm of study of humanitarian security two theoretical approaches emerge, qualified by Robert Cox as “problem solving theory” and “critical theory”, the most prevalent theoretical approach being that of “problem-solving”³, whereby security issues are addressed “as technical problems requiring technical solutions”, which, at the same time, clamps a lid on “social and political conflicts, power relations, and special interests that shape the sphere in which humanitarian actors negotiate conditions for their presence and their safety”⁴.

For researchers at Crash (Center for reflection on humanitarian action and knowledge, hosted by the Médecins Sans Frontières Foundation) we have just quoted, this technocratic approach to risk management does not credibly respond to the concerns of humanitarians, whose voice must be heard: “An alternate option to the dominant culture of security requires placing trust in the practical wisdom of humanitarian workers who can widely impart their knowledge by describing and analyzing their past experience with dangerous situations”⁵. Yet their experience is not any more or less objective than that of experts, whose updated models only represent a world view that comes into conflict with alternate ways of dealing with and reacting to risk⁶. Whatever experts or non-experts may have to say, talk on the safety of humanitarian personnel is still mainly “NGO-centered”.

Conversely, critical theories have attempted to work out the role of institutions and of power relations in terms of development and changes in the world order. Mark Duffield takes this approach to apprehend the security issue for humanitarians:

“A root solution [to the dangers facing aid workers] would be the disentanglement and distancing of aid agencies from the ideology, practice and aims of liberal interventionism, the public rejection of State funding and the promotion of independent action. It would also involve talking back to Western foreign policy. For an embedded aid industry, this is an impossible political choice. Hence the seemingly easier organisational option (but costlier in aid worker lives) of attempting to adapt to the changing security threats created by liberal interventionism”⁷.

Going beyond the limitations of a technocratic and standardized approach taken without concern for the specific context, one challenge is to explore the mechanisms of power and domination

³ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, vol. 10, n° 2, 1981, p. 126-155.

⁴ Michael Neuman and Fabrice Weissman, *Secourir sans périr. La sécurité humanitaire à l'ère de la gestion des risques*, CNRS éditions, 2016 [Saving Lives and Staying Alive. Humanitarian Security in the Age of Security Management, Hurst Publishers, 2016].

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶ Considering humanitarian action as a field of practice for edgework (qualified as such by Stephen Lyng: “Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking”, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 95, n° 4, 1990, p. 851-886, [www.webpages.uidaho.edu/css287/Lyng_Edgework .pdf](http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/css287/Lyng_Edgework.pdf)), Silke Rothe has shown how humanitarians negotiate risks on a daily basis: Silke Rothe, “Aid work as edgework – voluntary risk-taking and security in humanitarian assistance, development and human rights work”, *Journal of Risk Research*, vol. 18, n° 2, 2015, p. 139-155). Paradoxically, the individual valuation of risk taking is developing itself within a humanitarian community governed by the security obsession of zero risk. A dead angle in Rothe’s analysis concerns none others than the national employees, whose experience of risk taking rather derives from an economic necessity than a need for adrenalin or self accomplishment, Arnaud Dandoy, *Humanitarian Insecurity, Risk and Moral Panic: Toward a Critical Criminology of Aid*, PhD thesis, University of Kent, 2013; see also Dorothy Nelkin and Michael Brown, *Workers At Risk. Voices from the Workplace*, The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

⁷ Mark Duffield, “Risk Management and the Fortified Aid Compound: Every-day life in Post-Interventionary Society”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 4, 2010, p. 453-474 (p. 459-460 for this quote).

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that fuel hostility towards humanitarian workers. This is the challenge we have taken up by examining the ethics of care as they relate to the inequitable and conflicting relationships that covertly develop between humanitarian workers and their household staff.

