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## **The Problem of Understanding Modern Humanitarianism and its Sociological Value**

**(Revised for special issue on 'Understanding Modern Humanitarianism')**

The character, conditions and conduct of modern humanitarianism are widely studied and are frequently taken up as matters for critical debate. They form a substantial field of trans-disciplinary inquiry (Barnett and Weiss 2008). This is identified with efforts to chart new conditions and formations of global civil society (Kaldor 2002; DeChaine 2005). It involves inquiries into emergent forms of cosmopolitan political consciousness and action (Calhoun 2004; 2008; Delanty 2000). Moreover, many take an interest in these issues out of a concern to explain how humanitarian discourse along with the sentiment-fired terms on which it issues its moral demands operate as a political ideologies and as forces of 'governmentality' (Larner and Walters 2004; Walters 2011).

This article is designed as a sociological contribution to these inquiries. It further aims to explain the potential for humanitarianism to instruct sociological understanding; especially where the latter concerns itself with the harms done to people in society and how we are socially and culturally disposed to care for others. While outlining a 'sociology of humanitarianism' it also argues for the value of incorporating 'humanitarian' culture and values into projects of social research. From the start it should be understood that by no means does this exclude a concern to critically analyse the language and sentimental tropes of humanitarianism so as to attend to their involvement in the enactment of power relations. Neither does it turn a blind eye to the potential for humanitarian principles, policies and interventions, while presented as commitments to people's care and liberation, to operate as forces of harm and oppressive discrimination. In these regards, the

contributions of Foucauldian scholarship to our critical understanding of modern humanitarianism are acknowledged (Bornstein and Redfield 2010; Fassin 2011; 2012; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Kapoor 2013; Narkunas 2015; Piotukh 2015; Sokhi-Bulley 2011). At the same time, however, they are viewed as problematic where they commit us to an excessively limited conception of this phenomenon and to projects that have no other purpose than critique. By contrast, in the approach offered here, the unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) task of understanding modern humanitarianism is taken as a matter that warrants the development of considerably more elaborated frameworks of theoretical and historical understanding. It also aims to wrestle openly with the ways in which humanitarian conviction and sentiment operates to incite social consciousness and with its potential to serve as an encouragement to care for people in social terms. In these respects, moreover, it works to make explicit the humanitarianism that is contained within the critique of humanitarianism.

My argument draws on Charles Taylor's much-cited critical evaluation of Michel Foucault's conceptions of 'freedom' and 'truth' (Taylor 1984). Here, however, I am not so much concerned with Taylor's analysis of Foucault's understanding of power and his argument that it only 'makes sense' when linked to the idea of liberation. I am more interested rather, with elaborating on Taylor's contention that, in his portrayal of humanitarianism as a stratagem of social control, Foucault often simplifies too much. I join with Taylor in calling for a more wide-ranging historical investigation of the origins and development of modern humanitarianism. I also aim to detail some of the contribution that sociology can make to this.

More recently, in the context of debates surrounding the political character, organization and consequences of humanitarian interventions associated with the United Nations and related International Non-Governmental Agencies, a number of commentators have argued that the quality of analysis that is brought to bear upon contemporary affairs is impoverished due to its historical amnesia. For example, Michael Barnett argues this has often led to a lack of appreciation for the extent to which many of the moral contradictions, paradoxes and failings of contemporary forms of humanitarianism, have featured as part of its thinking and practice since its origins; and moreover, that these cannot be simply explained as 'an artefact of humanitarian actors having to operate in a dirty world' (Barnett 2011). Similarly, Samuel Moyn argues that a more carefully detailed history of modern humanitarianism, and especially one that attends, as he puts it, to its 'perversions' and the 'starting point of its syndromes', is essential for clarifying the distinctive character, organisation and novelty of global humanitarianism in the twenty-first century (Moyn 2014: 46). This article shares these convictions. At the same time, however, in its commitment to the development of sociological understanding, it is not only concerned to chart the origins and spread of humanitarian values and ideals so as to understand how these are incorporated within individual social actions and institutional formations, but also to attend to the social conditions under which these are rendered conceivable and are made charged with moral authority. In this regard, it begins to respond to Moyn's call for an approach that moves beyond debating the political and/or moral significance of the principles or sentiments by which humanitarianism is held to be justified, and rather, attempts to explain how these acquire their cultural validity and moral appeal in social experience (Moyn 2006).

The opening section offers a definition of modern humanitarianism. Here I share in the understanding that, given the complex history of modern humanitarianism and its multiple manifestations in the contemporary world, it is useful to distinguish between different types of humanitarian action, varieties of humanitarian organisation, different ages of humanitarianism and contrasting forces of humanitarianism (Barnett 2011). There are many humanitarianisms. At the same time, however, I hold that while there are many branches to the modern humanitarian tree, these have familiar elements and some shared histories by which they connected to the same trunk; or rather, are made rooted in common ground. It is not easy, however, to make all this amenable to sociological understanding. This is partly due to the fact that we are set to deal with areas of our cultural history that remain poorly understood, and then again, are liable to provoke many conflicts of interpretation. It is also related to the ongoing difficulties we have in making adequate sense of our emotional dispositions and how these have changed through modern times; and how in turn these are set to be configured by current social arrangements and are moderated through our cultural experience of the contemporary world.

