Violence and humanitarian assistance:
Reflections on an intricate relationship

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Introduction

Contrary to what was expected, the end of the Cold War and bi-polar global politics did not signal the beginning of an era of peace and development. Instead, in the period from the 1980s till today, the world has experienced a dramatic increase in internal violent conflicts, which more than anything else can be characterised by their excessive human and societal costs in the form of casualties, displacement, dispossession and destruction of livelihood opportunities. One of the consequences of this turn in history has been a growing humanitarian engagement in conflict situations by the international community, including the UN specialized agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs and state departments, whose operations have simultaneously expanded in size and scope of mandate. But the changes experienced by the international community have not simply been one of scaling up conventional operations. The new kinds of wars have required major organizational and operational adjustments, as has been described and analysed in detail elsewhere (Minear & Weiss 1995, De Waal 1997, Duffield 2001).

Here, I shall focus on only one dimension of this process, namely the shifting relationship between violence and humanitarian action.[1] I suggest that since humanitarianism is founded in an idea of being intrinsically and essentially benevolent, humanitarian organizations' real and imagined relationship with violence is critical for their self-understanding and wider legitimization in society, and hence worthy of in-depth consideration. To shed light on this issue I will go through three dissimilar and conflicting perspectives, which together illustrate some of the ambiguity and complexity that exists, and which also reflect the historical and analytical developments that have occurred as a result of concrete experiences with humanitarian operations in conflict zones in different parts of the world.

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[1] I would like to make clear that the reflections I offer in this paper are based mainly on existing literature and the observations and experiences I had while working for different international and national relief and development agencies in the period between 1994 and 2000. In that sense they are not findings of a systematic and in-depth research project, but should rather be perceived as a concerted attempt at identifying critical points that need further research.

The first perspective is that of early humanitarianism which captures what could be called the essence of humanitarianism, according to which violence and conflict exist as an external and separate object for the humanitarian project. And also according to which the humanitarian activity is seen as apolitical and an essentially benevolent and beneficial action targeting anybody in distress and need.

The second perspective emerges from the humanitarian organizations' encounter with the new 'dirty wars' as they are waged on the ground, and suggests that for most organizations it has become increasingly difficult to uphold the fundamental distinction between violence and humanitarianism. As a result humanitarian projects have become subjected to growing criticism and lost some of their innocence.

The third perspective is a further development of the criticism just raised, but instead of looking at single humanitarian operations at their interface with local realities, attention is shifted to a global level, and humanitarianism placed within the context of globalization and efforts to introduce a liberal agenda worldwide. From this perspective humanitarian projects might well help alleviate suffering and save lives here and now, but can simultaneously be accused of complicity in generating structural and cultural violence.

With point of departure in these different interfaces between violence and humanitarian assistance, I move on to some preliminary thoughts about the possible lessons to be learned from this analysis for anthropology itself and the further development of an anthropology of violence and conflict in particular. But before I get to that question I shall discuss the three perspectives on humanitarianism's intricate relationship with violence outlined above.

Early humanitarianism: Violence as raison d'être

The first perspective on violence and humanitarian work paints a picture of the roots of humanitarianism, and suggests that despite the fundamental changes inflicted by the new wars, this essence or ideal of humanitarianism continues to play an important role in how humanitarian organizations identify themselves. Humanitarian organizations are commonly regarded both by insiders and the wider public simply as organizations that are doing benevolent and altruistic activities in favour of those in need, whether their distress is a result of natural or man-made disasters with some form of violence involved. However, through my own engagement in humanitarian work as an academic and a practitioner, which allowed me to spend more time with staffs from different humanitarian organizations, both at headquarter and field levels, I came to realize that this characterization is not simply a functional statement of *what they do*, but a more fundamental one that has to do with the identity of humanitarian organizations and their staff, and that violence and suffering is somehow constitutive of that identity, of *who they are*.

This point was brought most clearly to me in a number of professional encounters with Red Cross staffs. The ICRC[2] (The International Committee of Red Cross) is an organization, which perhaps more than any other humanitarian organization is aware of, nourishes and celebrates its own identity and origin, which dates back almost 150 years. It is certainly the only humanitarian organization that I know of, which has a written and well-publicized myth of origin, translated into numerous languages[3], that is widely used both to generate committed and loyal staffs, and to create global awareness, legitimacy and support[4]. The myth also plays an important role in ICRC's professional relations with other humanitarian actors on the global scene, and has helped the ICRC to assume a hegemonic, but not uncontested, position in the world of humanitarian agencies with a particular responsibility to take a lead in setting humanitarian standards.

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[2] For more information about the history, structure, mandate and activities of the International Committee of Red Cross, see www.icrc.org.

