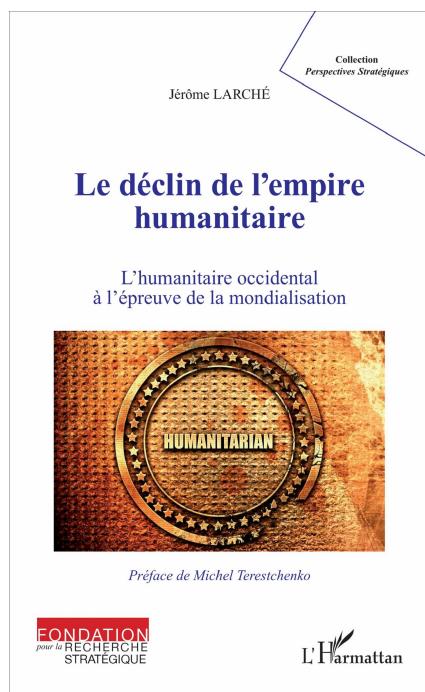


Is humanitarianism on the decline?

Interview with *Jérôme Larché*



Jérôme Larché is an intensive care intern working for over 30 years in the humanitarian field. His assignment with the NGO, Médecins du Monde, landed him in the midst of numerous conflicts, natural disasters, and dangerous situations, where violence and corruption were his daily lot. As a researcher associated with the Foundation for Strategic Research and the Canadian Research Institute on Humanitarian Crisis and Aid (OCCA), Jérôme Larché expounded his thoughts in a book, with a clear-cut title immediately attracting our attention at *Humanitarian Alternatives*. We went to meet him.

The decline of the humanitarian empire
Western humanitarianism collides
with globalization

Jérôme Larché
Preface by Michel Terestchenko
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Humanitarian Alternatives — Is humanitarianism truly in decline and what are for you the most telltale signs?

Jérôme Larché — The resources deployed across the world and its “theaters” in terms of personnel, operations, and funding have never been more substantial, and yet the meaningfulness and intelligibility of the actions of the Western *humanitarian empire* for the promotion of solidarity have failed to make any headway. Instead, the humanitarian working environment (wrongly termed, the “humanitarian space” by some), has undergone profound changes, and humanitarians “without borders” have become subject to globalization. This article explores the coming of the decline of the Western humanitarian empire, notably characterised by difficulties in carrying out humanitarian field operations, be they during armed conflicts or natural disasters. We also look into the way this decline has been *catalyzed* chiefly by the impact of a neoliberal policy relating to stakes in security, financing, and anti-terrorist strategies, and by the involvement of lucrative private businesses. Finally, the article describes the instigators of this decline – NGOs, States, international organisations – whose interconnecting relationships are at times ambiguous.

H. A. — Given these situations, what alternatives do you foresee?

J. L. — Today’s true challenge for all humanitarians is the reconstruction of their own identity, and, at the same time, the mapping out of a strategy to develop openness and knowledge-based

collective intelligence. By learning to accept the dark side and the uncertainties of their work, humanitarians would thus go through a process of reflection that would lead to an adjustment of their current practices. This would be a sign of real political maturity. The deciphering of their new operating environments by NGOs today requires calling upon disciplines such as geopolitics, sociology, demography, urban planning, and anthropology. *The paradigm of complexity*, theorized by Edgar Morin, combined with a “social systemic design”, could lead humanitarians to reflect more profoundly on certain major problems, improve their sometimes questionable practices, and, above all, be reminded of the need for them to take into full account the relationship with the Other and its resulting interdependencies. The concept of *complex humanitarianism* pursues the objective, beyond reflection and methodology, of modifying current practices. As it is impossible for all those involved (humanitarians, beneficiaries, and other actors operating in the humanitarian environment – States, supra- or interstate organisations, international donors, armed groups, etc.) to each separately acquire a full understanding of the complex situations they collectively encounter, it is a matter of recognizing that partial knowledge can be transformed into a will to share know-how and conduct proper actions. As a concrete example, I can mention the role of humanitarians and their management of IDP and refugee camps. These camps, where basic biological needs seem to outweigh all other needs, continually grow in size during armed conflicts and natural disasters, and there, the “human citizen” becomes termed, in *lingua humanitariae*, a “displaced person” or a “refugee”. Displaced populations are thus not only made subject to a type of “biopower” unintentionally bolstered by NGO operational activities, but also to greater political exploitation, as was the case both in the Kalma camp in South Darfur and in the Manik Farm camp in Sri Lanka, and, more recently, in Haiti. Settlement strategies that are poorly devised and prepared in a rush can permanently reinforce people’s negative preconceptions against international solidarity organisations, especially when their personnel flaunt external signs of wealth, such as four-wheel drives and astronomically priced rental accommodation. Understanding the Other’s perception during an armed conflict, as well as following an urbanistic approach to the geographical layout of cities after a natural disaster, and immediately encouraging the active participation of communities, have all become essential factors.

