

Humanitarian studies: a field still in the making

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It took a long time for humanitarian action to evolve from an act of activism to a subject of research. Valérie Gorin expertly traces this evolution, while reminding us that “humanitarian studies” are still far from complete. In a subtle way, the author illustrates the role that a review like *Humanitarian Alternatives* can play in building a bridge between action and reflection.

In November 2023, the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies, founded in 1998, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. The Centre has been both witness to the contextual and organisational changes that have profoundly shaped humanitarian action over the last two decades and a contemporary to the nascent field of “humanitarian studies” since the early 2000s, of which the establishment of the Humanitarian Studies Centre at Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2023 is the most recent example.¹ However, the growing take-up of humanitarian studies in recent years throws into stark relief the slow burn the field’s development has gone through since the beginning of the century. This article will therefore explore the academic trajectory of humanitarian action along two axes. The first axis examines the denomination of the field itself: indeed, by addressing the subject in the form of “studies”, humanitarian action is not confined to being an end in itself but is able to “intervene in the entire field of human and social sciences, on the basis of a conceptual and paradigmatic shift”.² The second axis examines the delimitation of the field, which finds itself in constant tension between the development of a critical and reflexive analysis of humanitarian action, and the desire to provide for training needs *with* and *for* humanitarians.

On the use of the term “studies”

In 2002, Philippe Ryfman laid out the framework of what could be a “French school” of humanitarian analysis, calling for uniting initiatives, such as “research programmes, doctoral student programmes, thematic collections from leading publishers, journals or conferences” in order to create a true field of study.³ To his credit, these initiatives have since taken concrete shape. Indeed a number of reviews – *Humanitaire* (2000-2015, published by *Médecins du Monde*), *Humanitaires en mouvement* (2008,

¹ The best-known centres also include the *Institut d'études humanitaires internationales* in Aix-en-Provence (founded in 1993), the Humanitarian and Conflict Resolution Institute in Manchester (2008), the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership in Melbourne (2011), the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha (2016), the Centre for Humanitarian Action in Berlin (2018) and the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies (2021-2023).

² Lucas Monteil et Alice Romerio, « Des disciplines aux “studies”. Savoirs, trajectoires, politiques », *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, vol. 11, n° 3, 2017, p. 231.

³ Philippe Ryfman, « Vers une “École française” d'analyse de l'humanitaire ? », *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, vol. 3, n° 47, 2002, p. 143.

published by *Groupe URD*) and this present review *Humanitarian Alternatives/Alternatives Humanitaires* (2016)⁴ – were inspired by this “French-style” humanitarianism, giving Francophone humanitarian organisations a voice on the international scene otherwise crowded with English-language publications.⁵ Nonetheless, just like their French-language counterparts, English-language reviews with a purely humanitarian focus did not appear until the 2010s. These English-language reviews included, among others, the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* (2016, in association with the Network on Humanitarian Action [NOHA]) and the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* (2019, in association with Save the Children and in partnership with *Médecins Sans Frontières’s Centre de réflexion sur l’action et les savoirs humanitaires* [known as the Crash] and the Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute). In addition, specific collections, such as Routledge’s *Humanitarian Studies*, as well as other student textbooks⁶ also helped to complete the institutionalisation of the field around shared knowledge.

What are the factors that explain the belated emergence of humanitarian studies? If we consider “studies” as the establishment of interdisciplinary fields of research and analysis, it is interesting to single out two dominant elements within the institutionalisation trajectories. First of all, as in any field of study, the legitimisation of such a field of study is closely connected with the “opportunity for developing critical perspectives on subjects that have been invisibilised and dominated within and beyond the disciplinary space, in a quest for recognition”.⁷ Thus, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the question of international aid was broached in publications which had a primarily disciplinary focus, such as law and medicine, or in relation to issues akin to humanitarianism, migration and disaster prevention, for example.⁸ One of the oldest journals,⁹ *Disasters* (1977), was created by a group of students who had worked in emergency contexts and were later to form the London Technical Group; a group absorbed in 1991 by the Overseas Development Institute, a research centre operating in consultation with the former British government’s Department for International Development. These publications are an illustration of the institutionalisation of fields parallel to humanitarian action, such as development studies, disaster studies, refugee studies and peace studies, which emerged in both the aftermath of the Second World War and the wake of decolonisation. They came hand in hand with the expansion of policies designed to strengthen development aid, conflict resolution and refugee assistance. However, while the international aid system underwent a revival in the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the rise of the United Nations (UN) and the surge in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), humanitarian action remained a secondary objective, which would only assert itself as a prism through which to analyse international relations in the late twentieth century.

