

David Becker

You Better Be Good

Review

David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night. Humanitarianism in Crisis*. New York, Simon & Schuster; London, Vintage, 2002. 367 pp.

On Monday, 24 March 2003, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan warned of a humanitarian crisis in the Iraqi city of Basra. The reason for this, of course, was the on-going war in Iraq, and specifically, the fact that Iraqi troops were resisting the coalition forces. The British and North American governments hastened to declare that their only interest was to avoid such a crisis and to bring help to the population as quickly as possible.

What is a humanitarian crisis?

From a military point of view, one thing you can do when you want to conquer a city is to besiege it. This means cutting off all supplies until the citizens give up. The fact that the citizens of Basra might be out of water and food only brings military victory closer. To call this a humanitarian crisis requires a rather creative way of describing and understanding reality: First of all, it must be understood that the coalition forces are not aggressors, but liberators. Secondly, in case there is resistance against the liberators, as in Basra, this cannot stem from the population, because they are definitely innocent victims. It has to be local repressors who are impeding the so desperately-needed help from arriving. Even if the fight for the city continues for days and maybe weeks, you still call this “confronting pockets of resistance” to make it clear that the people you are fighting only represent a very small number. The fact that people might be dying because of the siege on the city has to be flatly denied. Finally, the phrase “humanitarian crisis” has very different meanings, depending on who uses it. The British and North American governments use it to make clear that what they bring is help, not destruction. The U.N. Secretary General might think differently, but his use of these words further confuses the issue. Instead of commenting on the war, he comments on the humanitarian crisis, and apparently hopes to get some kind of permission to help the population, thus getting the U.N. once again involved in the process. Although this might be an understandable motive, the quickest solution for this “humanitarian crisis” is obviously to stop the war, something Mr. Annan did not mention. And even after the end of a war, “humanitarian help” cannot just be delivered like a parcel but is closely bound up with creating the political conditions needed to make it effective.

When Florence Nightingale went to attend British soldiers in the Crimean War in the nineteenth century and in the years following became the founding mother of all nurses and abnegated human commitment to those who suffer, nobody would have imagined (and in fact, it was not discussed until very recently) that she literally might have been responsible for the unnecessary death of thousands of British soldiers. As Helen Epstein explained in a pertinent article in the *New York Review of Books* (March 8, 2001) entitled “The Mysterious Miss Nightingale”, in Great Britain at the time, some people believed that the poor needed food, while others believed that they needed hygiene. Apparently, nobody believed that they needed both. Since Florence Nightingale belonged to the people advocating food, she literally made no effort to attend to the basic hygiene situation in the hospital she organized. Luckily, after her first winter on the Crime, the government changed, and the hygiene group came to power. They immediately sent a commission that cleaned up the dirt, thus lowering the death rate in

Crimean hospitals by about 80% within weeks. In honor of Florence Nightingale, it must be said that she became a fierce advocate of this new orientation during the following years. Nevertheless, this anecdote clearly shows that very well meant humanitarian efforts in the past could, and actually did, go horribly wrong. Obviously, also, health care and humanitarian action have always been linked and intertwined with political processes and power struggles.

In terms of meaning the words “humanitarian crisis” combine vagueness with a seemingly clear cut need for concrete action. People are suffering and need help. We do not need to know too much about the nature of their suffering, its history, social characteristics etc. We just have to perceive the need, and offer a quick answer. If people are hungry, give them food. If they lack houses, give them shelter. Solving a humanitarian crisis, boosts our morale, makes us feel good. Bad guys don’t deal with humanitarian crisis. People help people for unselfish reasons and for the sake of humanity. Although it is not and never has been true, we can still quite convincingly pretend that solving humanitarian crisis is politically as neutral as Swiss chocolate.

David Rieff and the dilemmas of humanitarian action: hating politics

David Rieff has written an impressive book on the issue of humanitarianism and its difficulties in our modern world. Drawing on years of reporting from the front lines of crisis around the globe, he discusses the cases of Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Afghanistan, among others, with passion, commitment and anger, highlighting the role played by international relief agencies, like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Save the Children, or Oxfam, in these crises as well as the role of the United Nations and the U.N.’s institutions dedicated to humanitarian help, like UNHCR.

Rieff introduces himself to the reader as somebody who (nearly) has seen it all. He has been to many places, he has experienced death in all of its forms, and he knows those who suffer in this world. As he says, “I have, at what costs I do not yet know and for reasons I doubt I will ever fully understand, done my best to rub my own nose in the horror of the world” (2). He shows his awareness of the ambivalent role of a war reporter like himself and his mixed product of voyeurism and bearing witness. He also assures us repeatedly that he is going to be honest with us, that he believes in fighting fire with fire, and regards “violence is the only responsible answer to the Osama bin Ladens of this world” (5).