H. A. — *What is your worst case scenario?*

J. L. — Given this rationale, which has grown to become market- and contract-oriented, the development of private companies specialized in providing aid and logistics support (actually former large NGOs backed by investment funds) may undoubtedly be the most rational solution sustained by donors. An initial policy guided by a search for an authentic Otherness will then have definitively given way to technical expediency and a quest for performance.

H. A. — *And ultimately, is “change or die” the only solution?*

J. L. — The current supremacy of the Western humanitarian model with its increasingly Anglo-American-tinged overtones (notwithstanding the historical track record of French doctors), bears witness to the way by which NGOs adopt methods and concepts of neo-liberal globalization in their response to people’s needs. Western humanitarianism fits perfectly well into the active and systemic processes of the globalization/worldview dyad, be it from a political point of view (with the defense of liberal peace), an economic point of view (with new modes of financing and management), or a sociological point of view (with the concept of time acceleration). The global institutionalization of the Humanitarian Empire and its ever closer collusion with States have considerably reduced both its capacity to be influential during crises (politically and via the media), and to physically extend its incursion into areas of conflicts where there are real

humanitarian needs (as in Syria and Libya). Moreover, the Empire's financing strategies have bled into those of the business world, each party taking aim at the same target, i.e. the millions of people at the *bottom of the pyramid*. Defining a new humanitarian path, one of *complex humanitarianism*, means opening up to anthropopolitics, that is to the ambition of understanding the world as it has evolved in recent decades. There is no doubt that humanitarians must attempt to re-humanize practices that have become increasingly technical and depoliticized. They must more systematically enrich them by more greatly involving the social sciences, and must minimize their normative biopower, as exemplified by the criteria set out by *Sphere* or in certain certification processes. Unless a change of course occurs, a professionalizing approach, straightjacketed by protocols and prohibitions, will gradually bring to its demise the "heart" of humanitarianism, the imperfect, slightly muddled soul that has nonetheless risen to build modern Western humanitarianism. The effectiveness and posted indicators of humanitarianism may indeed reassure dispassionate outside observers. But populations who are affected are capable of measuring the discrepancy between their own needs (for health, food, and dignity) and the actual technical assistance that has been solely provided.

H. A. — Is the humanitarian ecosystem actually cognizant of this?

J. L. — This is a difficult question that I would like the humanitarian community to address in a positive fashion. Would it ever be possible to have Western humanitarians gradually change the seemingly paralyzing "feeling of complexity" into an "awareness of complexity" that can lead to a better background understanding and to a true self-critical assessment of their strategies and practices? Will Western humanitarian NGOs have the clear-headedness and the flexibility needed to reconquer their identity, considering that it is never easy to reposition oneself in the world after having been at the head of an empire? I would only make a bet on the matter of collective intelligence and the reflexive thought that should both guide humanitarian actors and their partners in this direction for the benefit of populations who may be in need, but yet who are more and more becoming the actors of their own future.

Interview by Bruno-Georges David

President and founder of Communication without Borders
Director of communication and development of Islamic Relief France

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

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