



Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism

By Michael Barnett

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Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism By Michael Barnett

Empire of Humanity explores humanitarianism's remarkable growth from its humble origins in the early nineteenth century to its current prominence in global life. In contrast to most contemporary accounts of humanitarianism that concentrate on the last two decades, Michael Barnett ties the past to the present, connecting the antislavery and missionary movements of the nineteenth century to today's peacebuilding missions, the Cold War interventions in places like Biafra and Cambodia to post–Cold War humanitarian operations in regions such as the Great Lakes of Africa and the Balkans; and the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863 to the emergence of the major international humanitarian organizations of the twentieth century. Based on extensive archival work, close encounters with many of today's leading international agencies, and interviews with dozens of aid workers in the field and at headquarters, *Empire of Humanity* provides a history that is both global and intimate.

Avoiding both romanticism and cynicism, *Empire of Humanity* explores humanitarianism's enduring themes, trends, and, most strikingly, ethical ambiguities. Humanitarianism hopes to change the world, but the world has left its mark on humanitarianism. Humanitarianism has undergone three distinct global ages?imperial, postcolonial, and liberal?each of which has shaped what humanitarianism can do and what it is. The world has produced not one humanitarianism, but instead varieties of humanitarianism. Furthermore, Barnett observes that the world of humanitarianism is divided between an emergency camp that wants to save lives and nothing else and an alchemist camp that wants to remove the causes of suffering. These camps offer different visions of what are the purpose and principles of humanitarianism, and, accordingly respond differently to the same global challenges and humanitarianism emergencies. Humanitarianism has developed a metropolis of global institutions of care, amounting to a global governance of humanity. This humanitarian governance, Barnett observes, is an empire of humanity: it exercises power over the very individuals it hopes to emancipate.

Although many use humanitarianism as a symbol of moral progress, Barnett provocatively argues that humanitarianism has undergone its most impressive

gains after moments of radical inhumanity, when the "international community" believes that it must atone for its sins and reduce the breach between what we do and who we think we are. Humanitarianism is not only about the needs of its beneficiaries; it also is about the needs of the compassionate.

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Editorial Review

Review

"One of the most striking features of world politics in the last 200 years was the rise of humanitarianism Barnett paints an expansive portrait of that ascent . . . [contending] that humanitarianism is a 'creature of the world it aspires to civilize,' rather than some sort of abstract ideal In making that argument, he includes rich details about the visionaries, missionaries, transnational activists, UN agencies, and democracies that intervened in such places as Nigeria, Cambodia, and Kosovo."?G. John Ikenberry, *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2011)

"This is a history of humanitarianism?its ideas, practices, problems, and institutions. Whereas most other accounts of humanitarianism focus on recent initiatives, Barnett begins his historical account with the antislavery and missionary movements of the 19th century. He argues that humanitarianism has gone through three distinct stages: the imperial form (1800–1945), the neohumanitarian form (1945–89), and the liberal form (1989–present), with most institutional development occurring in the post-WW II era. . . . A strength of this study is that it critiques humanitarian initiatives in light of the historical conditions in which such activities take place. This nuanced, compelling book is strongly recommended. Summing Up: Highly recommended for all readership levels."?Choice (January 2012)

"Michael Barnett . . . through careful historical investigation and analysis . . . deftly addresses key dilemmas whose roots run deep throughout humanitarianism's history but which are often attributed to contemporary emergency relief and development, including the tensions between humanitarian principles and politics, the effects of market influences on humanitarianism, and the nature of humanitarianism's power over others. . . . Ultimately *Empire of Humanity* reminds us that while faith in the humanitarian imperative is crucial to realizing moral progress, the power of compassion can result in colossal failings. These failings, however, do not mean that humanitarianism is a hapless enterprise. Rather, they are the turning points that mark incremental advances, reform, and innovation that will enable humanitarian actors to not just *be* good but also to genuinely *do* good."?Melissa Labonte, *Political Science Quarterly* (Summer 2012)

"Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* provides an insightful analysis of humanitarianism and humanitarian action focusing on its evolution and globalization especially after World War II.... This is thus a fundamental book for all those who work with humanitarian issues, both academics and practitioners, since it not only explores with rigor and detail the main trends of humanitarian action, but also because it sheds light on the most urgent and important challenges and dilemmas to be addressed when it comes to reinforcing and improving the international humanitarian system."?Daniela Nascimento, *Human Rights Review* (March 2013)

"Michael Barnett takes the reader on a fascinating intellectual journey through the rich and little known history of humanitarianism, its roots in religious tradition, and its ambiguous and conflict-ridden relationship with diplomacy and military power. *Empire of Humanity* is a great read that explains much about why the humanitarian enterprise has ended up where it now; it is thoughtful, well written, and nuanced."⁷ Andrew Natsios, Georgetown University, former vice president of World Vision U.S. (1993–1998) and administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (2001–2006)

"The ability to respond to the pain of a suffering world means neither to believe in oneself blindly nor to doubt oneself into paralysis. This subtle truth emerging from the epoch of humanitarianism, as Michael Barnett panoramically reconstructs it, takes the field to an entirely new level of sophistication and reflection. Synthesizing disparate research into the past of transnational compassion, Barnett's outstanding book returns to history to make a major contribution to the study of international politics and lay the ground for a future in which sympathy and self-questioning depend on one another."⁸ Samuel Moyn, Columbia University, author of *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*

"Returning to the Western sources of humanitarianism, Michael Barnett offers a history in the longue durée, from the antislavery movement to contemporary killing fields and refugee camps. His lucid and honest analysis of the ideologies and practices, ambitions and engagements, ambiguities and contradictions of the humanitarian movement questions the moral foundations of our politics of compassion."⁹ Didier Fassin, James D. Wolfensohn Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Institute for Advanced Study, and coauthor of *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*

"It has been an immense pleasure to read Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity*. This well-paced and lucid book is the political history against which every other account of humanitarianism will have to be measured. Barnett opens up the field of humanitarianism for further study in a manner that few could emulate. This book has breadth and depth. It is scholarly and yet immensely readable?anyone interested in NGOs, volunteers, practitioners, and policymakers will need to read this text to make sense of humanitarian aid today. An indispensable book."¹⁰ Bertrand Taithe, University of Manchester

"Michael Barnett has pulled off a tour de force with his new book, *Empire of Humanity*. He unpacks the history, myth, and manipulation of this endeavor, from the founding myths way back in that first period of globalization in the nineteenth century, through the world wars and the cold war to the complexity of today's operations. Barnett shows how humanitarianism has always been intractably tied up with the liberal aspirations of the day and the political necessity for projecting foreign policy, and how the internal angst over whether to save lives and remain neutral or to commit to challenging the causes of inhumanity, has always divided the humanitarian church. This is a solid, highly readable analytical history, standing in stark contrast to many recent works high on cynicism and hype but low on fact."¹¹ Peter Walker, Irwin H. Rosenberg Professor of Nutrition and Human Security and Director of the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University

"In *Empire of Humanity*, Michael Barnett gives a critical history and a contemporary account of humanitarian practice. Each phase is differentiated by the particular sociohistorical combination of three sets of forces?destruction (states and warfare), production (capitalism), and compassion (norms in international relations). Barnett surveys the variety of dilemmas humanitarians have faced and the choices they have made; his compelling account is the most comprehensive and sophisticated single-volume analysis of the history and practice of humanitarianism currently available."²Stephen Hopgood, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, author of *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*

About the Author

Michael Barnett is University Professor of International Affairs and Political Science at The George Washington University.

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