I am particularly interested in the potential for the many ongoing intellectual difficulties and moral controversies attached to the attempt at understanding modern humanitarianism to be made productive for thought and action. In this I attend to the involvement of modern humanitarianism, and especially the many controversies it generates, in debates over the moral character of society. I also note how these can serve as a means by which individuals acquire social recognition as 'humans' deserving of care. I argue that we should take the many problems in making adequate sense of modern humanitarianism as a guide to social and sociological understanding. In this regard, in the middle section I contend that it is

possible to read some of the later developments in Foucault's work as lending support to this position. In a later section I argue, however, that it may be in the work and writings of Jane Addams that we find the best example of how sociology might proceed to refine our knowledge of the social constitution of modern humanitarianism and its value.

### **Modern Humanitarianism and Humanitarianisms**

There is a longstanding tradition of sociological and philosophical understanding that holds that modern people are particularly distinguished as such by the fact that they have acquired pronounced humanitarian temperaments and moral sensibilities. On some accounts, the origins of modern humanitarianism can be traced back to the Spanish colonization of the Americas in the late fifteenth century; and in particular to the moral and theological debates provoked in reaction to the genocidal violence visited upon Amerindian populations under the *encomienda* system of slavery (Headley 2008; McFarland 2011; Todorov 1984; Wright-Carozza 2003). Others are inclined to identify the well-spring of modern humanitarianism in some of the theologies and political movements of the Protestant Reformation; and here a focus is often brought to the Quakers in an attempt to explain how these people were first moved to protest against the cruelties done to slaves and how their moral convictions were subsequently corralled into sustained campaigns for the abolition of slavery (Abruzzo 2011: 16-49; Stamatov 2013).

While during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it appears that humanitarianism preoccupied only a few exceptional individuals and sectarian groups, it is now widely recognised that through the second half of the eighteenth century it became a widespread

and passionate concern for the new urban middle classes of Western European and American societies. Many historians share in Keith Thomas's attempt to document what appears to be an outbreak of 'spontaneous tender-heartedness', that from around 1750 onwards was widely recognised as a powerful force inspiring civic consciousness and action (Denby 1994; Ellis 1996; Thomas 1983: 173-5; Vincent-Buffault 1986). For example, Lynn Hunt argues that the 1760s in particular are distinguished by a marked increase in the discovery of moral feelings for the humanity of those subjected to cruel punishments. She notes that while at first Voltaire was moved in 1762-3 to protest against the trial of Jean Calas on the grounds that it took place as an act of religious bigotry, by 1766 his principle concerns had shifted to the morally outrageous ways in which the court had attempted to use the method of 'breaking on the wheel' to make Calas confess to the murder of his son. Although such forms of torture 'had long seemed acceptable to him', ultimately, it was due to a sudden upwelling of what many commentators of the time took to be 'natural compassion' that Voltaire was brought under the compulsion to change his views (Hunt 2007, pp.70-6).

Through the second half of the eighteenth century a new sentiment-fired 'humanitarian revolution' is now understood to have inspired early modern movements to end slavery, the initiation of campaigns for the rights of women, the founding of moral crusades against child labour, and to have provoked the first worries about the suffering experienced by people as a result of their impoverished working and housing conditions under nascent laissez-faire capitalism (Fiering 1976; McGowan 1986; Pinker 2011: 155-227; Sznajder 2001). While people were always selective in their attachments to particular humanitarian concerns, nevertheless, it is possible to identify these as all involved with what Margaret Abruzzo

refers to as a 'medley of interconnected assumptions' (Abruzzo 2011: 3). For the purposes of this article, it is these that I present as the signature themes of 'modern humanitarianism'.

Firstly, this holds that a great deal of human pain and suffering is unnecessary and unjust; and that its presence in extreme forms amounts to a moral obscenity. Here there is a radical revision of classical, medieval and most early modern understandings of people's pains and miseries as either an inevitable part of life or as connected to the workings of Divine Providence. A substantial amount of human suffering is no longer viewed as part of what Thomas Beard in his famous work of 1597 referred to as 'the theatre of God's judgements', but rather, it is seen as a terrible and unwarranted misfortune (Beard 2012 [1587]).

Secondly, it involves a new emotionally charged moral response towards pain. It is not only the case that most pain comes to be viewed as wholly against us and as forms of experience we must oppose, but also, that the spectacle of human misery excites moral sympathy.