After these declarations of principles, Rieff turns to the main topic of his book, the dilemmas of humanitarian action. He reminds us immediately that it is difficult to say whether humanitarian action has been very effective in the past. Obviously, nobody can have any objections to humanitarian action, but that does not mean that one can ignore the question whether it really helps. Rieff also has his doubts about the human rights movement. He asks whether

“...it is wise to insist that moral universalism championed by human rights activists is making enough headway in the world to make it safer for the victims of contemporary atrocities. Or whether, despite widely-hailed new norms of international law, above all the supposed end of the inviolability of state sovereignty, populations in danger today have no more reason to count on being rescued than the populations of Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto did in 1943”(13).¹

Rieff especially questions the effectiveness of the institutions dealing directly with humanitarian help, that is, those that bring aid in form of food, shelter, sanitation, or psycho-social services to populations after a disaster. He insists that this kind of help is necessary, but that it has fallen into serious difficulties. So-called neutrality, which is the basis of

humanitarianism as it was once defined in the ICRC, already became very dubious during WWII, when the ICRC remained silent in spite of its knowledge of concentration camps in order to protect the possibility of continuing its work. It took many years for the Red Cross to recognize this as an error. And in Rwanda in 1994, humanitarian organizations were evidently overwhelmed. They could not stop the genocide; they could not control the resulting waves of refugees fleeing from the country. In fact, they had no solution for anything that occurred. Rieff states that humanitarian help evidently tries to do good and does good, in certain situations, but that it can also become the direct cause of harm. Humanitarian aid with its achievements and failures has become a central problem in the modern world. For Rieff, the most profound challenge today is how humanitarianism will survive its own supposed successes. He asks, can

“the saving vision of human solidarity it offers in this cruel, fearful and self-centered time, be maintained, or does the current crisis in humanitarianism reflect the sad truth that our moral ambitions have been revealed as just that, ambitions and little more... Is humanitarianism a waste of hope?” (28)².

In a tour de force, he then proceeds to discuss the problems besetting humanitarianism and to propose his own solutions. He explains the history of humanitarianism, Christian charity and colonialism; he describes the original Red Cross ideology and its limitations, the encroaching politicization of humanitarian work, its linkage to the human rights movement, its entanglement with official politics, and finally, its direct involvement in military action in Kosovo and in Afghanistan. His final conclusion is the following: He argues that humanitarianism must find the way back to its roots, accept its limitations, and become strictly neutral and apolitical once again, dedicated only to the noble, never-ending task of helping victims, and letting others deal with the political issues, for better or worse. So while on the one hand Rieff provides the reader with detailed and well written descriptions of horrible errors and blatant failures committed in the name of supposedly always benevolent, but politically blind humanitarian help and any person that thinks politically can only agree with him, he nevertheless and surprisingly always ends up arguing against politics, against the linkage of humanitarianism with human rights, against those that analyze what goes on in the world in political terms, and worst of all if they do so, in direct identification with the oppressed. He seems to accept the identification of the field worker with the local victims as a sign of human empathy, but he does not like institutionalized political commitment, least of all if it brings on reminiscences of leftist ideology of the sixties and seventies.

Rieff apparently believes in a world in which the bad and the terrible cannot be eliminated, but can at least be clearly identified. He wants the humanitarians to do charity and do it well, without endangering its working conditions by getting involved in political issues. He wants the politicians to deal with the political aspects. And he wants the military to get on with the military tasks, without using or misusing humanitarian language. Some people have to do the dirty job of “fighting fire with fire” (like the war against terrorism after 9/11/2001) and as long as they do it without denying what they are doing, that’s ok. Humanitarian help can be a hopeless job, but it remains the best we can do. A sad world, but a clear-cut world in which even the villains belong to the same basic moral order. In Rieff’s world there is only black and white. Either you do humanitarian work and help the victims, or you deal with villains, in which case you are either one of them or one of the military machine bringing just punishment to the villains of this world. Human rights are a trap because through them one can justify military interventions as well as the decision not to help people who really need it, and withdraw, for example, from Afghanistan because the Taliban mistreat women. The U.N. is bad, because they facilitated the mix-up. Kofi Annan is really bad (see in greater detail, 313f.), because he blew it in Rwanda (true), and because he believes in a world order of

human rights. ICRS and MSF are good because they defend the neutral, original, basic humanitarian approach. MSF has sinned, but has learned from its errors. OXFAM is murky because they are too political. And worst of all are the “hardcore leftists” like Chomsky, who still talk about imperialism and the third world and identify with those romantic fantasies about liberation, that were en vogue many years ago, but are now absolutely outdated.

Post colonial history: imperial divide and shared experiences

In a recent article entitled “Always on Top”, Edward Said discusses this kind of anti-anti-colonial criticism (London Review of Books, Vol. 25, Nr. 6, 20 March 2003), that, apparently, is not limited to David Rieff, but actually represents a trend among many post-modern intellectuals. Said attacks V. S. Naipaul as one of the first in the 1960s to systematize the revisionist view of empire. Naipaul does not deny that terrible things happened in such places as the Congo nor that there was something like idealism and real effort, but he stresses that many post-colonial problems were not a result of colonialism, but of “self-inflicted wounds”. Said has more sympathies for third world liberation theorists like Frantz Fanon, but at the same time does not cling to simplistic views of colonialism and imperialism, either. He argues, instead, that in post-colonial histories we always have to keep two ideas in mind “that are in many ways antithetical – the fact of the imperial divide, on the one hand, and the notion of shared experiences on the other – without diminishing the force of either.” Said, for example, appraisingly discusses Cathrine Hall's book “Civilizing Subjects” as an excellent expression of the dialectical approach really needed to do justice to the reality of shared experiences between colonizer and colonized and their entangled histories, while at the same time acknowledging the basic divide between them. “Hall sees cycles and patterns in the attitudes she examines: Decent affirmations were leavened by racism; abolitionist views were succeeded by developmental theories that refused to allow the colonies the improvements that were taking place in Birmingham. What was good for reform-minded England was unsuitable in Jamaica...”