[3] On the ICRC homepage, the organization phrases it this way: "Since it was first published in 1862, the book has been translated into so many languages and reprinted so many times that it is difficult to know how many versions exist throughout the world."

[4] To illustrate the remarkable achievements of the organization, the ICRC can report that although the beginnings were modest, the Red Cross has today grown into a universal movement which comprises-besides the International Committee of the Red Cross-137 National Societies with about 250 million members and the Societies' world federation, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Material assistance, i.e. relief supplies distributed by the Red Cross, represents a yearly outlay running into millions of Swiss francs and is channelled to countless persons the world over, easing their suffering in times of war and peace alike (source: www.icrc.org).

The myth of origin of the ICRC and humanitarianism more generally begins in Solferino, in the Italian region of Lombardy, on 24 June 1859, where the Austrian and French armies are engaged in the decisive battle for Italian unification. The happenings that day are later summarized in the following manner: “The first exchange of gunfire took place shortly after three in the morning; by six o'clock the battle was in full swing; bright sunshine bore down on some 300,000 men who were slaughtering each other. In the afternoon, the Austrians abandoned their positions one by one; when night fell, the battlefield was strewn with more than 6,000 dead and 40,000 wounded” (source: www.ICRC.org). Apart from the struggle’s historical and political significance for the region, the battle of Solferino eventually also came to assume global meaning, because, quite incidentally, a young man from Geneva arrived on the scene.

That man was Henri Dunant, born in Geneva in May 1828 in a well-standing and pious family. Already in his young age, Henri Dunant was very engaged in several local welfare organizations, while at the same time attempting to make a career in the banking business. Apparently it was while journeying on a business mission in Italy that Dunant chanced to arrive in Castiglione delta Pieve on the same day in June 1859 that the Battle of Solferino was fought nearby. In his recollections of that memorable day in Lombardy, Dunant writes: “Here is a hand-to-hand struggle in all its horror and frightfulness; Austrians and Allies trampling each other under foot, killing one another on piles of bleeding corpses, felling their enemies with their riffle butts, crushing skulls, ripping bellies open with sable and bayonet. No quarter is given; it is a sheer butchery; a struggle between savage beasts, maddened with blood and fury. Even the wounded fight to the last gasp. When they have no weapon left they seize their enemies by the throat and tear them with their teeth” (excerpt from *A Memory of Solferino*). When the town filled with casualties and the medical services available proved to be inadequate, Dunant immediately joined hands with the local population in trying to help relieve the pain and suffering of the wounded.

These terrible experiences in Italy completely changed the course of Henri Dunant’s life in that he dedicated the rest of his life to finding a way in which to prevent and alleviate such suffering in future wars. Having returned to Geneva, he wrote the celebrated *A Memory of Solferino*, in which he shared his experiences and ideas for a organization of volunteer nurses, who could give medical services to soldiers in war. His proposals led to the establishment of the International Committee for the Relief to the Wounded in 1863, the predecessor of the ICRC. The following year the International Committee organized a conference that was attended by delegates from 16 states, and which resulted in the signature of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field. This was the foundation for modern international humanitarian law. Dunant's efforts were widely acknowledged throughout Europe and in 1901 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Henri Dunant went into history as a hero and a role model for ICRC humanitarian staffs. His importance is not restricted to ICRC (although his role there is unique), but extends to all other humanitarian workers, who I would argue have adopted the story of Henri Dunant as their master narrative by which I mean that they construct their own professional identity around those core values that his account exposes. Although there is no absolute agreement about the definition of the term "humanitarianism", its central undertakings are provision of emergency assistance and protection of fundamental human rights (Minear & Weiss 1995: 18-22). In Dunant's and ICRC's definition, assistance and protection must be neutral, which means that it shall be provided without consideration of a person's social, religious, cultural background, his economic standing, and political conviction and agendas. Rather than seeing people as social beings, differently positioned in a conflict, this view considers people first of all as human beings, and members of the same global humanity, a view that for various reasons has been heavily criticized by anthropologists (see for instance Malkki 1997), and also disapproved by some humanitarian organizations (see the following section). But regardless of these more recent assaults against the principle of neutrality, the emphasis on altruism and the reference to a common humanity has established a shared understanding of humanitarianism as a benevolent and moral act above all, and the humanitarian worker as a moral person. Alex De Waal writes that "Humanitarianism is hugely self-justifying: it may even be the paradigm of a secular human enterprise that does not need to succeed in order to justify itself" (1997: 4). De Waal's point was often illustrated by local humanitarian organizations in Sri Lanka, who would object to my critical questions and demands for more thorough assessments in relation to project proposals by saying “But this is a humanitarian project…” as if the invocation of the term “humanitarian” was sufficient justification for an activity. Writing about state politics, Sally Falk Moore asserts that: “Attributing moral significance to political ideas is one way to sacralize them and remove them from the category of the debatable” (1993: 1). Humanitarianism seems to be one such sacralized idea, which because it is associated with doing good for humanity becomes almost impossible to question. How can you reject a humanitarian project without becoming inhumane yourself?