Individuals acquire a more pronounced capacity to feel for the suffering of others; and further, may be moved by this to a position of moral outrage. As Emile Durkheim observes, at the same time as modern people are liable to experience social pressures by which they are inclined towards egoism, those same pressures also appear to be implicated in the development of a 'sympathy for all that is human, a broader pity for all sufferings, for all human miseries, a more ardent need to combat them [and] a greater thirst for social justice' (Durkheim 1973 [1898]: 49). Thirdly, modern humanitarianism is intimately connected to debates over what it means to be human and how this binds 'us' in ties in bonds of moral responsibility towards 'others'. In the eighteenth century debates over the 'meaning of our humaneness' are identified with a 'fellow-feeling' that is explicitly recognised as 'social'



(Abruzzo 2011: 3; Mullan 1988). The moral feelings aroused in face of the spectacle of human suffering are taken not only as a form of social revelation, but also, as a provocation to question the moral meaning of human sociality and the forms it takes (Smith 2006 [1759]). Moreover, this social sensibility and conviction, as dramatically illustrated in works such as Voltaire's *Candide*, is involved in a movement to locate the explanation for human suffering in conditions of human society; and further, for this to be addressed as a problem requiring us to engage in efforts of social reform (Reference to add 2016).

Given the many controversies attached to contemporary forms of humanitarianism, it is important to recognise that, as outlined above, modern humanitarianism has always attracted a lot of critical debate and political contest. The putative motives underlying expressions of humanitarian sentiment and commitment have always been questioned and have often been found wanting (Moyn 2006; Smith 2006 [1759]). Moralists have consistently worried over the extent to which the feelings aroused by the spectacle of human misery hold the potential to operate more as a self-serving pleasure than as an incitement for people to actively care for the well-being of others (Halttunen 1995). The possibility that modern humanitarianism, while presenting itself as a heart-felt commitment to the good of others, may in fact work as an ideology in the service of people's oppression, has long been recognised (Brunstetter 2012; Muthu 2003). In these regards, in her famous essay on 'the social question' when Hannah Arendt portrays the 'passion of compassion' as a justification for revolutionary violence and as a force set opposed to democratic political debate, then she is operating within longstanding traditions of critique (Arendt 1963).

It is also important to recognise that the base sentiments and convictions of modern humanitarianism have been taken up within many different, contrasting and sometimes contradictory humanitarian practices and campaigns. Humanitarian sentiments and convictions may be widespread, but they are by no means universal or indiscriminate. It seems that the 'compassionate temperament' is always selective in its focus and highly varied when it comes to its expression (if at all) in social action. This is vividly illustrated by F. David Roberts in his study of the social conscience of the early Victorians (Roberts 2002). Here Roberts notes that when it came to extending humanitarian sympathies towards the miseries endured by the working poor, it appears that widespread evangelical Christian beliefs in childhood innocence allied to a bourgeois faith in the virtues of classical political economy led to much more humanitarian sympathy being extended to the sufferings of labouring children than those endured by their parents. The humanitarian sympathies of Victorian bourgeois philanthropists appear to have been heavily disciplined by their theological convictions and political beliefs (Roberts 2002: 258-95). Similarly, Frank Klingberg notes that while touring Britain promoting the cause of American antislavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe provoked a storm of protest from those campaigning to improve the conditions of the white working classes when she refused to recognise the plight of white adult 'wage slaves' as a worthy humanitarian cause. Stowe held that industrial capitalists and landlords should not be blamed for workers' poverty, but rather, that this should be attributed to the 'traffic in intoxicating drinks' and the sin of intemperance (Klingberg 1938: 551). In this instance the moral judgements that Beecher Stowe cast on the white working poor operated so as to make her see them as not worthy of humanitarian concern.

These are just some of the many examples of historical contexts where expressions of humanitarianism by sentiment, word or action warrant analysis in more discrete terms. Insofar as it is evidently the case that modern humanitarianism can be appropriated in the service of many contrasting and opposing campaigns, and can be found operating within a wide range of institutional settings, then its various manifestations warrant explanation and analysis in relation to their particular forms and contexts. Modern humanitarianism is always blended with ideological commitments, favoured political priorities and moral preferences. It can, moreover, be found operating to justify a considerable range of behaviours and can be corralled in support of many different, and even opposing, institutional arrangements and political projects (Reid-Henry 2014). The humanitarianisms of abolitionism, campaigns for workers' rights, women's right, child protection, peace and reconciliation campaigns, health promotion, disaster aid and international development (and many more besides) all warrant analysis on their own terms and with due regard for their own distinct histories and domains (Barnett 2011; Sznajder 1997; 2001; Wilson and Brown 2009).

