
Book Review

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Organizing Disaster. The Construction of Humanitarianism

by: Adam Rostis

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Through a critical approach, the author explores the question of how humanitarianism has become a taken-for-granted social construction aimed at alleviating suffering. Humanitarianism is now an “accepted contemporary social force”, with large and structured organisations while humanitarian aid is becoming “more organised, funded, and globalised”. However, the author underlines “their lack of overall success in reducing suffering”. Despite this ‘questionable’ impact, humanitarian organisations and their policies continue to be perceived as key actors, indispensable for any action aimed at alleviating the suffering of victims from disasters. How do they achieve that and what purpose does the humanitarian organisations serve?

The book is structured in six chapters. In Chapter 1, the author presents the outline of his book and the problematics. He describes the theoretical framework being used, namely the postcolonial theory. From his standpoint, the renewal or the birth of the two organisations under study – The Red Cross and Medecins sans frontiers (MSF) – must be seen in the light of the Western values and “the continuing effects of colonisation”, because their practices and narratives lead to continuing the Western domination on former colonies.

In Chapter 2, the author describes its methodology, which relies on genealogy, a variant of historiography, developed with Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s works. Because genealogy “attempts to uncover other explanations that have been hidden in the construction of a logical narrative or explanation of how the past occurred”, Rosti analyses in depth what constitutes archives for Foucault, i.e., any discourse relayed into oral or written texts, practices, routines, etc., that could explain why and how the humanitarian organisations justify their practices, values, and their very existence as it is perceived now, i.e., taken for granted and unquestionable social forces for good. Specifically, Rosti tries to find in these archives and any discursive mechanisms constructing humanitarianism, the discontinuities revealing changes in the way of thinking and the emergence of new concepts or perceptions (called subjects by the author).

Chapter 3 proceed to an in-depth explanation of his approach of discursive analysis using genealogy. He describes in detail the different concepts coming from his analysis and how he identifies *discontinuities* in the discourse, allowing humanitarian organisations to emerge as we know them now. One concept appearing in the

humanitarian discourse is the suffering stranger – humanitarian organisations extend boundaries by taking moral responsibility to alleviate the suffering of victims in distant lands. Another one is a change in the religious discourse and the emergence of a “benevolent God” giving “people the authority to be benevolent”. Another key concept that emerged was that pain and suffering is socially unacceptable. Because of that, and due to the moral obligation that we must care about people suffering, humanitarianism began to be perceived as something that is allowed to be exercised anywhere, without respect to borders. Finally, the concept opening the way to humanitarian organisations as we know them is the discourse leading to the public’s perception that there are more and more disasters, requiring more knowledge and more human and financial resources. Therefore, only professional organisations can respond to those increasing needs.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the empirical data gathered through archives from two huge humanitarian organisations the author worked for, the Red Cross and Medecins sans frontieres (MSF). The author identifies a major discontinuity happening during the Biafran war, which forced the Red Cross to drastically change its image, practices and narrative, and led to the emergence of MSF in response to the failures experienced by the Red Cross during this war. Taking the power struggles between the Red Cross, the Nigerian state and the belligerents as example, the empirical data showed that the post-colonial theory could explain many practices and discourses of the Red Cross as well as MSF at that time and afterward. Empirical data also showed that discourses reflects a legitimisation of the colonial borders, and the perpetuation of colonial practices and discourses.

In Chapter 6, Rosti discusses results about emergent concepts which are now the basis of all the humanitarian discourse: the *humanitarian victim*, who must behave as expected to benefit from humanitarian aid; the *humanitarian professional*, who “has the right and the duty to provide assistance free from interference from third parties to the victim-humanitarian professional relationship”; the *humanitarian organisation* as a disciplinary institution, which aims to avoid any disorder after a disaster, mainly because victims of disaster are the more often people coming from developing countries who could be a “potential threat to our security”. Humanitarian camps for refugees, relocation camps, or field hospitals are for the author no more than “components of a disciplinary society”, in connection with the “colonial nature of humanitarian organisations”.

In summary, this book brings out a very interesting and innovative view of humanitarianism and humanitarian organisations, justifying their action and perpetuating their existence through discourses conveying colonial Western values, and structured to discipline victims in order to avoid any disorder that could come from disasters hitting vulnerable countries, threatening social and economic Western societies.