Humanitarianism is usually seen mainly in relation to its goal of doing good and the humanitarian likewise defined by his/her engagement in ameliorating suffering in times of conflict and disaster. But as I have experienced innumerable times in conversations with other humanitarian workers, this humanitarian identity and moral superiority is made visible and achieves its force only in relation to that which it is up against, namely extreme violence and human suffering, which is at times recounted with little less detail than is found in Dunant’s description.

And the importance of excessive brutality is evident from Henri Dunant’s account from Solferino referred to earlier. For him, the urge to do good was directly born out of his personal exposure to the inhumane behaviour and exceptional anguish in the battlefield, which far exceeded anything he had experienced before and challenged his view of what is normal and acceptable. For him, like for present-day humanitarian workers, violence and human suffering, then, became the evil in which to mirror humanitarian actions. In a sense, the more inhumane the violence, the more humanitarian the attempt to stop it and heal the resulting wounds. But it is important to stress that the humanitarian and the violent, here, are constructed as two separate and opposing domains, where cruelty and malevolence is safely placed with ‘the other’, the soldiers, the mercenaries, and warmongers. However, the irony is, that the humanitarian worker is dependent on ‘the other’, without whose existence, he would cease to exist himself.

The importance of exposure to violence was revealed to me in the many stories that I heard in bars and swimming pools or around coffee tables at seminars from humanitarian workers who had recently returned from a mission to a war zone, about being caught in a cross-fire, having to collect body parts and brutally butchered baby corpses from the battle scene, being attacked and looted or in more rare cases about the kidnapping of a colleague or friend. One can interpret such stories as a natural psychological reaction to extreme experiences, but here I am more interested in the role these stories played in forming a professional identity and community. The stories were used to mark inclusion where they served as markers of a novice's rite de passage and separation from 'the other',[5] as well as exclusion, as I experienced when a senior humanitarian worker rejected my contribution to a discussion simply because I had not been exposed to that kind of danger and hence, in his eyes, did not know what I was talking about.

The more hidden relationship between the humanitarian and violence, has also been addressed by De Waal (1997), who has somewhat cynically argued that in a context of growing competition for funding and access to territory, many contemporary humanitarian organizations are first of all concerned with their own survival and therefore not necessarily inclined to find a good and quick solution to a conflict, as organizational survival and growth is dependent on conflicts and violence. While I would agree with him that competition is fierce and that organizations have to spend considerable resources to develop feasible and rewarding strategies, I also think that he would agree that the commitment to assist people in distress and make a positive difference continues to play a decisive role for the vast majority of humanitarian organizations and their staffs.

However, there are other and subtler ways in which violence is becoming internalised in the identity of the humanitarian organization. For instance, when looking at the everyday practices of humanitarian workers, rather than their motivation, ideals and goals, one finds that there are many more similarities between humanitarian and military operations than one would perhaps expect, and according to Duffield (2001) this may become more and more true due to the particular nature of the new wars. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Sørensen 2000), the humanitarian and military operations are similar in the way they approach and prioritise logistics and communication. Likewise, their concern with territory and mobility share certain features such as the attempt to control and regulate movement, and the visible inscription of authority and ownership in the landscape. On my daily drives through the war-affected regions of Sri Lanka, I couldn’t help but notice how the presence of the Sri Lankan army and different international and national humanitarian organizations, and to a lesser extent the various Tamil armed groups, was marked in remarkably similar ways. First, the compounds of both military and humanitarian organizations were often well protected by fences and guards, and entrance was restricted and strongly regulated. Moreover, they held a multitude of modern communications and transportation equipment, which further suggested their objectives and capacity. Second, earlier political boundaries were temporarily overwritten by the organizations’ division of land into operational districts and zones, which through the number of vehicles, staffs, checkpoints, etc., indicated the present intensity of conflict. And in the individual community, earlier social demarcations of status and belonging tended to fade, as new flags, stickers and streamers with corporate logos and meticulously hand-painted signboards indicating organizational ownership and other details of the operation’s purpose were hung up for public consumption. While I do not want to take the comparison too far and exaggerate the similarities, I take these observations that stem from a conflict setting that is rather typical of the situations in which contemporary humanitarian organizations work, as an indication that the solid conceptual wall that had been erected between violence and humanitarian, and on which humanitarianism has built its identity, is indeed more fragile and permeable in practice in that the practical work often requires close proximity with violence and solid knowledge of its nature and dynamics in the particular setting as well as a certain adjustment. And in the following section I argue that this has in some way resulted in humanitarianism losing some of the virtue that I have tried to show was its basis in the present section.

