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HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND POLITICS: THE AWKWARD BEDFELLOWS

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian Law has walked a path full of ups and downs. Ever since its emergence in the 19th century, by cause of Henri Dunant's initiative, Humanitarian Action has been relevant for the promotion and codification of International Humanitarian Law.

Approximately one century later, Humanitarian Action started to face some difficulties. With the changing nature of conflicts, its flaws started being exposed. There was something else on the equation: Politics. The separation of Humanitarian Action from Politics that, up until then, was thought of as a fact, was starting to be questioned. Consequently, the principles which guide humanitarian actors' work in the field were under scrutiny as well.

The present paper will have two main aims. The first one is to prove that the relationship between Humanitarian Action and Politics can be beneficial to both sides, despite the

negative connotation it might have. The second aim is to propose a reform of the core principles of Humanitarian Action in order to better adjust to this new relationship.

KEYWORDS

International Humanitarian Law; Humanitarian Action; Politics; ICRC; MSF

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1. Background

1.1. Historical Introduction

Bare realities, which have to be faced in order to learn how to do better.
Harrell-Bond (1986: ix) *in* Raciti (2006: 50)

The international system is an intricate structure with many intertwined features making up for its complexity: power, money, interests, on the one hand; values, laws, human rights, on the other. All these elements play a specific role in society, yet when in contact with each other, they contribute to a variety of occurrences that constantly challenge the survival of millions of people.

The Humanitarian Action regime came into existence to alleviate human suffering caused by these events (Nascimento, 2015: 1), and it has undoubtedly come a long way. Despite a lengthier tradition, it was the 19th century that saw Humanitarian Action come to life, through the hands of Henri Dunant, who, outraged by what he had witnessed in the Battle of Solferino, laid on the foundations to what would evolve to become the International Committee of the Red Cross - hereafter, ICRC (Brauman, 1997: 39; Nascimento, 2015: 2). Thus, since 1864, the ICRC has been shining under the spotlight of Humanitarian Action with its apolitical principles and practices. These principles are based in and dependent on the Geneva Conventions, although not codified in them. So, one can admit the Red Cross plays a role in promoting and codifying International Humanitarian Law (Weiss, 1999: 1; Leader, 2000: 12, 17). In 1986, the International Court of Justice even decided not to define Humanitarian Action, but rather to associate it with the work of the ICRC (Weiss, 1999: 1). Hence, the fundamental principles of the ICRC, those of neutrality, impartiality, humanity, independence, universality, unity and voluntary service, serve as an ethical framework for

all Humanitarian Action (Leader, 2000: 2). The first four are the core principles, more specifically.

The second half of the last century, however, brought about some disturbances to the work of the ICRC and to the Humanitarian regime in general. The Biafra conflict in the late 1960s, which, according to Brauman (1997: 66), exposed both the greatness and the paradoxes of Contemporary Humanitarian Action, started a wave of questioning and doubting the neutrality and silence that marked the work of the ICRC (Brauman, 2012: 1524). Adding up to this, the end of the Cold War and the arrival of the so-called 'complex emergencies' changed the whole idea of how to respond to conflicts, and Humanitarian Action was starting to be seen as playing a role in international politics (Leader, 2000: 6; Binder, 2009: 330; Brauman, 1997: 81).

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the MSF – *Médecins Sans Frontières* – was established to fill in the gaps considered to be left by the apolitical action of the ICRC in the conflicts of the 20th century (Brauman, 2012: 1524; Leader, 2000: 6). Simon Schorno wrote on ICRC's website:

> While MSF and the ICRC share the same goal and operate in similar environments, the two organizations sometimes differ in their respective approaches to humanitarianism. We maintain that a principled, neutral, independent and impartial stance is the only way for us to operate; MSF says that deviating from these principles is both inevitable and necessary (Schorno, 2012).

Nevertheless, throughout its history, it is noticeable that the MSF remains torn between speaking out loud and following the steps of the pioneer (Brauman, 2012: 1526).

In fact, the changing nature of the dynamics of conflict called for a change in the approach to these conflicts as well (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 13). The whole environment around them was evolving, which also reflected in the multiplication of actors working alongside the ICRC (Leader, 2000: 6).

After 9/11, the conventional notions eroded even more, including the idea of a Humanitarian Action separated from Politics (Khakee, 2018: 20). In theory, the former should be governed by the principles set out by the ICRC, but that was starting not to happen, in practice. As MacFarlane and Weiss (2000: 112) put it, there was now a profound gap between the theory and the reality of Humanitarian Action.