While David Rieff's world is simple, Edward Said's and Catherine Hall's is marked by complex processes and an appropriate grasp of them. For Rieff, developmental politics didn't work, communism fell apart, and post-colonial societies like Vietnam or Algeria or most African countries have taken a wrong turn leading to abhorrent results, which in his view refute the old anti-colonial arguments and make “third worldism” a kind of four-letter-word. Edward Said shows more awareness of the complex and ambivalent details involved in these histories. In his discussion of Hall's book, we learn something about Jamaican history, about the role of Baptist missionaries and their confrontation with “their black parishioners”. We begin to understand that post-colonial history still refers and reacts to colonialism, but that this is not a simple story of good and bad. The solution to Euro-centrism, according to Said, is obviously not “Afro-centrism”, but a recognition of the horrors of colonial rule and of the reality of entangled, intertwined histories, of shared experiences, of a history of relationships that, although abusive, also shape identities and cultural processes on both sides. Rieff's bashing of “third worldism” in comparison just becomes an unfortunate simplification, an act of impatience in reaction to the complex realities, he purportedly is trying to understand and describe. If Rieff had risked providing us with a thick, in depth description of one of the humanitarian crises he discusses instead of roaming around the whole world, he might have come up with a better analysis.³

Rieff's bottom line is erroneous. But he nevertheless does know a lot, he describes some of the basic problems in what happens in the modern crisis regions of the world in very clear and understandable language, and much of his criticism is justified and can be shared by almost

everybody. It would therefore be unjust to simply condemn his book because of its overdrawn distinctions between the humanitarian and the political realm. It might be more fruitful to discuss some of his ideas in more detail before returning once again to a more general discussion.

"Designated consciences"

In the first section of the book, called "Designated Consciences", Rieff describes how humanitarian help has become something like a fetish in the modern world, in which a brave few, through a simplified message transported by the mass media, do something that alleviates the masses of their social guilt. In a very enlightening summary, he relates how humanitarianism is based on the tradition of Christian charity, as well as on colonialism. He then goes on to show how humanitarianism and traditional charity came into crisis, not only during the Second World War, but also in the 1960s and 1970s, with the "third world-isms" and the developmental policies then en vogue. Rieff states bluntly that, in his opinion, the developmental policies and third world-ism ideologies failed and were wrong, but that they did a lot to develop the idea of humanitarianism. Developmental policy failed because poverty continues to exist up to the present, and, in his opinion, "third world-ism" is just hard-core leftist ideology for him. "Even viewed through the most optimistic lens, development had at best only mixed success, and, as originally imagined anyway, it had largely been a failure" (112). The Third World revolutions proved to be not very convincing, and in Rieff's terms, everything thus came together in the 1980s to value humanitarian help as the positive thing. It satisfied the Thatchers of this world, who felt that developmental help was too slow, too bureaucratic, and ineffective. It satisfied the frustrated leftists of this world, because it gave them a good, new aim, something everybody would agree was worthwhile and necessary. And last, but not least, the United Nations could embrace this approach and play an important role in it. "By the late 1980s, humanitarianism had become the last coherent saving ideal. Its triumph, however, would prove in the 1990s to be its tragedy, for this success turned out both morally and operationally to be a poisoned chalice" (120).

Although Rieff's beliefs about "third world-ism" and development seems biased, I think he has got a point when he speaks about the disappointments of anti-colonialism and describes how first-world leftists began to embrace the idea of humanitarian aid and human rights in the 1980s and 1990s. Algeria, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, as well as Chile, Uruguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, all proved to be countries that, for one reason or another, did not satisfy the fantasies and expectations first-worlders had projected onto them. Much of this frustration was channeled and transformed into a commitment to humanitarian aid and human rights. Many of those who in the 1960s and early 1970s had expressed their solidarity with liberation movements now ended up working in humanitarian organizations. Rieff also shows how this shift in leftist commitment partially coincided with a neo-liberal Thatcherite critique of developmental policies. In that sense, Rieff convincingly defines the long tradition from colonial and Christian roots to modern humanitarian help as something he calls "designated consciences" that have less to do with the beneficiaries than with self-referential issues of the first world.

Nevertheless, already in this section of his book, Rieff seems strangely annoyed about the political aspects of humanitarian aid. He is good at showing how people's political convictions are apparently linked to their moral convictions and needs, and how this adds up to a certain attitude to humanitarian aid. But he is definitely not happy with the political aspects of humanitarian aid itself, although he develops a convincing argument as to why such

aspects cannot and should not be denied. He neither explains nor solves this contradiction. In this context, it does not seem accidental that Rieff does not even mention Latin America, nor does he make reference to South Africa. He probably would not deny that big and small humanitarian organizations, international as well as local, were and are active in these parts of the world, but maybe he does not consider these to be relevant humanitarian crises, or maybe the visible connection between political process and humanitarian help is too obvious for him in these countries.