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[5] Mary B. Anderson similarly notes how humanitarian workers tell tales of psychological pressures and physical exhaustion and how this is translated into a general mistrust and disrespect for the people they have come to help (Anderson 1998: 149, 151).

New humanitarianism: Caught up in violence

The second perspective is more critical of the humanitarian intervention and developed gradually throughout the 1990's, as more and more humanitarian organizations lost their innocence or at least found it increasingly difficult to protect and preserve. Attempting to explain the precarious situation in which the humanitarian organizations suddenly found themselves, one will have to take a closer look at the kind of emergency situations they engaged in. Many organizations had developed their policies and practices mainly on experiences from natural disasters and had no prior experiences with working in violent conflicts. But even those organizations that had been working in conflict situations before were facing new conditions, as the nature and dynamics of war were changing fundamentally. Recall Henri Dunant's account from Solferino: Here the humanitarian worker's only concern were the soldiers involved in the armed battle, as the title and focus of the 1863 Convention illustrates. But in the "internal wars", "dirty wars", "new wars" or "complex political emergencies", as the violent conflicts of the 1990's have alternately been labelled, the distinction between armed forces and civilians became blurred, and an estimated 95% of all casualties were now found among the civilian population. This dramatic shift relates to the fact that the new wars were also no longer exclusively fought in demarcated battlefields. Increasingly the warring parties were also waging their wars in the local communities and private homes of people, and using a variety of direct and indirect means to achieve their goals, which all contributed to the appearance of far more complex humanitarian emergencies than before. As a result, the humanitarian operations also became increasingly complicated and the organizations' operational mandates expanded. Organizations now had to develop agendas and programs that went far beyond the simple distribution of emergency relief and included or at least considered and paved the way for such different tasks as resettlement and relocation, macro-economic reconstruction and income generating activities, sanitation and health, education and vocational training, demobilisation and demining, peace-building and human rights protection, democracy and institution building, which all presented unprecedented demands for new skills and more coordination.

Another consequence of the new wars, and the one that is of most interest in the present context, was that humanitarian relief could no longer be seen as an external and neutral injection of medicine and food supplies with no other impact than the positive salvation of lives. Even if many organizations insisted on this self-image, evidences from the different war zones showed the contours of an entirely different picture. Some examples will illustrate this.

In armed struggles that often dragged on for years and curbed the movement of people and goods in a deliberate politics of mobility and vulnerability, food, medicine and other materials often became a scarce resource. And since the humanitarian organizations possessed these items in abundance, it is hardly surprising that local war-lords, as well as industrious civilians were tempted to loot humanitarian convoys, warehouses and project or relief distribution sites, and hereby defied the once taken for granted inviolability of the white flag with the Red Cross and other humanitarian symbols. The problem for the humanitarian organizations was that in the majority of cases, it could be suspected that the stolen relief supplies were used to sustaining armed forces or in other ways lend support to the ongoing conflict. But direct theft was not the only way in which emergency relief was appropriated in support of an armed struggle. In areas where humanitarian organizations established a longer-term presence, relief became subjected to innovative local taxing systems operated by different armed groups or thugs, hereby attaching considerable insecurity and anxiety to the reception of emergency assistance. As I experienced in Sri Lanka, some members of communities situated in the border areas between LTTE- and government-controlled areas would not accept any relief, even though they had many unfulfilled needs, simply because they feared it would be like an open invitation for attacks. Others in the same areas, however, happily accepted the relief and saw it as a means to developing good relationships with authorities and militants.

Once this uncomfortable and unwilling association between humanitarian and conflict actors and agendas had been established, the burgeoning and ever more critical literature on humanitarian assistance in the new complex emergencies suggested still new ways in which humanitarian assistance risked being entangled in the webs of violence and conflict. I would argue, however, that even though this criticism was in many ways a severe blow to the humanitarian project, the humanitarian organizations were at this point rarely directly blamed for their failures. These were seen as an unfortunate outcome of the fact that they had to operate in a new, unfamiliar and largely unpredictable conflict environment and this excused their ignorance, but put strong emphasis on learning lessons. But as I said, once the critical debate had begun, one example of a failed intervention after another appeared in the mass media and academic literature. One unintended consequence of the large-scale relief operations that was voiced was that they allow central and local government bodies as well as local war-lords to re-allocate money for the military that would otherwise have been spent on social welfare and development. For instance, it has been shown that the defence budget of the Sri Lankan government has grown proportionately with foreign relief budgets for the country throughout the armed of conflict (Goodhand 2001: 79).