These moral and operational ambiguities created tension and a big crisis of legitimacy in the international Humanitarian Action regime (Schimmel, 2006: 303; Whittall, 2015: 3). On the one hand, there was the traditional idea of perceiving Humanitarian Action and Politics as polar opposites. On the other, more and more people, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Agencies were beginning to question this assumption. Indeed, a quest for coherence among practitioners of Humanitarian Action had begun, followed by a debate among theorists as well (Raciti, 2006: 41; Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 13).

1.2. The many nuances of the spectrum

Indeed, the blurred lines between Politics and Humanitarian Action could no longer be refused.

Rony Brauman, doctor and former President of the MSF for more than a decade, has devoted his lifetime work this matter. In his book, *L'Action Humanitaire*, he declares that Humanitarian Action has been confronted with Politics since its beginnings (Brauman 1997: 109). Its history, he claimes, is paradoxically one of compassion and tensions between powers, when these try to instrumentalize that compassion for the benefit of specific objectives (Brauman, 1997: 109). Brauman introduces the concept of *espace humanitaire,* in which humanitarians should be "free to evaluate needs, free to monitor the delivery and use of assistance, free to have dialogue with the people" (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 1),

emphasizing the importance of the independence and neutrality principles (Schimmel, 2006: 303).

Like him, many other scholars have been caught up in the debate, yet, first of all, it is important to make some clarifications. Hostilities like those of Biafra, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, revealed the fact that the Humanitarian movement is now divided in two different conceptions of the relationship between Humanitarian Action and Politics (Brauman, 1997: 123; Weiss, 1999: 2). The first one is that of the 'Classicists', who, like the ICRC, believe Humanitarian Action should be insulated from Politics. The second, in opposition, is that of the 'Political Humanitarians', who, like the MSF, choose to abandon the fundamental principles and support a contact and a "constructive relationship" between the two concepts (Suhrke and Klusmeyer, 2004: 278; Weiss, 1999: 2; Raciti, 2006: 46).

Nicholas de Torrenté is one avid supporter of the traditional notion, denying the manipulation of Humanitarian Action in the service of political ends (De Torrenté, 2004: 3). He accuses the latter of being what undermines the former and what allows these emergencies to persist, as, most of the times, humanitarian interests are sacrificed in the name of political objectives disguised as 'greater goods' (De Torrenté, 2004: 6).

> On June 2, 2004, three international and two Afghan MSF staff were murdered in Baghdis province in an attack for which the Taliban claimed responsibility. In contexts like this one, subjecting assistance to conditionality and selectivity in pursuit of higher politico-military goals makes meeting even emergency survival needs more difficult, as illustrated by MSF's recent decision to withdraw from the country (De Torrenté, 2004: 8).

He then says that political integration is not the solution, and concludes by calling for a respect of the independence principle (De Torrenté, 2004: 12).

Like De Torrenté, Whittall is worried that the political choices of many NGOs and Aid Organizations in general are contributing to the failures of Humanitarian Action, elucidating

this with the case of South Sudan (Whittall, 2015: 3). He firmly alleges that by looking at the patterns of Humanitarian Action, one can clearly realize that it has been a tool in the exercise of power, and that this is why independence of action is so important (Whittall, 2015: 4).

This conventional wisdom that both De Torrenté and Whittall support is well summarized by MacFarlane and Weiss, despite the fact that they are not advocates of the idea, when they borrow the words of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata: "The fundamental objective of Humanitarian Action is to alleviate suffering and save lives. Humanitarian Action focuses on people and is rights based. Political action focuses on states and is guided by national interests and respect for sovereignty" (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 112).

In fact, fewer and fewer people still vehemently defend a politically-secularized Humanitarian Action. As has already been mentioned, the ICRC's traditional position is giving way to a notion that the two actions should not be isolated (Weiss, 1999: 5). Even former ICRC President, Cornelio Sommaruga, said, in 1997, that humanitarians and political players should communicate, because their roles on the field are different, but their responsibilities are complementary (Weiss, 1999: 12). One can look at this statement as supporting a middle-ground. Schorno states that the ICRC and, in this case, the MSF as well, share an independent and practical approach built on dialogue with the political parties of conflicts. Here, the two organizations differ in opinion, as while the ICRC defends a confidential dialogue, the MSF does not. Yet the point he seems to make is that political engagement has been a tendency (Schorno, 2012), even though both the ICRC and the MSF are still sceptic of the benefits of this relationship, and the former still chooses to hold on to its fundamental principles of action (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, 18 July 2002).