### **Causes, Conditions and Currents**

We are still working to piece together an adequate understanding of the range of historical events, cultural developments and social processes that are implicated in the origins, consolidation and spread of modern humanitarianism. While there is a tendency among Western scholars to attribute its origins to strands of Christian theology and pastoral tradition that promoted belief in a God of compassion along with the conviction that it was part of one's Christian calling to practice acts of charity and kindness to all people on the

understanding that all possess a common humanity, there is no agreement when it comes explaining how or why such beliefs and practices gathered wider legitimacy and appeal. It is recognised that this involves us in the problem of explaining why most people abandoned the idea that they were subject to the whims and dictates of an angry God of judgement and lost their 'enthusiasm' for doctrines of 'special providence', but this remains a matter over which a considerable conflict of interpretations reigns (Burns 2002; Cunningham and Grell 2000; Walsham 1999; Thomas 1971). Some argue that the prolonged extremes of suffering experienced by many people through the wars of religion and internecine civil strife that followed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation played a significant role in this regard (Hill 1993; Pinker 2011:172-4); and here Ronald Crane's 1934 article that suggests that the 'genealogy' of the eighteenth century 'man of feeling' leads back to campaigns waged by Latitudinarian clergy to promote a benevolent Christianity in opposition to Calvinist theology and Hobbesian political philosophy, has gathered renewed popularity as an important part of the explanation for the modern 'humanitarian revolution' (Asad 2011; Ellis 1994: 14; Herdt 2001; Moyn 2006).

It is certainly the case that at a popular level, and especially in Britain and the United States of America, eighteenth century Christianity was expressed in more openly heart-felt terms, and that here believers grew more preoccupied with proclaiming a faith based humanitarianism (Clark 1995; Mack 2008; Thomson 2003). Furthermore, following Crane, some argue that western humanitarianism is best explained as a development within strands of Christian tradition, although one that, once established, had a tendency to push humanitarian conviction in an avowedly secular direction (Cunningham 1998; Cook 2013; De Bruyn 1981). Accordingly, when writers such the Third Earl of Shaftsbury, David Hume,

Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine subsequently appear to operate with the largely unquestioned assumption that humanitarian convictions sentiments are part of human nature and a feature of common sense, then it is argued that they are involved in secularising a sentimentalised form of Christianity (Himmelfarb 2001; Fiering 1976).

In the domain of sociology, however, it is recognised that there is more than the mere appeal of a set of ideas involved in the processes whereby humanitarianism came to be identified with 'common sense'. Attention is brought to the social arrangements in which people are set to live and the components of lived experience that charge tenets of belief with credibility. One tradition holds that that the popularization of modern humanitarianism is linked to the emergence and spread of modern capitalism (Haskell 1985a; 1985b). Accordingly, Natan Sznaider contends that 'by defining a universal field of others with whom contracts and exchanges can be made, market perspectives extend the sphere of moral concern as well, however unintentionally' (Sznaider 2001: 9). Another tradition attends to the ways in which humanitarian dispositions are nurtured within social processes of individualization. Following Emile Durkheim it is argued that where people are made to live under social arrangements that make them relate to others as well as themselves as distinct individuals, the more psychologically disposed they are to acquire humanitarian conviction and moral feeling (Giddens 1971; Vogt 1993). It is observed that a 'religion of humanity' is more likely to appeal to those living in social contexts where they are more heavily individualized (Cotterrell 2011; Cristi 2009; Joas 2013).

In his account of the psychological and emotional transformations that accompanied the European 'civilizing process', Norbert Elias is now widely identified as providing us with one

of the most theoretically sophisticated elaborations of these traditions (Elias 1994 [1937]). Here a focus is brought to the long-term development of social mores, standards of cultural distinction and institutional arrangements that led people to both inhibit violent impulses and develop a more elevated concern with the cultivation of empathy. On this account, modern humanitarianism is established as the product of a set of social arrangements and processes of socialization. It is nurtured, promoted and accentuated within social 'figurations'; it is a human potential that emerges in contexts where individuals are made subject to disciplinary forces of 'civilization' (Linklater 2004). In these regards, moreover, it might be argued that we are still piecing together an adequate understanding of the variety of ways in which these takes place, and for that matter, of how humanitarian passions may wax and wane in contexts where civilization undergoes periodic processes of 'informalization' or 'reformation' (Ray 2013; Rohloff 2013). It is further suggested that while Elias has cleared the ground for us to better understand the social processes within which individuals are more likely to acquire humanitarian concerns, he does not go far enough to uncover the potential for these to be nurtured through conscious action (Rosenwein 2002). This has led to further calls for us to devise more analytically sophisticated accounts of how individuals are inspired to craft 'emotives' and how these are subsequently adopted within discourses of politics and public life (Reddy 2001; Spelman 1997); and here, one might further argue that we are only just beginning to piece together understandings of how the moral and political currency of humanitarianism is moderated in relation to the production and distribution of visual imagery of human suffering (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015; Kurasawa 2013; Orgad 2013; Reference to add 2013)

All these terms of debate and analytical challenges are mentioned here to establish that any discussion of contemporary humanitarianism is faced with a difficult task when it comes to understanding how it should be assessed in relation to its history. It is not only the case that the origins and early development of modern humanitarianism remain somewhat obscure and poorly understood, but also, that much within this remains open to dispute. We are dealing with what Charles Taylor refers to as 'a big and deep story' that 'no one can claim to understand ...fully' (Taylor 1984: 155). Moreover, many parts of the story that are identified as holding significance invite many conflicts of interpretation. Our understanding of modern humanitarianism is incomplete, and a great deal of what might be taken as understood remains a vexed matter for debate.