Likewise focusing on the macro-structures of which local conflicts are part, it has also been suggested that humanitarian operations distort local price and wage levels. This happens when out of necessity or for the sake of convenience, humanitarian organizations import large amounts of food items, seeds, tools and equipment to a war-torn country. Or it happens when organizations rely heavily on expatriate staffs, who often demand a certain living standard and comfort in the form of houses, vehicles, servants, familiar consumer goods, etc. But it may also happen when programs are more labour intensive and relative good salaries are offered in order to attract capable and skilful staffs. In addition to influencing price and wage levels, these measures also have a direct impact on patterns of inequality, marginalization and poverty, which may eventually generate tensions and in some cases direct confrontations between different social groupings (see also Duffield 1994 for a more detailed account of some of these unintended economic dynamics).

Related to the above arguments it has also been suggested that such distorted markets with prices changing dramatically from one day to another constitute an inducive environment for the establishment of black markets and mafia-like conflict entrepreneurs, who stand to lose more from peace than from war.

Focusing more directly on the individual humanitarian project, a critique has been made of the tendency to distribute relief only to certain categories of war-affected people, who most match the preconceived idea of a 'humanitarian victim' or more focused policy priorities such as gender. The partial or total neglect of other groups who may have similar needs, but who are not displaced or in other ways comply with the categorical expectations is often seen to have fuelled tensions and encouraged local processes of protection and exclusion, sometimes with the assistance of local thugs. Conflicts between host populations and refugee groups are just one example of this complex. But the contrary strategy, where relief and reconstruction is targeting whole communities or areas is not a simple solution either, as they interfere with existing social structures and differentiation in other ways, in that the provision of aid may help a subordinate group to prosper and gain influence above what is socially accepted.

The strong reliance on camps as a means to provide effective relief and protection for displaced populations has likewise been subject to several points of criticism. Apart from the growing realization that what are perceived and designed as temporary camps have a tendency to become (semi)permanent structures, the gathering of people in one location can be seen as facilitating attacks against civilians and thus increasing their vulnerability. Second, the layout of camps, which according to Hyndman (2000) primarily serves the safety of humanitarian staffs, has in too many cases failed to give protection from rape and other forms of sexual and physical abuse to which especially women fall victim.[6] Simple problems like a lack of (functioning) lampposts near toilet buildings, the wrong location of wells, or lack of room for privacy have often caused the violation and abuse of camp inhabitants.

While it is commonly agreed that humanitarian assistance in many cases has a negative impact on local war economies and contributes to different forms of violence, as the above examples illustrate, the conclusion that humanitarian assistance is a main reason for the prolongation of war is still widely contested. While Duffield (1994, 2001), Keen & Wilson (1994), and Anderson (1998) among others present empirical evidence of these unintended and unfortunate consequences, Shearer (2000), asserts that the significance of aid’s contribution to war economies and conflicts is generally overstated, and rests on anecdotes.

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[6] UNHCR is doing a tremendous job to improve conditions in camps, especially for women and children, and have published guidelines on protection, etc. to help local authorities and organizations.

But even though the negative impact of aid on conflict may be exaggerated, recent experiences from Rwanda, Somalia, Kosovo and other places have raised fundamental questions about the possibility and indeed appropriateness of neutrality in humanitarian operations, as well as suggested the need for better understanding and assessments of conflicts before humanitarian interventions are launched. It is clear that the humanitarian project is no longer self-justifying or safely located in a moral domain beyond the debatable. On the contrary, it has become the object of increasing attention, both within the humanitarian organizations and among journalists, academics and the wider public. It is also clear that even when the humanitarian project was never intended to become directly involved in conflicts and the dynamics of war, it no longer makes sense to treat it as an external factor. Humanitarianism is an integral part of any conflict in which it provides assistance, and must be analysed as such.

The realization hereof has generated a moral dilemma for the humanitarian organizations and implied renegotiation of a disturbed and shaken identity. Let me conclude this section by briefly summarizing the primary options available to them. Some organizations have decided to accept a certain amount of waste and other unintended consequences and justify their position by arguing that it is their objective to reach the many people in distress and save lives, and hereby they affirm their commitment to the humanitarian imperative. Their position should be seen in light of the second option, which is to stop operations altogether, because the required preconditions for providing neutral and effective assistance are non-existent. The price to be paid, however, is that the war-affected populations are effectively cut off from assistance and forced to fend for themselves. Both options imply negotiation and adjustment of the humanitarian principle.