Indeed, this 'meeting halfway' seems to be the position most theorists seem to take. Lockyear and Cunningham assert that the goal is not to specifically take a political posture, but rather to try to be open to the benefits that Politics can bring, while always keeping the

Humanitarian purpose in mind (Lockyear and Cunningham, 2017: 1-2). Likewise, Raciti declares that by separating Humanitarian Action from Politics, one is blinded and cannot see the effects that the latter can have on the former, and that this is what contributes to the flaws of Humanitarian Action (Raciti, 2006: 49).

Others are more extreme in criticizing the Classicists. O'Brien wrote on the matter while directly criticizing De Torrenté's assumptions, arguing that he was wrong to place his hopes on the classical notion (O'Brien, 2004: 31). Humanitarian Action is and has always been political, and the same applies for the principles it follows. Politics is about allocating resources and power, and Humanitarian Action is about directing these resources in a certain way (O'Brien, 2004: 31). A politicized Humanitarian Action, he declares, is "both right and realistic" (O'Brien, 2004: 38). Leader follows his line of thought by stating that Humanitarian Action is a type of politics constrained by ethical rules (Leader, 2000: 56).

Weiss claims that the principles in question are not ethical absolutes. They are, instead, means to achieve ends, not ends *per se* (Weiss, 1999: 7). Together with MacFarlane, they both say that the conventional approach is unrealistic and self-defeating (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 115).

All in all, the seats have been seized. Positions have been taken. This is a debate that involves opinions from all over the spectrum. Collinson and Elhwary stress the need for a "more humanized politics and a more effective humanitarian action" (Collinson and Elhwary, 2012: 4). In fact, and regardless of one's stance, the main goal is ultimately that of alleviating human suffering, and everybody seems to agree on that.

However, most of the theorists here presented, regardless of their vision, seem to be focusing too much on why one should or should not be defending a separation between Humanitarian Action and politics, instead of focusing on actual solutions to bridge the existing gaps related to this issue.

2. Objectives of this paper: what is the discussion lacking?

The question is not whether to be a 'Classicist' or a 'Political Humanitarian'. The fact that Humanitarian Action and politics interact mutually with each other is a given. From this starting-point, what the discussion is lacking is how to ultimately grasp this interaction for the benefit of the people Humanitarian Action is meant to help.

Following this idea, this paper will analyze qualitatively the relationship between Humanitarian Action and Politics on a deeper level.

How does Humanitarian Action go hand-in-hand with Politics?

Assuming that both concepts actually interact with each other and that the idea that there should be a divorce between the two is obsolete given the complexities of contemporary conflicts, a light must be shed upon both sides of this interaction. Most theorists seem to be oblivious of the benefits Humanitarian Action can take from interacting with Politics. They are aware of this new interplay, but don't actually address the positive results of it.

The goal is to prove that Politics and Humanitarian Action are two sides of the same coin, they influence each other mutually and benefits can be taken from both sides of the interplay. So, starting from the fact that this can be a reciprocally beneficial relationship, and accepting that it is not a perfect one, the flaws in question ought to be addressed as well.

In order to accomplish all this, some hypothesis will be tested: a) Politics' influence over Humanitarian Action is mainly negative; however, b) The contact between Politics and Humanitarian Action can be beneficial for both sides; and c) The Humanitarian Action principles require a reform to better accommodate this relationship.

Additionally, a reformulation of the principles that rule Humanitarian Action will also be proposed, so that they can better accommodate its changed nature, and the changed nature

of conflicts in general. These questions are intended to open up a space in which the interaction between Humanitarian Action and Politics is perceived as beneficial for all the people involved – not only for those affected by Politics and Humanitarian Action, but also for the people the latter is intended to help.

3. Analysis and debate

The analysis of the above-mentioned questions will be made through a theory, a sort of lens meant to enrich the way in which the different concepts and ideas are looked at. In the words of Abend, as theories are formulated to explain, understand and challenge phenomena (Abend, 2008: 173-199), the present paper will resort to Constructivism as the umbrella for its theoretical framework.

3.1. Constructivism

> *Constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life.*
> Ruggie (1998: 856) *in* Finnemore and Sikkink (2001: 392)

Constructivism is included in Critical International Relations Theory, which, according to Wendt, is not a single theory, but a family of them, united by their belief that society is 'socially constructed' (Wendt, 1995: 71).