"Dreams and realities"

In a second step, called "Dreams and Realities", Rieff then proceeds to discuss the cases of Bosnia and Rwanda. Some of his descriptions are very much to the point, and in fact, heart-breaking. He shows how, in both cases, the governments of this world and the United Nations knew what was happening, and still let it happen. He discusses the well known cynicism of international politics and its continuing actuality effectively:

"The United States could have acted; the truth is, it did not care enough to do so... The United States was not so contemptuous of international law that it was willing simply to thumb its nose at the genocide convention (*which would have obliged them, as a signatory state, to do whatever was in their power to bring it to a halt*). Rather, through the person of its then-U.N. ambassador and future Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the Clinton Administration made sure that the word "genocide" was never applied to what was taking place in Rwanda while the killing was actually going on. The goal of U.S. policy was not to have to do anything about the mass slaughter in Rwanda. The means chosen was to ensure that what was taking place was called a "humanitarian crime", not "genocide", and when that position became untenable, the U.S. State Department retreated to the stance that, while "acts of genocide" might be taking place in Rwanda, "genocide" was not. Asked by a Reuter's correspondent named Allan Nelsner how many such "acts" would be needed to add up to genocide, Christina Shelly, a department spokeswoman, answered, "That's just not a question that I am in a position to answer." (161)

Rieff explains how in the context of Bosnia and Rwanda, humanitarian organizations become increasingly and unavoidably political in their basic positions. As humanitarians, they failed to avoid the horrors of Srebrenica and the snipers of Sarajevo. Worse still, the humanitarian position itself gets twisted in Bosnia: If you save the people being persecuted and agree to lead them away, you facilitate ethnic cleansing. If you refuse this form of participation in ethnic cleansing, you have to accept responsibility for countless deaths. In Rwanda the first problem was the incapacity to stop the genocide. Then came the "humanitarian crisis" of millions fleeing the country, amongst which were those that had committed the genocide. In this situation humanitarian work could not be neutral, but had to accept a political commitment and needed to collaborate with governments. The ensuing involvement of mainstream relief agencies of humanitarianism and human rights is heavily criticized by Rieff.⁴

"The fact that the logic of melding human rights concerns and humanitarian ones had been shown to be completely incoherent passed unnoticed... For if the old regime in Rwanda was guilty of genocide, and its successor murderous... then the only coherent international response along the interventionist lines most NGOs were now coming to support was humanitarian recolonization, as would occur later in Kosovo" (191).

Again, we have to recognize how some of what Rieff says is true, but that at the same time, he builds up an argument that is unconvincing. Yes, undoubtedly, the United Nations miserably failed in Bosnia and in Rwanda. Yes, the relevant governments of the so-called international community played their games, as they always have. And yes, the notion that humanitarian

help could be or ever were apolitical was definitely proven to be wrong. But the conclusion Rieff draws from all this seems quite arbitrary. For him, the linkage of human rights and humanitarian aid is a consequence of the process of politization he has just convinced us was absolutely inevitable. But then, he seems to believe that this in itself is the basic argument for military intervention. Pure apolitical humanitarian aid reaches the end of its resources and turns into just one more propaganda instrument in international power games.

This conclusion, although it rings true, is neither logical nor obvious. In Latin America, for example, help for the victims of political repression was, in most countries, linked to a fight against human rights abuses. I worked in the Chilean context for many years as a member of a local NGO, and it was always clear that psycho-social help for the victims of repression could not and would not only involve food, medical help or therapy, but also had to address and be “embedded”, not in an occupation army as in Iraq, but in a framework of fighting for human rights. It never occurred to any of us to ask for military intervention against the Pinochet regime. Human rights were and are a legal framework that permitted the population in many Latin American countries to develop a local political process. Human rights in the fight against dictatorship was not something imported through international relief agencies, but it was a political banner that shaped the discussion, and that any person or agency that wanted to help had to take into consideration. Something very similar can be said about the political process in South Africa. Human rights are thus not just something to be enforced or not enforced through military intervention. Human rights are part of on-going political struggles, nationally and internationally. The fact that the oppressors of this world try to use the human rights argument in their own interest does not mean that, by definition, it cannot be used and play an important role for the oppressed of this world, or that their fate is either to be bombed or just to make do with ameliorative humanitarian help before and after military interventions, in order to avoid any involvement in the underlying conflicts.

Rieff’s argument can potentially only make sense if the whole thing is discussed exclusively from the viewpoint of an international agency or a government, for which the people that live in a crisis region are only objects of their intervention. You bring them food, you bring them shelter, and if you bring them human rights, you get mixed up in problems you shouldn’t be involved in. This seems to be Rieff’s credo. The problem is that the recipients of his help do a certain number of things by themselves. Often, they do not really have to wait for outside help to think of human rights. Sometimes, even in the worst of crises, they act as subjects themselves, if they are not prevented from doing so by outside involvement. Rieff correctly criticizes a neo-colonialist attitude which pours human rights on people’s heads, independent of what they themselves feel, think, or do. But he does so in defense of an equally imperialistic and neo-colonialist ideal of helping without being politically committed.

"The death of a good idea"

We thus come to the third section of Rieff’s book, “The Death of a Good Idea”. Describing and discussing what happened in Kosovo and in Afghanistan, Rieff shows how international humanitarian organizations have linked up with the military and have become part of the war games being played, thereby losing their autonomy and their capacity to act as independent helpers for those who suffer the most: the civilian population. Rieff’s critique of many big humanitarian organizations which lost their independence, especially of the North American institutions linked to their government without any criticism, is as harsh as it is true. The final outcome of this kind of mix-up can be viewed on TV every day as we follow the progress of the war in Iraq, and continue to listen to the strange mixture of people telling us how successfully they are bombing a country (20,000 tons of bombs dropped by Wednesday, 9

April 2003), while at the same time everybody is apparently only trying to solve a humanitarian crisis.