### **Contemporary Humanitarianism and Foucauldian Critique**

Some of the above mentioned social and cultural transformations that gave rise to modern humanitarianism are charted by Charles Taylor in his famous work *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989). Some reference to these is also featured in his earlier critical appraisal of Michel Foucault's political philosophy. Of particular importance for Taylor is the contribution that Protestantism has made to the modern 'affirmation of ordinary life' as a matter of sacred value and as a realm of experience that we should be seeking to ameliorate in a bid to combat the causes and effects of human suffering (Taylor 1984: 155-6; Taylor 1989: 211-302). His purpose in drawing attention to this period of Western cultural history appears to be twofold.

Firstly, Taylor uses this to raise the suggestion that there is much within Foucault's explanation of modern individuality that remains both unacknowledged and unexplored. Taylor argues that insofar as Foucault is interested to explain how people are made into modern subjects via the mobilization of humanitarian discourse and humanitarian projects of social reform, he should be more concerned with providing us with an historically elaborated account of the genealogy of modern humanitarianism. He contends that insofar as Foucault embarks on his historical studies from Nietzschean premises and with a concern to expose 'regimes of truth' as systems of domination, then he cherry picks examples to suit his cause; and further, Foucault ignores any evidence that might complicate or dilute his message. Taylor holds that Foucault's attraction lies in the fact that he operates as a '*terrible simplificateur*' (original emphasis) (Taylor 1984: 165). Accordingly, Taylor argues that while a work such as *Discipline and Punish* (1991 [1975]) provides us with an 'immensely rich series of analyses' of the potential for humanitarianism to operate as a system of domination and as a form of 'power' operating to produce new kinds of disciplined subjects, insofar as it does not own up to its biases, it also prevents us from recognising the potential for humanitarian discipline to advance 'more egalitarian forms of political participation' (Taylor 184: 164).

Secondly, Taylor contends that in his critical standpoint and ethics Foucault is more indebted to Christian humanitarian tradition than he cares to acknowledge. Taylor argues that ultimately Foucault occupies a paradoxical position where on the one hand he aims to denounce all notions of 'freedom' and 'truth' as manifestations of a 'will to power' and 'as systems of domination', while on the other, by his engagement with the attempt to recount our history and alert us to conditions under which we acquire our social subjectivity, he



aims to offer us a form of enlightenment. Taylor claims that there is a residual attachment to Christian notions of 'freedom' and 'truth' here. He asks:

'In offering us a new way of reappropriating our history and in rescuing us from the supposed illusion that the issues of the deep self are somehow inescapable, what is Foucault laying open for us, if not a truth that frees us for self-making?'

(Taylor 1984: 181)

More recently, the first of these points has been elaborated upon by Simon Reid-Henry (Reid-Henry 2014). Reid-Henry argues that Foucault and those inspired by his work have not paid enough attention to the inherent paradoxes of western humanitarianism that result from the fact that at the same time as it operates as a 'politics of life' involved in saving individuals and improving conditions of social life, it also serves as a technique of government that is 'constitutive of the political rationality of laissez-faire liberalism' (Reid-Henry 2014: 428). Accordingly, he urges us to recognise that while throughout modern times humanitarian promotions of 'care' have always been disciplined by market values and the logic of humanitarian values have served as a justification of state intervention in people's lives (and even to the point of using violence to achieve this), these have also 'set limits on state powers and market forces, at times even to shape them to better ends', as for example, in movements to abolish systems of slavery (Reid-Henry 2014: 428). His wider point here is that insofar as we cast humanitarianism purely as a political rationality that enforces disciplinary regimes of 'care' and justifies self-serving interventions into people's lives, then we fail to recognise the extent to which it is a 'liberalistic diagnostic' that also operates to expose and oppose the harms done to people under the social and political

systems in which they are made to live. Reid-Henry argues that modern humanitarianism and the many forms it takes, are frequently to be found performing more complex and contradictory roles in social life than Foucault and his followers are prepared to admit. These consist in sets of values and practices where there is always an amalgam of potentially beneficial and possibly harmful consequences for people.