This theory is a very versatile one and has consequently been used to look at almost every issue of interest to scholars (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 391). Constructivism's success is due to the fact that is focuses on the role of ideas, norms, knowledge, culture, dialogue in politics and stresses the way in which these are all socially constructed understandings on social life (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 392). This "intersubjective" feature of society is its main proposition.

One must note that there are many types of Constructivism. Yet the purpose of this analysis is not to focus on characterizing the different types of this theory, but rather on its main premises.

Essentially, Constructivism proposes three different core notions. The first one is that actors and social structures are reciprocally constituted, as social structures are partly defined by shared understandings and expectations, and these constitute the actors and the type of relationships they have with each other (Wendt, 1995: 73; Hopf, 1998: 172). Constructivism looks at these actors and structures and tries to explain how the world, and especially politics, functions (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 393).

Here, the role of norms must be highlighted. Martha Finnemore defines norms as:

> Shared expectations about appropriate behavior held by a community of actors. Unlike ideas which may be held privately, norms are shared and social; they are not just subjective but intersubjective. Ideas may or may not have behavioral implications, norms by definition concern behavior (Finnemore, 1996: 22).

She claims that social norms, like codes of chivalry or codes of conduct, are particularly relevant when looking at war, because they regulate the way in which people fight, and some clearly promote survival, like norms of solidarity and unity (Finnemore, 1996: 69). Moreover, a good example of how norms act internationally is the law: she says that Customary International Law exists because states decide to comply with certain rules of behavior and then this behavior is eventually believed to be essential and appropriate (Finnemore, 1996: 139).

In this sense, norms are very important, not only because they act as limitations on the behavior of states, but also because they are formed through continuous practices and customs (Hopf, 1998: 172).

The second main proposition of Constructivists is that what gives a meaning to material realities, like gold, is the structure of shared understanding in which they are embedded

(Wendt, 1995: 73). Furthermore, things like money and rights only exist because people collectively give them a value and act like they mean something (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 393).

For instance, Canada and China are both related to the United States of America, but the simple military balance does not explain why the former is an ally and the latter an enemy. This shows why Constructivists believe normative and ideational factors are as relevant as material ones, because they shape the actor's identities (Wendt, 1995: 71-77).

Following this line of thought, the last issue that Constructivists bring to the table, and a particularly important one, is their focus on identities and interests. Constructivism believes agents are characterized by their identities, and these imply specific interests that will, ultimately, allow the understating of certain patterns of behavior (Hopf, 1998: 174). In other words, identities create interests, and these generate actions. And the construction of these identities is made through the interaction of agents with each other. That is why ideas are crucial and widely shared, because they help to explain certain patterns of behavior.

It is also worth mentioning the importance of discourse for Constructivists. It is through discourse analysis that they interpret certain interests and behaviors and even social norms (Wendt, 1995: 71-77).

In a broad sense, Constructivists are worried about the different processes that constitute society. They assume there is a permanent construction and reject claims about all-covering truths (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 394). The world is in constant mutation simply because it is constituted of actors and these actor's interests and ideas change over time. In this sense and consequently, norms and values can change as well, creating, in their turn, coordinated changes in actions and interests (Finnemore, 1996: 2). The mutually constituted process of construction becomes clear in this sense.

This theory offers many contributes for one to look at the interaction between Humanitarian Action and Politics. Finnemore claims that the ICRC, which she describes as a "transnational, nongovernmental group of individuals", was responsible for influencing decisionmakers and triggering their interest in the adoption of the Geneva Conventions (Finnemore, 1996: 2).

All in all, she means that war is a social structure regulated by rules, and these rules have changed over time, which was what happened when the first Geneva Conventions were adopted in 1864. The subsequent adoption of the other Geneva Conventions shows precisely what has been discussed above: that norms and rules change, and change because actors' interests converge towards it. The perceptions of the founders of the ICRC of what was right or wrong and their interests in altering the atrocities happening in conflicts were a turning-point for the regulation of war. Had it not been for the specific action of creating the ICRC, International Humanitarian Law would not have been codified, and the Humanitarian Action principles themselves would certainly not exist like they do today (Finnemore, 1996: 86).