One could expect at this stage of Rieff's book some discussion of the doubtful concept of "humanitarian wars", the disrespect for international law and state sovereignty it implies, as well as some reference to the structure of these new wars, as for example Mary Kaldor⁵ or Herfried Muenkler⁶ have discussed more recently and Martin van Creveld⁷ some time ago. But although Rieff touches upon these issues, this is not really his topic. He criticizes the abuse of the human rights issue through the political propaganda. He obviously does not like how humanitarian organizations are letting themselves be abused by governments and military interests. But his focus is not on the political structures that produce this kind of abuse, nor on the new kind of war realities that facilitate this entanglement between military and humanitarian action. If for example "modern" wars are basically fought with and against civil society, then it cannot surprise us that humanitarian action and military interests get more and more intertwined. Rieff does not follow this kind of analysis. He just feels that humanitarians have gotten involved with something that goes far beyond their capacities, and that they have to come clean somehow, in order to defend their original objectives.

Rieff's final conclusion is thus, that humanitarian work can only function if it somehow wins back its innocence. "The tragedy of humanitarianism may be that, for all its failings and all the limitations of its viewpoint, it represents what is decent in an indecent world... Independent humanitarianism does many things well and some things badly, but the things it is now being called upon to do, such as helping to advance the cause of human rights, contributing to stopping wars, and furthering social justice, are beyond its competence, however much one might wish it otherwise." (334) So finally, we come full circle, back to a very naïve and thus imperial world vision: Humanitarians! Accept that your work is limited, but stay morally clean. Politics is a dirty game; don't get involved in it. Let others fulfill the tasks they have to fulfill, like, for example, waging war. Don't let them abuse you. In short: Let's be moral. Let's be good.

Ideologies and confusions

Rieff ends up throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Why he does so is a difficult question to answer.

One reason might be that he neither has a clear conceptual understanding of the relatedness between humanitarian aid and developmental cooperation, nor does he appear to appreciate the extremely long time frames we are dealing with, when confronting manmade disasters. It is impossible to discuss these issues in depth within the framework of this article, but we can at least name some of the relevant aspects of this discussion: The traditional division between humanitarian aid as a short range disaster relief activity and developmental cooperation as a long term structural intervention nowadays is obsolete. Especially in crisis regions humanitarian projects tend to continue for many years, they rapidly and correctly acquire long term developmental perspectives. Although this is a conflictive issue amongst developmental agencies, because the implications are complex and require new strategies, we can observe a certain trend, to think in a more integrated way. Rieff seems to dream about quick action and quick help, which is ok but actually does not understand reality. If for example a refugee camp receives a food program for 10 to 15 years, then we are not talking anymore about disaster relief. We are looking at an economic structure, at grown relationships, at a developmental situation. Or if we deal with trauma, we will not quickly do some counseling, and then pretend the problem is solved. As we have learned at the latest

with Keilson's Concept of "sequential traumatization" trauma in a political context must be understood as a process, which will continue for many years, many generations. If we work with trauma we will have to deal with it on many levels, not just therapeutic, and we will have to develop long range perspectives.⁸

A second issue is that Rieff does not really differentiate well between the different stories he is telling us, and thus misses a chance to develop the implications. Western States and western relief agencies are two very different although related things. As we can learn also with Rieff's book, the language of statesmen and of helpers begin to overlap more and more, especially in reference to the issue of human rights. In this context one could imagine three different stories: 1. The story of the changing governmental justifications for wars. 2. The story of the changing language of helping organizations and the way they analyze, justify and evaluate their activities. 3. The story of the growing entanglement between the vocabulary used by governments and helpers, and of the implications this has in reference to history in general, to the dominant political discourse, and to the working perspectives of the humanitarian organizations. Rieff offers a lot of material for these stories, but he never really tells them.

Maybe all this happens, because Rieff, like the characters in Catherine Hall's book on Jamaica, is part of an empire, part of a colonial ideology. For him, the issue is the ideology of humanitarian helpers, not the people that receive this help. He would never think about the recipients of aid as people who act as subjects or about humanitarian help as a process in which so-called helpers and helped need to cooperate and learn from each other, if help is to be effective. Also, his analysis does not penetrate very deeply. Otherwise, he wouldn't use words like "ethnic fascist" for Slobodan Milosevic, or "Islamic fascist" for Osama bin Laden so readily.

Maybe he gets confused because, in good-old North American tradition, he is very much interested in individual rights and freedom, and basically looks at governments and state sovereignty in a very skeptical way. For Rieff, the treaty of Westphalia (in 1648) rested on an absolutist concept of national sovereignty that limited states in what they could do internationally, but declared that they were free to do whatever they pleased to their own citizens (71). In her book "Die Grenzen der Solidarität" ("The Limits of Solidarity"), Gret Haller, the former Ombudswoman for Bosnia, interprets the treaty of 1648 in a very different way. For her, this treaty is what ended the religious wars, because it implied the submission of religion under state law, and in fact, became the basis for modern international law. She argues that the basis of state law in the United States was the other way around: There seemed to be a basic interest in guaranteeing religious freedom. She thus implies that the human rights issue is something that, within the European tradition, will seek its installment within state sovereignty, in international relationships, and will transfer group or national sovereignty to international bodies, i.e., the U.N. or international courts in order to guarantee individual rights. As she portrays the North American position, a North American would view this the other way around, always believing that the more power you give to states or to international bodies, that is, the more individual rights you hand over to state control, the more prone you are to become a victim of abuses ("Die Grenzen der Solidarität", Gret Haller, Aufbau Verlag Berlin, 2002).