Theoretical foundation of the expertise on the safety of humanitarians

The progressive empowerment of the security discourse within the humanitarian community reveals a deeper crisis provoked by the redefinition of the limits of the humanitarian field over the last twenty years⁸. And, as in the era of enlightenment, humanitarians have found in science control modes (of a managerial type) capable of consolidating their faith – somewhat shaken – in the humanitarian cause, that is to say in their capacity to change the order of the world⁹. Ethics have played a central role in the process of rationalizing risk management within the humanitarian community. Kantian ethics remain the dominant paradigm of modern humanitarianism¹⁰, and the German philosopher's legacy has left its mark in today's regulatory inflation and in the attempts made to codify humanitarian action (Sphere Project, ALNAP [Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action], HAP-I [Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International], etc.). As far as security rules are concerned, they become moral imperatives, generally and unconditionally (or categorically) applicable to all and under any circumstances. The revised edition of the Good Practice Review 8¹¹, considered as the « bible » by the NGO security referees, thus emphasises that, “in the end, the management of security operations in high risk areas is both a moral and a legal obligation”¹².

Our study, on the other hand, seeks to have another type of traditional ethics applied, the ethics of care, which are inexplicably disregarded in writings on humanitarian action. As opposed to Kantian philosophy, which places human responsibility within the sphere of the planetary community, the ethics of care draw attention to specific individualities that tie us each to one another¹³. This relational concept has profoundly changed the way humanitarian action is conceived, as it focuses on what a moral life actually is and not what it should be¹⁴. More specifically, theories of care demand that careful attention be given to networks of dependency and of vulnerability, in which and through which ethical norms arise. These theories of care thus introduce a flaw in “humanitarian exceptionalism”¹⁵ by destroying the image of a type of humanitarianism that is autonomous and independent, as Larissa Fast well described:

⁸ In an article we mobilised the concept of “moral panic” (Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, London, Paladin, 1973), so as to, on the one hand describe the disproportionate reaction of the humanitarian community in the face of the threat, and on the other, to situate its roots in a wider historical and social context : Arnaud Dandoy, “Towards a Bourdieusian frame of moral panic analysis: The history of a moral panic inside the field of humanitarian aid”, *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 19, n° 3, p. 416-433). This concept has today lost its sociological meaning, becoming a simple label stuck on a reaction considered irrational or excessive. Whereas the reaction of the humanitarian community needs to be understood in the light of upheavals following the cold war and the contradictions that have divided the humanitarian field in the course of the last two decades. It is, from this point of view, rather well balanced.

⁹ Craig Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action”, in Michael Barnett et Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarianism in question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, Ithaca, Cornell University, 2008, p 73-97; Didier Fassin, *La raison humanitaire : une histoire morale du temps présent*, Editions EHESS, 2010.

¹⁰ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2011.

¹¹ Koenraad Van Brabant, “Good Practice Review 8. Operational Security Management in Violent Environments”, London, Overseas Development Institute, 2010.

¹² Fabrice Weissman et Monique J. Beerli, « Suivez le guide ! Les manuels de sécurité et la mise en ordre autoritaire des organisations humanitaires », in Michaël Neuman et Fabrice Weismann, *Secourir sans périr. La sécurité humanitaire à l'heure de la gestion des risques*, CNRS Éditions, 2016, p. 138.

¹³ Joan Tronto, *Un monde vulnérable. Pour une politique du care*, La Découverte, 2009.

¹⁴ Pascale Molinier, *Le travail du care*, La Dispute, 2013.

¹⁵ Larissa Fast, *Aid in Danger... op. cit.*

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“A relational approach forces critical scrutiny upon the relationships that aid actors create and neglect, which, in turn, demands attention to be paid to the internal vulnerabilities, and not just to external threats, that must be part of a full accounting of the complex causes of violence against aid workers and agencies”¹⁶.

The author, however, just takes note of the absence of such a relational approach without going into the task of defining the ethical stakes and political implications¹⁷. In this respect, the ethics of care offer a unique approach in the analytical study of the conflicts and tensions arising from inequitable and stigmatizing relationships between humanitarian workers and local populations.