Humanitarian Action has to do with productively participating in the political process of creating interests (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 115). At the same time, the concept of 'Politics' in itself has no inherent value content, it is part of social life, a process through which individuals or groups seek to collect enough power to meet their interests and attain their objectives (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 117). In addition to this, the actors involved in Humanitarian Action and Politics are in constant interaction: there are identities at stake, interests involved and actions that imply choices. All these concepts are in a very complex web that constitutes the relationship between Humanitarian Action ad Politics. Certain perceived interests will always inevitably be in tension with the humanitarian imperative. That is why it is so important to analyze this tension and then try to come up with solutions on how to resolve it.

To conclude with the words of Martha Finnemore, Constructivism is useful because it allows an interpretation of principled norms, morality, responsibility, and individual action. There is a responsibility to respond to international conflicts, but it would not exist without a shared moral understanding and social structures (Finnemore, 1996: 87-88).

3.2. Clarification of concepts

Before delving into the hypothesis to be examined in this paper, a definition of the concepts central to the discussion is necessary.

Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian Action encompasses some dimensions. MacFarlane and Weiss define it as military or civilian responses to the suffering of civilians caused by armed conflicts. These responses include both the delivery of goods and the protection of fundamental human rights, and can be governmental, intergovernmental, or nongovernmental (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 119). The latter category will be the object of the present analysis. It should also be mentioned that the focus will also be on Humanitarian Action by external actors, mainly humanitarian organizations.

One should note that the concepts of Humanitarian Action and Humanitarianism are used interchangeably by many authors. Although this will not happen in the present article, the definition of Humanitarianism can help bring some enlightenment to the debate. Thus, Weiss defines the latter as “helping and protecting victims irrespective of who and where they are and why they are in need” (Weiss, 1999: 11). Basically, Humanitarian Action is Humanitarianism in practical terms.

In simple words, for an organization like the MSF or the ICRC, Humanitarian Action is the act of saving lives and relieving suffering, being thus associated with the idea of charity (Whittall, 2015: 1; Raciti, 2006: 40).

As already mentioned in this paper, Rony Brauman came up with the so-called term *espace humanitaire* – Humanitarian Space –, where Humanitarian Action is accomplished and needs are meet in accordance with the principles of Humanitarian Action, and unsubordinated to any economic, military, or political influences (Raciti, 2006: 46). It is, therefore, a place where Agencies and NGOs can save lives, alleviate suffering, and be distinguished from military and political actors, in theory (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 1-2).

Furthermore, the principles of Humanitarian Action, which have also already been brought up, are a framework that guides these organizations' conduct during these events. These principles differ from the Humanitarian Principles, which were created to regulate the behavior of warring parties in conflict situations, and are present in the four Geneva Conventions (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 5).

Politics

"There is little effort in the humanitarian literature to define politics", according to MacFarlane and Weiss (2000: 116). It is a lot easier to talk about political contributions, political parties, political actors. Yet, Politics *per se* is hard to quantify and describe, because the term is very wide and encompassing, it has many elements.

Perhaps the description given on Politics through the lens of Constructivism is the best one, that Politics is what individuals and states make of it in their quest for power to meet their interests and achieve their objectives (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 117-118). Thus, this paper will consider Politics as involving an interested behavior from political actors, who, for this reason, are self-interested rather than communitarian, as opposed to Humanitarian

Action. However, this is not to say that humanitarian organizations are never self-interested or that political actors' interests are never aligned with the promotion of humanitarian values (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 117-119).

Politics is about political will collectively, and this involves both the elites and the masses (MacDonald, 2011: 124). This will be very important towards answering the research questions, as will be demonstrated.

Fundamentally, perceptions of both Politics and Humanitarian Action are always evolving, which is precisely what the constructivist theory supposes. The important issue is how to influence these conceptions of political interests in order to redefine them to be more convergent with humanitarian values (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 137).

3.3. The debate: testing the hypothesis

3.3.1. Politics' influence over Humanitarian Action is mainly negative

It is worth remembering, first of all, that the dimension of Humanitarian Action to be examined here is that performed by humanitarian organizations with a nongovernmental character, such as the ICRC or the MSF. Humanitarian Action performed by states themselves will not be a subject of analysis. Hence, the focus will be on how states' interests[1] and decisions influence the Humanitarian Action performed by these organizations.

That Politics influences Humanitarian Action is a given. Most authors choose even to not problematize it because they consider it is too obvious (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 114).

[1] Reference the Constructivist idea that identities are intersubjective, they entail interests, and these generate actions.