Perhaps Gret Haller's argument is also a little simplistic (shaped by a dose of anti-Americanism and defensive feelings about "old Europe"), but it nevertheless would explain why Rieff, although criticizing so many correct things in detail, at the end, only seems to have three major enemies: the United Nations, human rights, and politics. If Haller's argument is

partially true, one could sympathize with Rieff's basic mistrust of governments, and one could engage in happy solidarity with him in his criticism of horrible bureaucracy and human rights abuses in the name of the United Nations. Nevertheless, one could also see that his absolutist position is not really always helpful, and that it sometimes does make sense to think about collective tasks in this world, like, for example, human rights, and to listen to the people one is trying to help, although providing the help wanted may mean becoming involved in their conflicts. This would make sense even if the world continues to be unjust,

Rieff insists again and again that if you intervene in Afghanistan or Kosovo, by the same token, you must also intervene in, say, North Korea or Zimbabwe or Chechnya. But this is a statement about the morals of politics, not about humanitarianism, and maybe politics is not only about war. Maybe humanitarian help can understand itself within a political framework without having to give up independence. I believe, in agreement with Rieff, that there is a place for the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, Oxfam, and so many, many others. But I do not think that their central potential lies in being politically neutral and engaged in a process of returning to the old ideology of the International Red Cross. Neither is it necessary, that they all do the same thing or adhere to the same political ideology. All are part of on-going political processes, and represent different political ideologies and identities. We can understand them, criticize them, or even adhere to them as such. But whatever we do, the issue is not to make them apolitical or to analyze them outside of politics. Just like religion, humanitarianism is not something that happens outside and apart from social and political processes. Believers, victims and helpers never are only this, but live in the same world and have many other needs, interests and roles like every human being. Somehow, Rieff seems to know this, but it does not prevent him from forgetting it in his book again and again. Somehow, he seems to think that if human values and morality relate to social and political processes, they will be polluted, distorted, faked, and destroyed. It seems that Rieff is looking for something to believe in, not something that is part of human life.

A serious discussion of humanitarianism, of developmental cooperation, and humanitarian interventions in crisis regions must look very closely at people's realities, their histories, and their culture. It cannot try to understand what happens only from a "first-worldish" point of view. The NGOs Rieff talks about are not the only ones that exist in the world. In many places, we have local NGOs, some of which are home-grown, and others which undergo a slow emancipation process from their mother institutions. For example, Christian Children's Fund in Angola continues to be a North American NGO based in Richmond, Virginia, but it is also somehow a local institution run and shaped by Angolans and their needs. It is thus necessary to think and talk about humanitarianism not only as an issue between the helpers and those who are being helped, it is also an issue between international donors and local receivers, and the complex institutional framework that develops in this process and that mitigates between local needs and preconceived views developed in other contexts and distant places. It is also not only a question of what happens immediately during the so-called "humanitarian crisis", but also of what happens in the many years afterwards, when David Rieff and his colleagues have gone on to new crisis areas.

The "culture of lies"

In what I have come to call a "culture of lies", I think it makes sense to look at the hidden agenda of the donors, the hidden activities of the recipients, politicians and political abuse, and the contradictory wishes of the beneficiaries.

Donors have explicit political and social goals, most of which are known in their home countries, but not in the places where the money is spent. They wish, for example, to enhance democracy, facilitate reconciliation, and develop the economy. All this sounds very nice, but in fact implies something comparatively dangerous. Donors pretend to know what democracy is, how reconciliation should take place, what can be expected of the economy. They are strongly convinced that they know what must be done a lot better than the locals.

To take a historical example, the Spanish decided that what the Latin American Indians needed was Christianity, even if bringing it to them meant the extermination and exploitation of those Indians, making only the Spanish crown richer. We can find a less crude example more recently in the former Yugoslavia. When the issue of rape of so many women during this horrible war became internationally known, German women's organizations came to Bosnia to help. Many did excellent work there, but others, in a very arrogant way, felt obliged to explain to the women in Bosnia that Germans, because of their experience in the Second World War, knew better how to deal with rape than these psychologically uneducated Bosnians.

Even if many other cases are not so extreme, donors quite in general have their own logic of how to deal with things. They have aims, which they often do not make explicit, they basically believe that they have the better know-how, and furthermore international agencies are decisively linked to certain ways of spending money. That means they have to spend their money within a certain timeframe, no matter if this timeframe is adequate or inadequate in reference to the situation it pretends to deal with. And also, the agencies have to account for the money they spend in a certain way that makes sense in, for example, Germany or the United States, but that is profoundly ridiculous when you are living and working in a region without banks, sometimes without government, etc., etc.