The ensuing institutionalisation of humanitarian studies is therefore to a greater degree due to a paradigm shift than the invisibility of aid. Indeed, humanitarian action had until then been perceived more as a calling than a proper “occupation” requiring specific professional competencies. The idea of a humanitarian vocation refers back to narratives long developed by humanitarians themselves, in numerous (auto)biographies with quasi-mythographic aspirations.¹⁰ However, during the 2000s, the

⁴ The review *Humanitaire* was published by *Médecins du Monde* between 2000 and 2015; *Humanitarian Aid on the Move* has been published by *Groupe URD* since 2008, and *Humanitarian Alternatives* has been published since 2016.

⁵ Origin of the *Humanitarian Alternatives* review: <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/presentation>

⁶ Roger Mc Ginty and Jenny H. Peterson, *The Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action*, Routledge, 2015.

⁷ Lucas Monteil et Alice Romerio, « Des disciplines aux “studies”. Savoirs... », *art. cit.*, p. 236.

⁸ The International Humanitarian Studies Association provides a more exhaustive list of scientific journals: <https://ihsa.info/resources/ihsa-journal>

⁹ Historically, the *International Review of the Red Cross* (1869) published by the ICRC can be considered as the first “humanitarian journal”.

¹⁰ Marcel Junod, *Le Troisième combattant. De l’ypérite en Abyssinie à la bombe atomique d’Hiroshima*, Éditions Payot, 1947 ; Bernard Kouchner, *L’île de lumière*, Éditions Ramsay, 1980.

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literature from practitioners adopted a more critical stance towards humanitarianism, going “beyond the legend”¹¹ and heralding a lineage of actors who would come to apply their experience in an approach alternating between reflection and research. Thus, in the era of “liberal humanitarianism”,¹² many controversies arose concerning international aid, which was increasingly presented as a system “under attack”¹³ that had revealed its limits and paradoxes.¹⁴ This criticism was in part prompted by the international community’s failings during the Rwanda genocide which, in the prolongation of the Yugoslav Wars, was a wake-up call to humanitarian organisations about the instrumentalisation of aid.¹⁵ At this time, voices began calling for the reform of the system and its governance; a debate rekindled by the September 11 attacks and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as by the wars unleashed in the wake of the Arab Spring, such as in Syria. The birth of humanitarian studies therefore correlates with the catalogue of criticism that has shaken the humanitarian system over the last twenty years. Scrutiny that also translated into academic output with the publication of works focused on the history of organisations, humanitarian action in international relations, as well as the anthropology, the sociology and the politicisation of aid.

Secondly, the appearance of a specific field of study must be tied in with the “power dynamics accompanying and underlying it” and in particular with the “connections between evolutions internal to the academic field, social movements and public policies”.¹⁶ In this instance, more than the activism that characterises the birth of gender studies or postcolonial studies, it is the growing place occupied by humanitarian action in the public debate and the evolving role of states that led to the progressive recognition of humanitarian studies during the 1990s. One indication of this shift is the emergence of teaching and research networks, such as the aforementioned NOHA network. Founded in 1993, this network is composed of nine European universities and backed by the European Commission.¹⁷ Since 2017, the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA) also brings together the research communities of countries in both the Global North and the Global South, thereby starting to break down the Western-centred humanitarian narrative. This research community is becoming increasingly visible and collaborative, in particular thanks to the organisation of international conferences, including those held by IHSA and the International Humanitarian Summit in Dubai, the latter reflecting the growing involvement of the Gulf States in international aid. This academic development has also resulted in the creation of education programmes. Thus, in 2010, two market studies identified between fifty and eighty Masters courses in humanitarian action around the world, most of which were located in Global North countries and taught in English.¹⁸ These various initiatives and networks have multiple objectives: to promote research and teaching and to produce theory on humanitarian policies and practices through publications and public events.

¹¹ Rony Brauman, « L’humanitaire par-delà la légende », *Études*, vol. 3, tome 392, 2000, p. 615-626.

¹² Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, 2011, Cornell University Press, pp. 161-240.

¹³ Joanna Macrae, “The death of humanitarianism? An anatomy of the attack”, *Disasters*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1998, pp. 309–317.

¹⁴ Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Cornell University Press, 2002.

¹⁵ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *L’aide humanitaire, aide à la guerre ?*, Éditions Complexes, 2001.

¹⁶ Lucas Monteil et Alice Romerio, « Des disciplines aux “studies”. Savoirs, ... », *art. cit.*, p. 237.

¹⁷ See the website: <https://www.nohanet.org>

¹⁸ Jean-Daniel Rainhorn, Amna Smailbegovic et Sabine Jiekak, *Formations universitaires en action humanitaire*, Centre d’enseignement et de recherche en action humanitaire de Genève (CERAH), 2010 ; Peter Walker and Catherine Russ, *Professionalising the Humanitarian Sector. A Scoping Study*, Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA), 2010.

What fields do humanitarian studies cultivate?