As far as Taylor's second point is concerned, it is perhaps interesting to note the extent to which this has been developed under the auspices of Foucauldian scholarship, albeit without any concern for exploring its connections to earlier humanitarian traditions hewn from segments of Christianity. Among scholars of Foucault a considerable amount of debate now surrounds how we should interpret some of the suggestive remarks that feature in his 1975-76 lecture course *Society Must Be Defended* and in his 1981 press conference statement in support of efforts to offer humanitarian assistance to the 'boat people' fleeing Vietnam (Foucault 1984; 2004). The former includes a passage where Foucault states:

Truth to tell, if we are to struggle against disciplines, or rather against disciplinary power, in our search for a non-disciplinary power, we should not be turning to the old right of sovereignty; we should be looking for a new right that is both anti-disciplinary and emancipated from the principle of sovereignty

(Foucault 2004: 39-40)

While the latter urges us to embrace a 'solidarity' based on the recognition that we are all the subjects of government, and more provocatively, to recognise that:

Because of their claim to care for the wellbeing of societies, governments arrogate to themselves the right to treat in terms of profit and loss the human suffering which their decisions cause and their negligence this allows. It is a duty of this international citizenship to always confront the eyes and ears of governments with the human suffering for which it cannot truthfully be denied that they bear responsibility.

People's suffering must never be allowed to remain the silent residue of politics. It grounds an absolute right to stand up and to challenge those who hold power.

(Foucault 1984: 22)

Some take these as evidence of Foucault changing his mind, and that in his later work he was moving towards a position that recognised some virtue in liberal humanism (Paras 2006). Others, while conceding that such passages demand a reappraisal of Foucault's views on humanitarianism, are more inclined to argue that he was not so much concerned to advance a total dismissal of humanitarian conviction and action, but rather that, throughout his work, Foucault was principally concerned to oppose any philosophy or politics that operates from the premise that we have an intrinsic 'human nature' and that we should rest settled in our understanding of how we are constituted or of what it is possible for us to do. For example, Ben Golder contends that Foucault's later engagements with human rights concerns represents 'an ethic of critical engagement with human rights, with-in and against existing human rights, in the name of an unfinished humanity' (Golder 2010: 3; 2013). Similarly, David Campbell argues that ultimately Foucault was setting the groundwork in place for a new 'radicalised humanitarianism' (Campbell 1998). He argues that at the same time as this would operate with due regard for the potential for humanitarianism to cause harm - and that here he was particularly worried by the extent to

which a great deal of harm had resulted from efforts to justify humanitarianism via the metaphysics of humanism – it would also aim to revise and rework humanitarian conviction and sentiment against doing harm to others towards ‘an affirmation of ‘life’ and ‘being human’ that always affirmed our potential for alterity (Campbell 1998: 519). Campbell argues that Foucault was ultimately urging us to recognise that we can never live, think or act beyond the fray of ethics and politics, and that as a matter of urgency, this requires us to engage with a radical humanitarian critique of humanitarianism.

Here it seems that Taylor has not only raised some critical questions that call for a reassessment of Foucault’s arguments within a more historically elaborated frame of reference and analysis, but also, that he has alighted on some concerns that open the door on to the possibility of reading Foucault as involved in an attempt to revitalise humanitarian outlook and understanding so that this operates with an active interest in developing an ever broadening conception of humanity and human possibility. On this reading Foucault emerges as involved in a project to charge modern humanitarianism with a more pronounced concern to actively struggle against forms of thought, commitments of value and terms of practice in which it operates to select those who should be saved and the causes it should defend. It seems he is not only concerned with how modern humanitarianism should be rendered as an object for critical thought, but also, with how it might yet be incorporated within our critical thinking.

## **Sociology and Humanitarianism**

Contemporary debates on humanitarianism are largely dominated by academics working in the fields of International Relations and Anthropology; and often, these have a shared concern with analysing the humanitarianisms associated with the intergovernmental agencies of the United Nations and allied international non-governmental organization (INGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Here, moreover, more often than not, it is humanitarianism as a political ideology and/or 'politics of life' that is held up for debate.

As far as International Relations is concerned debate has congregated around a 'conventional narrative' that holds that the founding moment of modern humanitarianism should be identified in the efforts may by Henri Dunant to establish a permanent system of assistance for the casualties of war following his shock encounter with the wounded, dead and dying on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859 (Barnett 2011; Skinner and Lester 2012; Lester and Dussart 2014). Modern humanitarianism is narrowly conceived as a specific form of civil action; one guided by principles of impartiality (the quality and quantity of aid is set to correspond with people's needs), neutrality (humanitarian action is motivated by a direct response to people's suffering and nothing else besides), and independence (humanitarian actions operates above the fray of politics). On these terms, analysts proceed by charting the processes by which the original aims of objectives of Dunant's heroic mission have been corrupted by new imperatives and agendas. Our attention is directed to the institutionalization of humanitarianism within state-like organizations and its incorporation within the apparatus of inter-state relations and interventions (Barnett 2010-173-97). It is

argued that through these processes its moral character and social functions have been radically transformed; and here most are preoccupied with debating the extent to which the humanitarianism that originated with the founding of the Red Cross now operates within institutional forms and to political agendas that forsake Dunant's original vision and ideals. Humanitarianism is cast under suspicion, and in some quarters even denounced, as a set of corrupt political movements caught within a spiralling crisis of legitimacy (Barnett and Weiss 2008; 2011; Reiff 2002).