In short, even the most well-meaning donors usually do not have the time to establish a meaningful and closely-knit relationship with the people they give money to, and therefore tend to have unrealistic expectations about what the people who receive the money can do with it. In fact, the basic logic of understanding projects does not really include recipients, but is a closed circuit, self-explaining logic, based on the reality of the donors. If, for example, our project says that we will do trauma therapy with ex-soldiers of the Bosnian army and our log-frame explains that this therapy will be carried out within a framework of six months per client, then whatever happens in the project can only be explained within these terms of reference. Therapy helps in six months, or it doesn't. If it doesn't, the project is a failure. If it does, it was a good project. But never, ever can we question the framework itself or go beyond it.

And that brings us to the next issue: the hidden activities of aid recipients. Recipients themselves also have their hidden agendas. First of all, they need money, and are willing to accept money for whatever is being asked for. This is not because they are corrupt, but basically because they live in countries in which the economy is devastated, and working for an NGO, especially if it has humanitarian goals, is a fantastic solution. It implies being able to do something apparently worthwhile for your country, and at the same time, enables them to earn a living on a level much higher than most other people in the country.

In Angola, for example, I met several people who, at some point, had held high posts in the Ministry of Social Welfare, but what they earned in these posts was never enough to live on. Working in an NGO meant receiving, for the first time, the money necessary for more or less decent way of life. First of all, there is a motivation that has to do with money much more

than with the content of the work. This is especially so in countries where there are no local NGOs to begin with, but in which it is the international agencies or the international NGOs that invent the local NGOs. Secondly, locals very often rightly feel that the internationals are not really willing to listen to them, and also that the internationals will give more money if you manage to explain whatever you are doing in their language.

Returning to the example of the therapy institutions mentioned above, we find something interesting happening: I had to evaluate this institution, and when I talked to them, I said that I was fascinated with their program, but that I had never, ever seen a therapy program with severely traumatized patients have success in such a short time. So, I was wondering what kind of secret witchcraft they were using. They immediately proceeded to tell me that they themselves also do not consider these patients healed after six months, but that their program said that this was the time allowed for therapy, and so that was when they ended therapy. But they had managed to squeeze a little tiny item called “clubs” into their budget, in which the patients who participated in the program could meet once a week at the center just to sit together and talk.

As far as they were concerned, these clubs were actually important therapeutic activities. First of all, they were of much longer duration: people had been coming for several years. Secondly, they had characteristics of a mixture of self-help groups and therapeutic interventions, because in these meetings, therapists were usually present, but the group never functioned as a group therapy session. When I asked them why they had never communicated the details of this to their donors, they expressed anxiety as to the donor's possible reaction to the apparent failure of the official therapy program, and told me that the donors had not been really very interested in these issues. No representative of the donors had ever asked them about their methods or their patients' case histories and real problems. For the international agency, the only issue had been the fact that they were working with ex-combatants and trying to help them and that their bookkeeping was correct.

We can find examples like this nearly everywhere. The basic issue is that locals usually do not really dare to say what they think and what they are doing, and accept a basic lie which, in this kind of work, can have very destructive consequences: this lie is that victims' help can be short-term help, and that we can really overcome humanitarian crisis quickly and efficiently. All of us know that this is simply not true. But donors and recipients, for different reasons, tend to define the task in these terms. So in fact, they end up believing it and lying to themselves and to each other.

Further elements in this culture of lies are the public figures. We have to think about politicians and political abuse. Politicians in the recipients countries, on the one hand, hate local NGOs and what they stand for, because they tend to be critical of government policies and to protect their independence. On the other hand, these projects very often do things that the state should do and cannot because they lack the money. So politicians and government also love NGOs, because through them, money flows into the country that otherwise might not get there. This creates a natural and permanent tension between NGOs and government, in which official politics very often try to use and abuse what is happening in these projects. Especially when dealing with reconstruction of democracy, justice, help for victims, etc., we can see a tense and contradictory attitude of politicians to this work. They need and love the symbolism; they hate practical consequences; they want to control it, and they definitely don't want to finance it. This may explain the ambivalent attitude of helping agencies to local political stake holders. They would like to keep their distance from corrupt or self-serving politicians, they have to get involved in a complex political situation in which they mistrust

everybody, the local government, just as much as the small local groups they are possibly trying to help. Looking for a nonpolitical space seems an attractive answer, but does not solve anything.

Last, not least, we have to mention the contradictory wishes of the beneficiaries. Especially when dealing with victims of man-made disasters, we can observe several problems. First of all, there are different kinds of projects. For example, there is a difference between a group of victims that does political lobbying for truth and justice and a therapy project. In the first case, this group might need money, but it might do a lot of harm to this group if they are forced to turn into an official institution, because what started out as a relevant political fight ends up possibly being a self-serving structure that cannot want to reach its political goal, as it would then disappear as an institution. The second case, the therapy project, is also complicated, because victims want help for themselves. Very often, they justifiably feel that the best for them would be a regular income. Instead, they become involved with therapists who don't give them money but who themselves receive a regular paycheck for supposedly helping them. Although they might understand the need for such professionals, the interaction is sometimes very complicated, and often contributes to the illusion that the institution, which tries to help in terms of therapy or with lawyers or whatever, in fact is something like the state, which really could be in charge of "repairing" the victims. In this process quite often the different dimensions involved get blurred and confused or seem mutually exclusive, as if in therapy the victims need for justice could be satisfied, or as if one had to make a final choice for dealing either with political or economical or emotional processes and needs.

Short term solutions?