Despite this, when this is actually a theme worth of debate, most people simply assume that the influence of Politics on Humanitarian Action is mostly negative for the latter.

In fact, and as has already been explained, at a first glance, the influence of Politics over Humanitarian Action is not so good. In almost every case, political motivation and interests constrain activities by aid organizations and agencies (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 121). Firstly, many of these nongovernmental organizations, in spite of their 'nongovernmental' nature, depend on voluntary contributions, most of which are made by governments and states on the base of their interests. For instance, governments are ICRC's biggest contributors, making up for more than 84% of their budget (ICRC). According to O'Brien, between 2001 and 2002, 19% of MSF's funding came from governments and the European Union – henceforth, EU (O'Brien, 2004: 36). This changed in 2016, when MSF stopped accepting funding from EU Member-States, due to "their damaging deterrence policies on migration and their intensifying attempts to push people away from European shores". Nowadays, government contributions are only 2% of their budget (MSF). Because a lot of the NGOs and Agencies are dependent on public funding, their action ends up not being that independent after all, and they end up trying to accommodate state's interests into their actions.

Secondly, Humanitarian Action has also been progressively included in the political agenda of states, contributing, not only to an erosion of the ethical framework that should guide its work, but also to a restriction of access of the organizations to the populations in need (Raciti, 2006: 45; De Torrenté, 2004: 5-6). In many cases, NGOs have become extensions of Western foreign policy, as Whittall puts it, in contexts such as Afghanistan, where they were part of the US-led stabilization activities after the invasion of 2001 (Whittall, 2015: 1). Additionally, there has been an increase in civilian-military cooperation, which is evidently problematic, and aid is getting more and more militarized (Raciti, 2006: 38-45). It is often

deployed as a reward or denied as a punishment to humanitarian organizations, depending on their loyalty (De Torrenté, 2004: 3; Khakee, 2018: 22).

Also, humanitarian organizations work side to side to governments on the field. This means that these will most likely try to orientate the delivery of aid towards their own objectives. Consequently, to reach their goals, organizations have to establish compromises with the people in power, a lot of times detrimental for Humanitarian Action itself (Brauman, 1997: 110-111).

Following this line of thought, it should also be noted that NGOs are dependent on political authorities' permission to perform their activities on the field, to obtain visas and permits, to import supplies and establish communication (Lockyear and Cunningham, 2017: 2). They usually need to obtain a 'right of access' in the form of taxes or monetary advance (Brauman, 1997: 111).

Thus, these are some of the wide panoply of examples that elucidate how Politics negatively influences Humanitarian Action. It is all a matter of interests and risks that have to be thought-about. If the risk of action is bigger than the benefit, action usually does not materialize. And the politicization of Humanitarian Action happens also within these organizations. They too have to make choices, and choices imply political decisions (Weiss, 1999: 18). They too have to decide on who gets help first, who are the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' (De Torrenté, 2004: 4). They might not be completely free of doing what they wish to, worried that their actions might have negative political repercussions, or that their donors might not approve of them. There is always a fight between principle and action.

As demonstrated, there are many ways in which Politics influences Humanitarian Action in the negative. Can this relationship be beneficial, however?

3.3.2. The contact between Politics and Humanitarian Action can be beneficial for both sides

Humanitarian activities take place in a political environment and thus are affected by and affect the environment.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, 1997 *in* Weiss (1999: 21)

Despite all the negative influences of Politics over Humanitarian Action, there are always two sides to one coin. Politics' contact with Humanitarian Action can also be positive, fruitful and helpful to the latter (Lockyear and Cunningham, 2017: 2).

Humanitarian organizations can learn from Politics how to well analyze contexts in order to better plan and program their activities. It is a matter of 'learning from experience', also, because history matters and there is always room for improvement[2] (Raciti, 2006: 45).

The inclusion of Humanitarian Action on political agendas does not only bring problematic consequences to the former. In certain occasions, Politics actually contributes to Humanitarian Action by supporting it. There are many cases where political discourses[3] and actions managed to end certain atrocities, and therefore acted in favor of Humanitarian Action by alleviating human suffering.

Moreover, other times, Politics gives humanitarian organizations a sort of platform from which to gain more visibility and raise awareness. It is on these organizations' interest to have an informed public opinion, as they are also dependent on private and individual contributions. The MSF received more than €1.5 billion from 6.5 million individual donors and private companies and foundations, in 2019 (MSF). If political leaders talk about these emergencies and about Humanitarian Action in general, people are more prone to help.