Most contemporary anthropological studies of humanitarianism share these understandings, but here there has been a greater concern with exposing the ways in which particular practices of humanitarian aid and intervention operate to impose hierarchies of value upon human life; so it is made clear that what might present itself as operating on the basis of universal claims of humanity, is in fact the imposition of a culturally favoured and possibly neo-colonial way of life on people (Abu-Lughod 2002; Davey 2015; Redfield 2010). Moreover, more recently, a great deal of this has drawn to a focus on how humanitarian organisations and individuals negotiate with the political status of people's lives and the terms by which they hold themselves to be justified to intervene to 'save', 'assist' and 'care' (Fassin 2007; 2012; Marsland and Prince 2012; Redfield 2005; Ticktin 2011). Under these aims, as in their review of the field Paul Redfield and Erica Bornstein observe, 'anthropologists are often of two minds when it comes to "going good" ....and more comfortable with the stance of critique than that of endorsement (Redfield and Bornstein 2010: 21).

Some sociologists readily align themselves with these critical projects, and chart further avenues of critical inquiry of their own (Calhoun 2004; 2008; Krause 2014). However, I take the view that by no means are these sufficient for the task of opening modern humanitarianism up to sociological insight; and further there is a danger here that in setting humanitarianism purely as a matter for critique, we fail to recognise the extent to which, nevertheless, it remains a vital element in our attempts at human understanding and in the critical thinking that seeks to advance this as a common cause.

On the perspective taken in this article, humanitarianism is a more complex and variable phenomenon than is often recognised in contemporary International Relations and Anthropology. Its analysis should not be confined to the institutions and practices of the international humanitarian order of the last hundred years. But what is at stake here? Along with Simon Reid-Henry I agree that 'we cannot properly understand the swirl of forces that make up the domain of humanitarianism in our own era without first grasping...its historical variations and underlying continuities (Reid-Henry 2014: 422). I further stand with Samuel Moyn in the view that if we are to seriously grapple with the problem of reforming humanitarianism, then we need to work at uncovering the long history of its 'perversions' and 'syndromes' so as to work at understanding how these have always been a part of its politics and practices (Moyn 2014: 46). At the same time, however, I want to suggest that there is a more important point to make here beyond declaring that in order to set current forms of humanitarianism into analytical relief we need devise more carefully elaborated accounts of their histories and the histories of their commonalities and variations.

One of the most important insights to draw from sociology, and especially that which takes theorists such as Durkheim and Elias as its guides, is that modern humanitarianism and its cultural enactments are both nurtured within and sustained by embodied forms of social life and modes of human sociality. In contemporary debates there is a tendency to treat humanitarianism as no more than a form of ideology and politics. It is acknowledged that humanitarian ideals and practices might be taken up within diverse and contrasting institutional arrangements and that they might be directed towards a range of different causes, but they are essentially identified as products of moral principle, political philosophy and heroic example. Humanitarianism is addressed as an idealism. Accordingly, while a focus is brought to how humanitarian ideals conduct social actions and may be incorporated within the design of social institutions, we are not encouraged to understand how they exist as expressions of our social situation and as products of our social constitution.

Durkheim and Elias provide us with some broad-scale theoretical explanations of the ways in which humanitarian convictions and sentiments result from moral forces of social life and processes of socialization. While there is no doubt that they may be consciously cultivated and are taken as the inspiration for individual social actions, at the same time, it is recognised that they are rooted in social conditions that are prior to and exceed any individual sphere of action or institutional context. We may critically question humanitarian ideals and the ways in which these are set into practice, but the wider point here is that such ideals and practices are representations and expressions of a fundamental social state that cannot simply be adopted or set aside as a political choice. Moreover, in many instances this will involve us in many conflicts of value and interest; and as far as



humanitarianism concerned this is bound to happen, for here it is often the case that human life itself is at stake.

In traditions of classical sociology, arguably, it is Jane Addams who goes furthest to identify social inquiry with humanitarianism; and, as she puts it, with the understanding that under conditions of modernity there is a 'humanitarian movement' seeking to 'embody itself' in 'society itself' (Addams 1965 [1892]: 41). While those acquainted with Addams' work in the Hull-House social settlement may readily recognise that this involved her in the practice of 'doing sociology' as a commitment to caregiving and progressive social reform, it should not be forgotten that her practice was also informed by a great deal of critical sociological thought (Deegan 1988). Addams understood social life to consist in enactments of substantive human values, and on these grounds she worked under the conviction that any effort to care for people's hardships and miseries was set to aggravate conflict. More recently Erik Schneiderhan has reminded us that in works such as *Democracy and Social Ethics* (2002 [1902]) Addams advocated a method of social investigation that actively courted the many 'perplexities' that arise through clashes of moral opinion, social justice beliefs, class interests and political perspective (Schneiderhan 2011). She advocated the practice of a humanitarian sociology that also sought to make itself vulnerable to and discomforted by critique; and especially from those that were the subjects of its care. Addams lived among and shared in the problems of the people that she cared for, and at the same time, through the many public meetings and gatherings at Hull-House she encouraged them to critically question her humanitarian motives, the values she incorporated within her terms of social understanding and the communal value of her activities. She practiced a humanitarianism that aimed to make itself consciously alert to the

