THE POLITICS OF WARTIME HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Thomas G. Weiss
Tuesday, 2:00 – 4:00 pm
Fall 2014, PSC 86401, Room 8202

Purpose
Over the last 150 years, and more particularly over the last quarter-century since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed an impressive expansion of organized humanitarianism, or the institutionalization of the desire to reduce the suffering of others. Efforts in war zones, the focus here, are considerably more fraught than those where natural disasters strike. There is now a network of states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) along with private military companies and transnational corporations that populate the international humanitarian marketplace. Their existence has helped to create and been nourished in turn by a complex array of norms and legal principles. This network and the normative fabric have resulted in something that resembles a “system” of global humanitarian governance—that is, humanitarian action is organized to help protect and assist distant strangers, and more recently to address the causes of suffering as well. The intertwining of compassion and governance, however, signals that humanitarianism is more complicated than merely helping those in need. After all, “isms” invariably are less pure in practice than in theory. Responding with the heart requires responding with the head as well.

Subject Matter
This course examines the history as well as the domestic and international politics that undergird the ideas, social movements, and organizations designed to regulate the conduct of war, to improve the welfare of those victimized by armed conflicts, and to prosecute war criminals. The big topics that many students will have heard about but perhaps not studied include just war theory, international humanitarian law, humanitarian action, and intervention.

Beginning with a look at the political, philosophical, and ethical underpinnings of humanitarian thought, the seminar concentrates on the emergence of the international humanitarian system, including specifically of international humanitarian law and even more especially of aid agencies. With these foundations in mind, the class examines the behavior of agencies and the outcomes of their actions in specific crises as well as the value of legal mechanisms in constraining the use of force and in holding violators of law accountable. We begin with the nineteenth century and continue to the present but emphasize the post-Cold War period. In particular, case-by-case analyses of crises since 1989 help inform the overall study of trends in the humanitarian sector and illustrate contemporary challenges. We also take up innovations such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). Finally, the seminar evaluates the current system of protection and delivery as well as its future in light of “new wars” and “new humanitarianisms.”

Section One begins with “the basics” of humanitarianism: the foundations (political, philosophical, and ethical), logics, dilemmas, and consequences of humanitarian action. It continues with the history of responses during the first two formative periods (from 1864 to World War II, and during the Cold War).
Section Two focuses on the early post-Cold War period with analyses of early crises of “the tumultuous 1990s”—northern Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Haiti, Kosovo, East Timor—that help inform the overall study of trends in the humanitarian sector and illustrate contemporary challenges.

Section Three turns to “the twenty-first century” and generalizations about the nature of so-called new wars and new humanitarianisms; it also probes the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) and why it replaced “humanitarian intervention.” The recent cases of Libya and Syria are essential as well as the political economy of the contemporary international humanitarian system (and “business”) as backdrops to evaluate whether the pace of expansion over the last two decades will continue.

The seminar makes eclectic use of historical, administrative, political, and legal materials related to coming to the rescue of civilians caught in the cross-hairs of armed conflicts. Although in-depth knowledge of international organizations is not expected, I assume familiarity with the basic theories of international relations and with world history since 1945.

It is worth underlining that the seminar is not a platform for me to lecture but for you to interact and to gain basic skills (in oral presentations and writing). Students should be prepared to do a significant amount of reading and to discuss it seriously. Graduate courses only work when everyone, including those who have little background or whose mother tongue is not English, comes prepared for a critical and informed conversation.

**Required and Other Texts**

The “required” reading will be on reserve at The Graduate Center Library as will the “suggested reading.” All participants should be familiar with the required reading for each week. Virtually all of the articles can be found in the library’s online journal databases. Required reading is, well, compulsory for each session; it is not onerous because I prefer that students read what most interests them, but we need a common point of departure for each session. The works under “suggested” are intended for discussion leaders and others truly interested in a topic. I have listed “additional” sources that I have found most useful for those interested in pursuing a topic in this seminar or another. The endnotes in the readings provide additional hints.

Six paperback texts (reasonably priced when new, and available used as well) are to be read almost in their entirety and undoubtedly should be purchased from Amazon.com and be part of your library. I have tried to assign as much of the required reading from them as possible. I have emphasized my own recent books in the hopes that you may get to know me and my thinking better without my having to put you to sleep in class. They also provide the basis to question me when points are unclear or challenge me when they seem wrong. The mammoth royalties will go into a beer-and-wine account for the last class.


The study of international organization and humanitarian action requires consulting primary documents. The world-wide web is an accessible source of primary documentation (including resolutions, documents, press releases, and speeches), for intergovernmental (IGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The United Nations is the center of gravity for much of contemporary humanitarian action and politics, and so you may wish to consult the following: Thomas G. Weiss, David P. Forsythe, Roger A. Coate, and Kelly-Kate Pease, *The United Nations and Changing World Politics* (Boulder: Westview, 2014), 7th edition; and Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). The Routledge “Global Institutions Series,” which I edit with Rorden Wilkinson, contains short but authoritative treatment of most international organizations and issues, and copies of the 85 titles in print are in the library. Other sources of relevant data emanate from such NGOs as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, U.S. Committee for Refugees, Overseas Development Institute, Overseas Development Council, InterAction, and ActionAid. In addition, students who do not already have the habit should begin reading daily the *New York Times*.

**Office Hours**

The most convenient time to find me is Tuesday immediately before (1:00 to 2:00 p.m.) or after class (4:00 to 5:00 p.m.) in 5203 at The Graduate Center. I usually am available right after class in our classroom as well for short consultations. I am available at other times but by appointment only. Please do not simply show up at my office but rather email me at tweiss@gc.cuny.edu. I respond quickly, whether I am in New York or elsewhere (which is not infrequent).