[2] Reference to Constructivism.
[3] Reference to Constructivism and the importance of discourse.

Then, of course, the influence of Humanitarian Action on Politics is also visible, as public masses can pressure governments towards acting in a favorable way to them. Moreover, political leaders might also want to look good in the eyes of the masses, by showing their interest in these matters, by reveling themselves as compassionate towards the suffering of others.

Furthermore, the fact that states are enmeshed in an international web, constantly in contact with each other, means that they end up influencing each other's actions[4]. For example, if funding the ICRC is part of USA's interest, because it is an ally of Canada, these are prone to follow their ally's steps, as they might want to be aligned with their interests to reassure the unity and cohesion of the alliance. This is, of course, beneficial for Humanitarian Action, but also for Politics, as political actors are coordinating their interests with other actors, therefore strengthening their alliances.

In addition to this, humanitarian organizations can raise awareness, increase social participation, and foster education, and by doing so, they are using Politics for their own purposes (Raciti, 2006: 49).

In the words of Khakee, "humanitarian actors are far from powerless" (Khakee, 2018: 26). This is not to say that they possess more power than political actors. It simply means that, although they are often seen as weak, they hold enough power to, at least, influence Politics and take advantages out of the contact with it. Humanitarian Action, just by existing, is a counter-balance to dominant power (Whittall, 2015: 4).

Another way in which this is evident is through humanitarian actor's ability to change the rules and norms that restrict the environment in which states operate. Like has been mentioned in the first section of this paper, had it not been for humanitarian actors, the international rules and codes that regulate states' behavior in conflicts would possibly not

[4] Reference to Constructivism.

even exist (Khakee, 2018: 26). This is to say that humanitarian organizations, through their actions, actually influence the normative surroundings of Politics, as states and their power are restricted by norms and institutions (Khakee, 2018: 25; De Torrenté, 2004: 3).

Given all this, it seems clear that the relationship in question is not so bad after all. Not only is it not bad, but it actually brings benefits to both Humanitarian Action and Politics.

All in all, it makes no sense to pretend that these two concepts can exist separately nowadays. Yet, and regardless of how advantageous this interplay can be, one still needs to look into one other question: are the principles of Humanitarian Action still fit to accommodate this new connection?

3.3.3. The Humanitarian Action principles require a reform to better accommodate this relationship

Once again, that Politics and Humanitarian Action intersect is a fact. There is no need to question that. The real question is, nevertheless, and in the words of Weiss, how can this intersection be handled to guarantee a more humanized Politics and a more efficient Humanitarian Action (Weiss, 1999: 22).

As explained above, NGOs and other humanitarian organizations and agencies have room for maneuver in pushing governments towards moral and human-right-respectful approaches (Khakee, 2018: 25; Raciti, 2006: 54). Additionally, they can also influence the changing of the normative environment that guides these conflicts. Concerning this point, they thus have a role in changing, not only International Humanitarian Law and the way in which wars are fought, but also the Humanitarian Action principles, those that guide humanitarian organization's performance during conflicts (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 5). Indeed, Humanitarian Action in the last decades has very much deviated from the classical principles that guide it (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000: 113). Organizations like the ICRC or

the MSF have, for most of their existence, managed to more or less stick to these principles, even if, once more, the tension between principle and action was hard to face. Yet, the fact is that, with the changed nature of conflicts and the consequent proliferation of new humanitarian actors and organizations, the deviation from the original framework is now more staggering than ever (Whittall, 2015: 3; Lancaster, 1998).

Therefore, does it still make sense to hold on to the fundamental principles of Humanitarian Action? Are neutrality and impartiality, in particular, still fit to deal with these new emergencies, like the ones in Rwanda, Bosnia or Liberia? I believe not. As Leader puts it, these principles are under too much stress because they were not meant to cope with this new reality (Leader, 2000: 15). I will, thus, propose a reformulation of three of the core Humanitarian Action principles, as the principles of voluntary service, unity, universality and humanity have not yet lost their relevance.