contingencies of its social conditioning and its inherent cultural prejudices; and further, to the fact that along with the rest of social life, it needed to always remain open to progressive democratic reform.

Addams has left many questions in her wake relating to the viability of her sociology and whether it could or should ever be rehabilitated as a serious concern within today's academy (Reference to add 2016). However, if we are prepared to take her seriously then she challenges us to approach the experience of humanitarian conviction and of carrying this through into action as a means to critically reflect upon the social conditions under which we are made to live. She advocates a praxis that, by involving us in how society takes places as an enactment of substantive human values, aims to equip us with the moral experience that is required for us to critically reflect on it as such. The experience of attempting to work with people to improve the social conditions of their existence is taken as necessary for the development of our sociological understanding. Humanitarian practices and cultures are not only approached as objects for critical sociological investigation, but at the same time, in all their inherent difficulties and contradictions, they are also held to be a necessary part of sociology; for in these one is set to encounter both how social life is made possible and why it matters for people.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Over the last thirty years the gathering of academic interest around the topic of humanitarianism has grown exponentially. Within the social sciences and humanities, it is now a substantial field of trans-disciplinary inquiry. This is indicative of significant changes

that have taken place in the political currency of social problems as well as in the configuration of disciplines within the academy and priorities set for research. The study of humanitarianism not only serves as a means to chart new conditions of global civil society, but also, to document emergent forms of cosmopolitan political consciousness and action (Barnett 2011; Moyn 2010; 2014; Calhoun 2008). It is further understood to provide us with important insights into mechanisms of global governance, new forces of 'governmentality' and the human values at stake in the attempt to realize effective political communities (Fassin 2012; Lechte and Newman 2012).

Here it is generally recognized that when set to debate the character and conditions of modern humanitarianism, we are also made to question the terms under which we assign value to human life and how we negotiate with the moral responsibilities we bear towards others. This concerns our understanding of the causes and effects of human suffering and how we should venture to care for the harms that are done to people. At the same time as it draws debate to the moral character of human society and people's experiences of social life, it also involves us in questioning the moral state of our humanity; and often with the effect of uncovering uncomfortable truths relating to our guiding assumptions and how our conduct affects others.

In a largely forgotten article published in 1884, Lester Frank Ward, the first president of the American Sociological Association, urges his colleagues to take all this seriously as matters for sociological investigation. Here advises them not to dismiss 'the sentiment of humanity' as of no importance and further urges them to reject the narrowly conceived intellectualism that treats humanitarianism as no more than a 'fanaticism' for social reform. By working to

make humanitarianism 'the object of deep study' Ward contended that here the ultimate goal of sociology should be to guide society towards an understanding of how it might prove itself 'capable of caring for the most unfortunate of its members in a manner that shall not work demoralization' (Ward 1884: 571). This article shares seeks to repeat this call and further advance this aim, however, it does so with the recognition that there is still much to resolve by way of sociological understanding and within our terms of scholarly critique.

I do not claim to have resolved much here, but I hope that I have begun to clear the way for critical thinking about modern humanitarianism to proceed with a greater wariness of its tendency to operate in a mode of denunciation. Indeed, it might be argued that, while Foucault may provide the many critics of modern humanitarianism with the intellectual ammunition to expose the political rationalities at work in its will to care, he also sought to problematize the activity of critique itself. Andreas Folkers reminds us that in his later work Foucault had begun a genealogy of critique; and here he claims that Foucault's public statements in support of the humanitarian cause of the Vietnamese boat people was, amongst other things, charged by a concern to distance himself from a culture of academic critique that sought to remove itself from real life political concerns. Folkers argues that towards the end of his life Foucault was searching for new ways to marry critique with critical practice, so that it changed 'its valence from a purely deconstructive to a more positive endeavour' (Folkers 2016: 22).

Here I have argued that we should approach modern humanitarianism as a constituent part of the moral condition of modern societies and as an aspect of our social being and politics that we are still very much grappling to understand. In these regards, I hold that we may still

learn a great deal from Foucault's spirit of inquiry and concern for critique. At the same time however, I hold that there is much more for the sociology of humanitarianism to grapple with here; and further, that we may have hardly begun to appreciate the vital significance of humanitarianism for the advancement of sociology.

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