Addressing humanitarian studies first warrants the difficult task of defining what humanitarian action actually is. Far from being considered a discipline unto itself – such as history or sociology, which are taught using their own distinctive epistemologies and methods –, humanitarian action must be regarded at once as “an ideology, a movement, a profession and a compassionate endeavour to provide assistance and protection to populations at risk” and “a set of institutions, a business and an industry”.¹⁹ This wider, more flexible definition makes it possible to go beyond a focus centred solely on the study of institutions, contexts and responses. Yet, is it really feasible to learn and teach humanitarian action without limiting it to mere technical expertise or know-how? As pointed out by Ryfman in 2002, mapping “the state of knowledge” is a complex endeavour,²⁰ even more so when the objective is to create a generalist and cross-disciplinary university curriculum. As for the “studies” as a whole, a reflective and critical perspective prevails but finds itself in constant tension between pluri- and inter-disciplinarity. Indeed, in 2001, the Plurifaculty Programme for Humanitarian Action (PPAH), the precursor of the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies, drew upon each of the University of Geneva’s faculties (law, medicine, psychology and educational sciences, economic and social sciences, earth sciences):

“Designing training and research in humanitarian action in a resolutely pluridisciplinary manner provides responses to the major humanitarian challenges of our time: both by overarchingly addressing the structural problems of society and the subjects of violence, war, torture, hunger, inequalities and anthropic or natural catastrophes, in terms of their identification, prevention, emergency management or reconstruction, and by taking into account the ethical deliberations on professional humanitarian practices, here and elsewhere.”²¹

Higher education and training programmes have mostly, throughout the last twenty years, reflected the humanitarian system’s main reforms and controversies. With the recognition of states of “complex emergency”, the need for coordination and professionalisation has led to new management models within organisations and required the proficiency of a broad knowledge base of crisis situations. The shift from needs-based humanitarianism to rights-based humanitarianism has also prompted actors to adopt a normative framework founded on accountability and standardisation. Nevertheless, a true interdisciplinary approach is struggling to emerge, as pointed out by Alain Guilloux in 2009, when he observed that the majority of humanitarian training courses were taught within disciplinary departments and faculties.²² For example, the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies is attached to the Faculty of Medicine and part of the training it provides addresses health issues, while the Rotterdam and Doha training programmes are attached to social sciences institutes. The purpose of these attachments is often historical, stemming from the disciplinary origins of the programme founders. However, a fundamental nuance must be given to Guilloux’s other observation that “few programmes seek to explore the political environment in which humanitarianism operates, the contexts in which humanitarian action is deployed and the difficult choices faced by humanitarian

¹⁹ Antonio Donini, “The far side: the meta functions of humanitarianism in a globalised world”, *Disasters*, no. 34, 2010, p. 221.

²⁰ Philippe Ryfman, « Vers une “École française”... », *op. cit.*, p. 135.

²¹ Programme plurifacultaire en action humanitaire, *Rapport d’activités 2000-2001 et perspectives*, Université de Genève, 2001, p. 3 [translated by the author].

²² Alain Guilloux, “Interdisciplinarity in perspective: The case of humanitarian studies”, *The Journal of the World Universities Forum*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2009, p. 72.

actors”.²³ On the contrary, a more systemic, social sciences-inspired approach has led to humanitarian action being considered as a system constructed by ideologies, multiple identities, power relationships and dogmas.

Humanitarian studies are therefore positioned within, upstream and downstream of the humanitarian sector and mainly address the production and circulation of knowledge emanating *from* the sector and focusing *on* the sector, its mode of governance, its power dynamics, standards and ethos. Thus, the evolution of the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies’ programmes demonstrates that in 1998 – *i.e.* from its inception –, in addition to the traditional disciplines associated with humanitarian work, such as health and law, the following subjects were also all covered: political, economic and social analysis of humanitarian contexts, as well as project and team management.²⁴ In 2023, the core curriculum of courses included the ethical, sociological and anthropological dimensions of aid while simultaneously reinforcing the specialised training provided in the areas of negotiation, advocacy, communication and protection.²⁵ This core curriculum is found in most university programmes, yet it also demonstrates that “humanitarian studies today seem more to be drawing upon an accumulation of approaches and disciplinary knowledge than evolving towards a discipline as such”.²⁶

Nonetheless, the questions of legitimacy and status remain unresolved within humanitarian studies. Should they be considered as focused solely from the perspective of humanitarianism-as-object, implying relatively impervious boundaries between the academic and practitioner worlds? Or, on the contrary, do they entail more porous boundaries, with the integration of partnerships and research both within and with organisations? To what extent do they consider humanitarianism-as-subject, *i.e.* knowledge produced directly by humanitarian institutions? Here too the field is shifting and encompassing a diversity of approaches based on the nature of the academic centres providing the studies. While the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies dedicates itself exclusively to the continuing education of humanitarian professionals, backed by partnerships with organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and *Médecins Sans Frontières*, which send cohorts of participants to courses, most of the other centres are dedicated to initial training. To date, partial and dated data indicate an employability rate of approximately 50% of young graduates in humanitarian sectors.²⁷ Finally, certain centres only operate as research institutes and think tanks.