A third option, of which we have also seen several examples in the past, is to continue the provision of relief, but adjusting to circumstances by employing international soldiers or hiring local gunmen to protect warehouses, convoys, projects and staffs. Here, as the critics of this strategy have pointed out, violence becomes legitimised and the boundary between humanitarian and military operations is blurred to such an extent that it threatens the reputation and integrity of the humanitarian agencies. Its advocates, on the other hand, counter that, if this was what was required to ensure that help reach the people in need and only they, so be it.

The two perspectives discussed so far demonstrate a shift in the role of violence and conflict from a feature belonging to ‘the other’ and the raison d'être and obvious mirror for the humanitarian, to an integral aspect of humanitarianism itself, which possesses the potential of severely damaging the humanitarian principle. From here, I move to the third and final perspective, which in some ways presents an even more devastating attack against humanitarianism.

Authoritative humanitarianism: An act of violence?

The third perspective maintains the critical angle of the second perspective, but shifts its focus from the material, economic aspects of concrete relief deliveries at the local level to humanitarianism’s economic, and in particular its ideological and cultural foundation and implication at a global level. Contrary to the second perspective, which finds some support among humanitarian practitioners themselves, this viewpoint is fo far mainly or exclusively academic and is part of a wider debate about globalization and its impacts.

In short, the third perspective suggests that not only is humanitarian assistance not inherently benevolent and a natural exponent of a high moral standard (the 1st perspective), nor are relief operations quite innocently caught up in the many webs of violence that are spun in modern armed conflicts (the 2nd perspective). In fact, they are a major contributing force in creating the preconditions for violence and conflict itself and are indeed themselves a kind of violation. This emerging criticism of international humanitarian assistance to conflict-ridden countries in the south does not present a consolidated view, but consists of many differing arguments, which each stresses different aspects of international humanitarian work such as economics, politics, ideology or culture. But in spite of their different professional roots and line of reasoning, they share a similar point of departure, I would argue, in that they all conceive of present-day humanitarian agencies and operations as exponents of what we commonly refer to as globalization, and in the following I shall demonstrate why. Moreover, they also seem to share the conclusion that humanitarian assistance may generate or reinforce the economic marginalization and cultural appropriation of receiving countries in the south.

The association of contemporary humanitarianism with globalization of course depends on which understanding of this ill-defined and contested term one adopts. But if globalization, among other things, implies the emergence of more and more global and transnational networks; a partial transfer of decision-making power from nation-states to international or transnational bodies; increasing employment of universal guidelines and policies to regulate and control the behaviour of authorities at all levels, extensive mobility of goods and people, and support of liberal goals, then it makes sense to consider humanitarianism as part of the globalization process.

Over the past two decades, the humanitarian community has changed from consisting mainly of a few international organizations and a small number of local temporary organizations in disaster areas into a large and extremely heterogeneous community or cosmopolitan network of elite of relief workers, officials of donor agencies, consultant academics and the institutions for which they all work, as well as journalists and an exorbitant number of local organizations and individuals (De Waal 1997: 3-4, Duffield 2001: 12-13, Wickramasinghe 2001). Obviously the members in the network play different roles and have different levels of authority and power, but they all contribute to the humanitarian system and to its global nature. With regard to the transfer of decision-making power, it has often been noted how the domestic jurisdiction of nation states was eroded in the 1990s, when it was accepted (in Resolution 46/182, 1991) that the international humanitarian community intervene in situations of conflict without necessarily obtaining the consent of the ‘host’ government, if the conflict was considered a threat to international peace and security, and the population’s humanitarian needs were uncared for (Minear & Weiss 1995: 37-38). The ongoing development of universal policy documents, regulations and guidelines and humanitarian categories and their systematic employment in different social and cultural contexts is yet another manifestation of global humanitarianism as are the many conferences, seminars and workshops held in both headquarters and field offices to raise awareness and encourage the use of these. And the final characteristic of globalization, mobility of goods and people, hardly needs further description, as we are all familiar with the images of international peace-keepers, relief workers with white flags and / or bullet proof jackets, and white coloured trucks and vehicles and heavily loaded cargo planes bringing goods from the central store houses to different locations of war.

In the present context, where focus is on the intricate relationships between violence and humanitarianism, it is not the global form of humanitarianism per se that is of prime interest. The liberal agenda and its different manifestations that are part of the globalization process are, however, since it is in these that one can detect the political interests and power relations at play, which give rise to marginalization and inequality. One of the central arguments here is that the international system is “either unable or unwilling to end conflict” as Duffield phrases it (Duffield 2001: 79). Although spectacular humanitarian operations give the impression that the international community is doing a lot to help where there is need, they are often criticized for being a poor “substitute for concerted political action” (ibid.), which have the affect of generating and reinforcing a general acceptance of “instability and violence as part of a generic Southern predicament” (ibid.). The consequence of this argument is that prolonged humanitarian operations may be seen as a means by which the south is kept in a structural subordinate position, dependent on external relief and expert knowledge, and subjected to different kinds of sanctions and conditions by the international community (Esteva 1998).