It is worth mentioning, still, that the principle of humanity, the idea that human suffering must be addressed in respect for all human beings (OCHA), is constantly denied by belligerents in genocides and ethnic-cleansings, which makes the work of humanitarian organizations a lot more difficult. Still, respect for this principle is, in practical terms, essentially hard because it is such a basic and widely encompassing one. Reformulating it would not solve the issue. In opposition, impartiality, meaning the allocation of help based solely on need, deserves some attention (De Torrenté, 2004: 4). The goals of war have changed, there are economic and political factors involved now. As discussed above, this new intersection between Humanitarian Action and Politics has some negative effects on the former, and one of them is the disregard for the impartiality principle. How are some deserving and others not deserving? Why Kosovo, why not Sudan or Angola? The same happens with independence. It has also been elucidated how this principle is constantly disrespected. Humanitarian Action can no longer be “autonomous from the political, economic and military objectives” (OCHA). Not when NGOs need funding, not with the emergence of new actors on the field,

not when they have to constantly accommodate their action to political requirements. Instead of impartiality and independence, one should speak of complementarity, coordination or financial independence. Yet, what are NGOs if not financially dependent?

Regarding the principle of neutrality, the most problematic one, it seems pertinent to ask: how can someone be neutral while facing such evils as in Somalia, for instance? How can humanitarian actors not take sides in hostilities or engage in political controversies when they are at the mercy of belligerents, and are sometimes killed unmercifully, like what happened in 2004 with two Afghan MSF staff (De Torrenté, 2004: 6)? Conflict environment is inherently politicized, like in the cases of Afghanistan or Iraq (O'Brien, 2004: 39). Neutrality is meaningless in these situations, as it can no longer protect the people who are actually trying to help those in need. Instead of neutrality, why not speak of discernment or judgement?

These principles are not useless. On the contrary, they have contributed greatly to the establishment of the foundations of Humanitarian Action as we know it today. Despite all the cases where they failed, they were a relevant starting point. Nonetheless, given the latest challenges and the new and complicated nature of war, they are not viable standards anymore, as they are too broad, and given that contemporary conflicts are becoming more and more detailed and intricate. The international community needs to adjust its Humanitarian Action imperatives so as to keep up with the changing nature of, not only conflicts, but the whole international system. They need to be applied consistently and respected.

As Weiss declares:

> A quandary entails tough choices among unattractive options with better or worse possible outcomes. While humanitarians are perplexed, they are not and should not be immobilized. The solution is not indifference or withdrawal but appropriate engagement (Weiss, 1999: 9).

To conclude, a reformulation of the core principles that guide Humanitarian Action is necessary in order to better accommodate, not only its relationship with Politics, but also the whole environment around conflicts.

4. Methodology

The present paper will be divided into 3 parts. The first part will consist of the exposition of the background on this topic: an historical introduction on the emergence of Humanitarian Action, its posterior changed nature and the consequent emergence of the debate in question; and the State of the Art, in which different views and opinions from a variety of scholars will be confronted.

In the second part of this paper the research objectives will be exposed: the research problem will be presented, as well as the specific research questions to be answered: how does Politics negatively influence Humanitarian Action? How can the contact between Humanitarian Action and Politics be beneficial for both sides? How can the principles of Humanitarian Action better accommodate the relationship between Humanitarian Action and Politics?

The third part is meant to explore all the aspects of the debate. Through the lens of Constructivism, the research objectives will be met, via the qualitative analysis of the concepts of Humanitarian Action and Politics, its dimensions and indicators. The intersection of the two and the consequences that stem from it will be examined. Furthermore, the principles of Humanitarian Action will also be analyzed, and a reform of some will be proposed.

A conclusion on the topic will follow.

5. Conclusion

Humanitarian action is noble when coupled with political action and justice. Without them, it is doomed to failure and… a conscience-salving gimmick.

Alain Destexhe, former Secretary-General of the international office of the MSF, *in* Weiss (1999: 14-15).

The nature of conflict has changed. One cannot talk of Humanitarian Action being separated from Politics anymore. Realizing this, however, does not mean that all wars are absolute in practice. From Afghanistan to Angola or Sri Lanka, and in many other countries, humanitarian organizations could and still can fulfill their mission, even if they have to go through interminable negotiations and concessions with political actors, and even if their principles are disrespected (Bauman, 1997: 116-117).

In fact, the way Humanitarian Action has been performed nowadays, most of the times in the pursuit of broader objectives than those implied by its definition, clearly points to it being instrumentalized by Politics (Whittall, 2015: 4). It has been proved, however, that this dynamic is not so linear after all, as it can bring Humanitarian Action and Politics mutual benefits.

What is missing now is proper commitment and reform of the standards that guide Humanitarian Action, because it has changed and cannot hold on to obsolete principles to meet its goals.

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