Of humanitarians and domestic staff

Humanitarians find themselves in an awkward position when it comes to care, as they are both providers and recipients. In fact, their concern for others extends not only to providing relief to vulnerable communities (through humanitarian aid), but also to comfort services to a more privileged group. The logic behind this discrepancy: on the one hand, the impossibility of their working fully autonomously, and, on the other, their desire to be freed from certain tasks in order to become entirely engaged in other activities. Expatriates provide care to the most vulnerable populations. They derive prestige and recognition for their work. Their missions, however, can only be accomplished with the support of members of the local population (drivers, nannies, cooks, local staff, etc.) who, in turn, tend to the care of humanitarian workers. Theories of care are significant in holding that unseen, menial tasks are essential for accomplishing the “noble” task of providing care, which conveys greater legitimacy and respectability¹⁸.

It is hard for humanitarian workers to acknowledge the extent to which their professional life depends on the work of others. Recognizing this would not only alter their perception of their own autonomy, but would also unbearably highlight the inequitable granting of privileges that they vastly enjoy, notwithstanding the values of altruism and solidarity that humanitarians enshrine. The uneasiness generated by the display of privileges thus calls for preventive action. One reflex consists in cutting oneself off from local populations and adopting an inward-looking view. Other reactions also come into play: the hierarchical rapport between a humanitarian worker and his driver can be broken by the use of casual speech (e.g. the French “tu” form); or an amicable relationship with a housekeeper can result in her becoming “a member of the family”, and so on. A switching process in terms of dependency then occurs: the care provider becomes the recipient of care. Pascale Molinier defines the indifference of the privileged group as:

“Psychological posturing that rests on a complex system that is both ideological and segregated, and that avoids the privileged from having to think about the extent to which real situations can embarrass them, or prevent them from enjoying their privileges, or undermine their sense of justice. It is extremely comforting not to have to pay heed to the people who serve us and to the costs it entails for them”¹⁹.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Róisín Read, “Book review: Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promises of Humanitarianism”, *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 52, n° 5, 2016, p. 753-756 ; Hugo Slim, “Book review: Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promises of Humanitarianism”, *International Affairs*, vol. 91, n° 3, 2015, p. 629-631.

¹⁸ Joan Tronto, *Un monde vulnérable...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Pascale Molinier, *Le travail du care...*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

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The reality felt by household staff is quite a different thing. The lack of recognition is what they consider to be the most insufferable, even more so than their precarious situation. The issue at stake is the unbearable dominancy, which contributes to fueling the frustration of local populations and arousing hostility towards humanitarians. As Jock Young explains, «it is not simply injustice experienced on the levels of material goods and resources which foments discontent, it is a much more combustible combination of poverty and indignity²⁰». If this does not necessarily give way to violence, such a combination facilitates its emergence.

Paternalism – or rather maternalism, concerning the relation between lesser household staff – turns against humanitarians who are, in turn, pointed out in their differences and privileges. This situation, that stems from the inequalities and the stigmatisations spread out between humanitarians and populations does not necessarily entail direct acts of aggression but can constitute its first signs.

Critical criminology of humanitarian action

Our study sheds new light on the sources of hostility towards humanitarians. Rather than searching within differences stemming from lack of adaptation to the western model²¹, it is advisable to investigate the unequal and paradoxical relationship developing between humanitarians and the local population. In a pragmatic way this study seeks to establish the processes and factors that facilitate singularisation and rejection. It was then necessary to situate them in a wider theoretical framework, impregnated by the care ethic. By underlining the unacceptable character of this relation of domination concealed by both sides, it has opened up a large area of work for more targeted and further reaching studies. As according to us the analysis of security for humanitarians will not be able any more to ignore the issue of inequality.

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

Biography • Arnaud Dandoy

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²⁰ Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, Sage Publications, London, 2007, p. 156.

²¹ Beverley Mullings, Marion Werner and Linda Peaka, “Fear and Loathing in Haiti: Race and Politics of Humanitarian Dispossession”, *ACME : An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 9, n° 3, 2010.