Duffield also points to another, and in my view equally or even more important aspect of contemporary humanitarian interventions, which he summarizes in the term “liberal peace.” Liberal peace, he argues, “reflects a radical developmental agenda of social transformation” (2001: 10) or a “commitment to transform societies as a whole” (op.cit.: 82). Echoing this view, Wickramasinghe describes recent developments in Sri Lanka in the following way: “The 1990s have witnessed a drive of development from the simple goals of poverty alleviation to holistic aims of redesigning the state and society of the country” (2001: 15). The evidence for this agenda can partly be found in the gradual shift from pure emergency relief operations to the now more common system-wide interventions that also include “conflict resolution and prevention, reconstructing social networks, strengthening civil and representative institutions, promoting the rule of law, and security sector reform in the context of a functioning market economy" (Duffield 2001:11, see also van Ufford et al. 2003). This shift, Duffield contends, must be seen as a result of the merger of development and security, where underdevelopment together with existing political systems are seen as the cause of conflict, and the transformation of societies a necessity to avoid more conflicts and ensure development. Van Ufford et al. conceive of contemporary development in a similar way and describe it as "a narrowing of development goals", followed by "a widening and proliferation of the *means* to achieve these goals" (2003: 6).

In his analysis of disaster relief, Alex de Waal talks about the emergence of a particular "humanitarian mode of power" (1997:4), and I have found this Foucauldian perspective a most useful one for the development of a more anthropological analysis of the implications of these global agendas and policies, in that it allows for a closer look at how these work in practice, and by implication how they relate to and shape people's everyday lives (Shore & Wright 1997). And I shall conclude this section with an elaboration of this point.

As I stated earlier, humanitarian emergency operations are today accompanied by a plethora of policies and guidelines that outline main objectives and means, and these all confirm the commitment to liberalism or "liberal peace" to use Duffield's term. One expression of this is the donors' much favoured "partnership strategy" according to which donors implement their projects with local partners. Although this strategy could indeed be seen as an attempt by donors to root their activities in particular settings, what we often find is that existing social institutions are bypassed and undermined, and instead new organizations are formed that can constitute a "civil society" that corresponds better with a liberal political culture (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999, Wickramasinghe 2001, Anderson 1998).

Another way in which humanitarian operations contribute to societal transformation is in the overall emphasis on individual households and individuals rather than for instance communities and the explicit ambition of turning these into self-sufficient units with responsibility for their own development (Duffield 2001: 101). This is particularly clear in the tremendous focus that has been put on income-generating activities, which not only has the well-intended goal of providing families with cash to cover for their most pressing expenses, but aims at establishing a “market society” with all that this implies (van Ufford 2003: 5). Unfortunately, the outcome has not only been a revitalization of deteriorating local economies, but also a more unwholesome competition with tensions and clashes between different social groupings along gender, ethnicity, age and host-refugee lines. And, as I experienced in my discussions with internal refugee families in Sri Lanka, mounting disagreements and clashes within families over the new consumer identity and its values (Vincent & Sorensen 2001).

Humanitarian organizations support the urge to transform war-torn societies according to liberal economic and political agendas, not only through their selection of partners, targets and activities, but also through their very mode of working. A privileged point for studying this is “project intervention”. In Scott’s analysis of state-sponsored development projects in the 20th century, he points out how “legibility is a condition of manipulation” (1998: 183). In order for the state to be able to exert control and manipulate its subjects, “they must be organized in a manner that permits them to be identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated and monitored” (ibid.). This to some extent is still the case, but the “governmentality” of contemporary project interventions is based more on self-regulation and self-control. Shore & Wright phrase it this way: “… neo-liberal reforms do not mean less government. Rather, the result hs been an increase in more subtle methods of intervention and technologies of governance based on ideas of ‘freedom’, ‘enterprise’, ‘management’ and the market” (1997: 28-29). A similar conclusion is reached by Ufford et al. who in commenting on priorities in development practice assert that “there has been a broad transition (since the 1980s) from a situation in which development interventions were an expression of specific political responsibilities to one in which management takes central stage” (2003: 4). Likewise, Marilyn Strathern has recently remarked how contemporary policy fields are governed by what she calls “audit regimes”. “Audit regimes,” she says “accompany a specific epoch in Western international affairs, a period when governance has become reconfigured through a veritable army of ‘moral fieldworkers’ (NGOs)” (2000: 2). Focus has shifted from goals to results (Ufford et al. 2003: 4) or from doing the right thing to doing things the right way, and this is reflected in the way humanitarian (and development) organizations work with their partners or beneficiaries.