The nature of scientific publications also sheds light upon the boundaries between research, debate, policy and practice. French-language and English-language reviews provide a forum for dialogue between researchers and practitioners as well as content in the form of empirical research, literature reviews, essays and policy documents. This dialogue still remains limited today, as in its difficult beginnings, as was pointed out with irony by the editors of the review *Disasters* in the first issue: “While we suspect that [scientists and relief workers] may avoid reading articles produced by the other, we should hope that some interchange of ideas may result. It may even diminish the condescension which neither group appears to realise is mutual”.²⁸

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ Programme plurifacultaire en action humanitaire..., *op. cit.*, p. 26-39.

²⁵ See the Centre’s course catalogue: <https://humanitarianstudies.ch/course-catalogue-2023-2024>

²⁶ Jean-Daniel Rainhorn, Amna Smailbegovic et Sabine Jiekak, *Formations universitaires en action...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12 [translated by the author].

²⁷ Peter Walker and Catherine Russ, *Professionalising the Humanitarian Sector...*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

²⁸ “Editorial”, *Disasters, The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management*, vol. 1, n° 2, 1977, p. 1.

In addition to academic courses, many non-qualifying professional training courses have also emerged, in particular in English-speaking countries. Platforms such as the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (a unit within Save the Children) and RedR UK work in particular on strengthening local skills in collaboration with partner NGOs. Very often, these training programmes also provide a career transition path to humanitarians who have returned from the field. The UN even has its own Institute for Training and Research, primarily intended to shape the young diplomats coming out of its fold. However, few organisations have a training fund (such as does the ICRC's iDevelop programme, for example). Supporting academic training helps to deconstruct organisational culture and expose staff to other points of view. However, it is difficult to determine the number and profile of employees benefiting from training, as organisations share very little socio-demographic data. What we find in effect are training silos that are either confined to technical and managerial knowledge – such as in-house NGO training programmes – or provide exposure to theoretical reflection.

What education and training mean

The narrative on professional education and training needs, however, to be contextualised in two ways. Firstly, in terms of the recognition of university qualifications in humanitarian career paths. Indeed, a more accurate understanding of the realities of humanitarian careers has been provided by research into sociology of work,²⁹ showing that disparities exist between expatriated staff with access to university training and national staff who are limited to experience in the field. In addition, access to academic humanitarian programmes is unequal, in particular in Western programmes, whose prices are prohibitive for candidates from Global South countries and therefore remain reserved to a minority, despite the programmes having better professional recognition.³⁰ University-acquired knowledge is often, however, unusable in the field.³¹ These challenges are echoed in the desires expressed upon enrolment by Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies students (including both expatriates and nationals) to improve their skills, seize professional opportunities, obtain an official qualification from a recognised academic institute or retrain for a new career.

Secondly, in terms of the identification of the aptitudes and competencies required by humanitarian professions. The injunctions to professionalisation in recent decades have often resulted in meaningless language pushing for effectiveness and performance – even appearing in one of the current humanitarian standards.³² Recent Bioforce studies and a case study of the NOHA network³³ have in particular highlighted the lack of consensus regarding the necessary skills. How can a set of common competencies be defined in a world in which humanitarian visions differ so greatly? What can be said about the language and localisation-related power dynamics at play in the production of knowledge at a time when calls for decolonisation prescribe the reconfiguration of the humanitarian system's power dynamics? These yet-to-be-answered questions will require an examination of the processes of knowledge circulation and contention within the field of humanitarian studies.

²⁹ Pascal Dauvin et Johanna Siméant, *Le travail humanitaire. Les acteurs des ONG, du siège au terrain*, 2002, Presses de Sciences Po.

³⁰ Eric James, "The professional humanitarian and the downsides of professionalisation", *Disasters*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2016, pp. 185–206.

³¹ Silke Roth, *The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals*, Routledge, 2015, p. 75.

³² Core Humanitarian Standard, "Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability", number 7, <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/Core%20Humanitarian%20Standard%20-%20English.pdf>

³³ Rory Downham, "The professionalisation of humanitarian action: a work still in progress", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 16, 2021, p. 112-127, <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2021/03/25/the-professionalisation-of-humanitarian-action-a-work-still-in-progress>; Lars Löfquist, "Teaching humanitarian action: NOHA joint master's programme at 30." *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2023, p. 8.

Translated from the French by Naomi Walker

Biography

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