**Assignments and Grading**

In addition to reading attentively and participating actively, all students enrolled or auditing are expected to arrive punctually for every session of the seminar. Professionalism and courtesy dictate that anyone unable to attend a particular session should notify me in advance. All students should come to class prepared to contribute through discussion—which requires you to have read and reflected on the materials assigned for a particular session. I do not give a specific grade for participation, but those who demonstrate a mastery of the materials and do not fall asleep will help their final grade.

I will lead the first three sessions of the seminar. Thereafter and following the scheduled break, every student enrolled or auditing will then be expected to lead three short discussions of the required readings for the following ten sessions (from #4 to #13). Kicking-off requires familiarity with required, suggested, and additional readings. The task, in a brief (10-12 minutes) presentation, will not be to regurgitate the readings but to launch our conversation about what was insightful or not in readings (referring back to relevant international relations or legal theory can be part of the effort); this exercise designates a “discussant” (as in a professional academic conference) to start what hopefully will be a good conversation. At the first two sessions, students can sign up on a first-come-first-served basis for time slots that should be spread out throughout the course; if you do not opt for particular choices, I will “volunteer” you. Your first and perhaps second choices will be honored, but I will probably have to juggle in order to ensure...
coverage for all sessions—ideally, three presenters for each. These “discussant” presentations are serious and will constitute about one-half of your final grade. For planning purposes, those who are responsible for a specific session typically will meet with me and the others for a few minutes after the class preceding the scheduled presentation. This permits the “team” to divide up responsibilities, avoid overlap, and foster coherence. I will fill in what I see as important conceptual or factual lacunae.

The other half of your grade will result from your answering two “reaction essays,” or short papers that require using your accumulated knowledge but not additional research. These should be not more than 1,500 words (excluding notes) and could be shorter; they are a take-home essay in the form of a double op-ed (albeit an academic one). You should thus set aside in your planning for the semester a quiet and concentrated period of 3-4 hours on 28-29 October and 2-3 December. Your essays should be emailed to me as soon as you can but not later than 18 hours after you receive them—that is, no later than 10:00 am on the Wednesday following the handout after class on the day before. I will provide several provocative questions, and you will select only one. There are no “correct” answers (although obviously the factual information and theoretical framing should be accurate). The challenge is to synthesize course material in an original manner and make a persuasive, well-written argument. At the session following the assignment, we will set aside a bit of time to discuss my reactions to the writing.

Along with your knowledge of humanitarian action, my intention is that your oral presentation and writing skills also should improve over the course of the semester. Please note that there are NO ACCEPTABLE EXCUSES for an inability to make presentations or to hand in the essays on the date prescribed. Should for any reason (e.g., illness, jitters, your dog dies, etc.) you do not do comply, you will be automatically penalized one full grade. Deadlines are part of a professional ethos. No exceptions. In case that is not clear, let me repeat, no exceptions.

SEMINAR OUTLINE, WEEK-BY-WEEK SCHEDULE

Session 1 (2 September): Participant Introductions, Overview, Getting Organized

SECTION ONE: THE BASICS

Session 2 (7 September): The big concepts

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 6-33
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 1-17
- Barnett and Weiss, eds., *Humanitarianism in Question*, Chapter 1

Suggested reading:
Additional reading:

**Session 3 (16 September): Why Care? Humanitarian Goals and Principles**

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 80-88
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 33-34, 18-29

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

**NB! 23 September: NO CLASS PER GRADUATE CENTER CALENDAR.**

**Session 4 (30 September): The Origins of Organized Humanitarianism: From Solferino to the Holocaust**

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 34-43
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 18-29 (reread)

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

**Session 5 (7 October): The Cold War Experience: From the Berlin Airlift to Biafra, and the Shape of the Contemporary “System”**

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 34-43 (reread)

Suggested reading:

**Additional reading:**
3. Thomas G. Weiss and Don Hubert, *The Responsibility to Protect: Research, Bibliography, Background* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), chapters 4-5.

**PART TWO: THE TUMULTUOUS 1990s**

**Session 6 (14 October): Some Key Early Post-Cold War Crises: Northern Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia**

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 43-56

Suggested reading:

**Additional reading:** Case material is abundant.

**Session 7 (21 October): Some Key Later Post-Cold War Crises: Rwanda, Haiti, and Kosovo**

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 43-56 (reread)

Suggested reading:

Additional reading: Case material is abundant.

**Session 8 (28 October): International Judicial Pursuit and Peacebuilding**

• Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 33-34 (reread)

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

**NB! REACTION QUESTIONS FOR SECTIONS ONE AND TWO:** Handed out on Tuesday, 28 October, after class and due in my email no later than Wednesday, 29 October, at 10 am.

**SECTION THREE: THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**Session 9 (4 November): Halting Mass Atrocities? The Responsibility to Protect**

• Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 97-132
• Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 148-154
Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

**Session 10 (11 November): Today’s Landscape of “New” Wars: What’s New?**
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 56-95

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

Session 11 (18 November): The Current Landscape of “New” Humanitarianisms: What’s New?

- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 56-95

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

- Barnett and Weiss, eds., *Humanitarianism in Question*, chapter 6 (Barnett and Snyder), 7 (Hammond), 8 (Redfield), 9 (Rubenstein).

Suggested reading:

Additional Reading:

**Session 13 (2 December): The Future of Humanitarian Action: What Next?**
- Dennis Dijkzeul, Dorothea Hilhorst, and Peter Walker, “Introduction: Evidence-based Action in Humanitarian Crises,” *Disasters* 37, no S1 (July 2013): s1-s19

Suggested reading:

NB! REACTION ESSAY FOR SECTION THREE: Handed out on Tuesday, 2 December, and due in my email no later than Wednesday, 3 December, at 10 am.

**Session 14 (7 December): Topic and Location TBA**