In many cases a basic condition for receiving funds is a commitment to learning and using standardized procedures for writing project proposals, progress reports and evaluations and for accounting, etc. As a result, social groups and individuals in war affected communities have now become occupied with attending so-called capacity-building workshops and training programmes, often organized by NGOs, that can provide them the basic skills that are needed in order to access humanitarian assistance. They chase and collect diplomas, which I would argue primarily has a value as ‘social capital ‘ in relation to the international organizations, where they signify compliance with the new social order and bear witness to the ongoing internalisation of its ideals or values,[7] whereas they are relatively useless in relation to pursuing more traditional livelihood strategies, a point that elder members of the displaced communities in Sri Lanka would often make.

Whereas the second section of this paper showed how humanitarian operations often get involved in situations that generate physical assaults and violence, this kind of violence is not the focus in the present section. The third perspective instead suggests that in so far as humanitarianism is part of a globalization process with a liberal agenda, it can be argued to contribute significantly to generating global and local structures of economic marginalization and inequality that may partly be responded to with resistance and violence (see also Schrijver 1992, Esteva & Prakash 1998). In addition to raising our attention to the relevance of considering structural violence, the third perspective also includes cultural violence. This violation of cultures takes place when humanitarian organizations today stress universal goals and concepts and favour organizations and organizational practices that reflect their own worldview and interests more than they reflect local political cultures, social structures and visions for development.

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[7] By this I do not mean to say that the ”modern order” simply replaces the order that exists, as this would be naïve and in contradiction with what we have learned from studies of such “interfaces” (see Arce & Long 2000 for a useful conceptualisation of this issue). My point is simply to demonstrate that the humanitarian project is not only about saving lives and recovering livelihoods, but about creating new societies and illustrate some of the ways this takes place concretely.

Lessons for an anthropology of violence

In the previous sections I have shown how humanitarianism, which is commonly viewed as inherently benevolent and beneficial, is indeed involved in far more intricate relationships with violence, including physical, structural and cultural violence. Depending on the concrete case and perhaps also the observer's own political and theoretical orientation, this involvement may be judged as either incidental or intended. However, it is not my aim here to issue any verdict against humanitarianism, but simply to suggest that humanitarianism be seen as connected to wider processes of development and globalization, and that the analytical perspective is broadened from its narrow objectives and immediate achievements with regard to saving lives to including structural and cultural processes of marginalization and exclusion.

Now, how are these lessons relevant for an anthropology of violence? To attempt an answer to that question I will have to go back four years, when I was assigned by a Danish humanitarian NGO to develop a program to assist communities and people affected by war-related displacement in Sri Lanka. One of the things I did in preparation for my assignment was to read up on the anthropology of violence and conflict, which I anticipated could help me in dealing with this issue in an appropriate and responsible manner. But I didn't always find what I was looking for. And one of the things that struck me was the almost exclusive focus on narrative, performance and inscription and the emphasis on cultural explanations (Schmidt & Schröder 2001). In my view the biggest value of this kind of study of torture, rape and other forms of abuse and harassment was that they were giving life (and meaning) to the statistics and generalized accounts that dominated the material from humanitarian organizations and other authorities. They were invaluable for understanding how particular people experienced and acted upon experiences of violence, and how these affected social worlds. However, at the same time I felt that this particular analytical perspective failed to address and explain the larger systems that generated and supported ongoing processes of violence. And perhaps as a consequence, it also failed to address the role of anthropology and the anthropologist, who in many cases took the position of an observer, although a very sympathetic one.

First, this calls for more attention to global-local structures and power relationships. I thus fully endorse Farmer's "call for a more fine-grained and systemic analysis of power and privilege in discussions of who is likely to suffer and in what ways" (1997: 277), and Esteva & Prakash's suggestion that more attention is given to "the underbellies" of international interventions (1998: 133) in the anthropology of violence. But this should be done without jeopardizing what is indeed the strength of anthropology: "our familiarity with the specifics of the lives and conditions of real people in the world ... obtained ... by mixing with people during our fieldwork" (Barth 1997: 233).

Second, it urges us to reconsider our own positionality and engagement, and the ethics of anthropology. We have to continue our self-critical reflections on issues such as representation, the use of our knowledge, our relationship with different actors in the political and politicized locations we study, as well as our own, maybe unconscious, visions for our own and their society. As the recent literature on this subject indicates, the question of anthropological positionality is full of dilemmas and there is no single answer, but it is a path we have to tread to avoid contributing to the social problems we are increasingly taking as our object of study (see also Caplan 2003).

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