So, we can establish a basic sequence in conflict situations and their aftermath. First, we have bombs, we have war and fighting. Then, when it stops, we have the international community reconstructing houses and building trauma centers, solving the humanitarian crisis. After some time, the trauma centers prove not to be sufficiently effective for the donors, and then a new word appears, called "income generation". So now, it seems we don't want only to save people's souls, we also want to make sure that they have food and that they earn a living. And then, quite quickly, donors begin to ask about exit strategies. The official catastrophes are over; it's time to move on. In a more or less elegant way, donors tend to pull out. So, finally, we have this lovely but profoundly despairing sequence from war to health to wealth to nothing. Everybody knows that this is what is going to happen. Those at the receiving end try to hold out as long as they can. The donors try to finish off with the highest morale possible and reaffirm their conviction that all help was only given to enable self-help. Efficiency, efficacy and sustainability are the key words through which, finally, we develop good excuses to walk out, and once more leave people to themselves until they are ready for the next gruesome war.

This culture of lies must be understood as one element of neo-colonial power struggles going on around the world. None of the sides involved are essentially good or bad, but they are all part of a global structure from which they, even with the most benevolent intentions, cannot escape. If we want to understand the crisis of the humanitarian organizations, this might be a useful frame of reference. But it will still not be enough, because, once again, we have to enter into the specific cultural and political realities that characterize one or another crisis region. Although it is obvious, it is never too late to understand that Bosnia is not Rwanda, and that both of them differ from East Timor or South Africa or Chile. Recognizing these differences does not mean one cannot talk about these countries at the same time, but one

should keep in mind the essential differences and Edward Said's focus on both the colonial divide and the shared experience.

It is correct to criticize the United Nations as a bureaucratic monster and to show how often it has failed. But it is essentially wrong to treat the UN as if it were a government, or a single person. The UN is an organization that is as good or bad as its members permit it to be. It might be sad and frustrating that the governments of this world still do not agree about certain essentials, but it is also logical, since the UN is part of the colonial divide, and can question it only partially. Nevertheless it is better that we have a place where the governments meet and sometimes reach agreements, than if that space did not exist. The UN cannot and should not function as a hegemonic power. It will thus always be easy to criticize its inefficiency. But on the long run this "inefficiency" might be exactly its central value, insofar as it helps control hegemonic interests of individual governments and countries.

Many humanitarian organizations have betrayed their own ideals by succumbing to supposed market rules, by believing they have to sell each new catastrophe to the public in the quickest and most "soap-operatic" way possible. Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" has become their unfortunate credo, thus denying complex realities and long term needs and inventing short term total crisis, as well as short term total solutions. Humanitarianism in this context degenerates to a simple market strategy that has nothing to do with reality and is also easily used and abused by other interested groups like governments or the military or the industry. But not all organizations work that way, and actually many have accepted the need for long term strategies, for contextual approaches and for cooperative and respectful relationships with the beneficiaries.

As Rieff correctly points out in his book, since the Kosovo war we find ourselves confronted with this terrible new self-justifying concept of "humanitarian war". War never was humanitarian, nor will it ever be. The fact that some wars might be justified does not make them more humanitarian. Propaganda has always described war as something carried out to protect the good from the bad, the victims from the aggressors, and the civilized from the uncivilized. So the tendency to also use humanitarian arguments in order to justify war is perhaps quite old. But never before have we seen such a direct linkage between humanitarian ideals and the destruction of war. The war in Kosovo supposedly only occurred in order to protect the local population from ethnic cleansing. The war in Afghanistan occurred to free the people from the horrible Taliban, and in Iraq, of course, once again, the aim is only humanitarian. But does this cynical argumentation in itself make the fight for human rights unnecessary? Does the fact that some frustrated liberals have entered into an unholy alliance with neoconservative war hawks in the name of fighting for liberty and human rights discredit these concepts as such? I think not. Humanitarianism as an apolitical nicety is ridiculous. Humanitarianism selling itself to warmongers in a misunderstood process of politization is suicidal. But maybe these are not the only alternatives.

All we have are complex situations in a world marked by neo-colonial realities. Humanitarian help is part of an ongoing political process. We should risk engaging in complex discussions, and accept once and for all that simple solutions, straight forward answers, do not exist. Rieff's book provokes a discussion on important issues, and it correctly points a finger at several severe deficiencies in the on-going realities of international cooperation. Nevertheless, it is also a book stunningly ignorant of the complexities of political processes and situations that characterize the political realities in the countries in crisis. And, most unfortunately, it does not question anywhere the author's own type of benevolence. Apparently he is "above suspicion".

Rieff probably believes himself to be a progressive thinker. What he has delivered with this book nevertheless seems to me to be very much part of the kind of neo-conservatism that has become so fashionable these days: you present yourself as very modern. You declare “leftist” theory (whatever that may be) from Marx to Bourdieu as romanticism at its best, you then describe and deconstruct a little bit the global village and finally you end up with something that sounds very new but in fact is very old, something like “human values matter” or “lets get back to our roots and stop this erroneous road of politization”. Although their work may be harder to read, I personally find the work of people like Edward Said or Catherine Hall more helpful.

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Short biographical note (author)

David Rieff is a widely published writer and journalist. His work covers a variety of subjects including international conflict, disaster, immigration and American politics. He is the author of four earlier books: *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*; *Going to Miami: Exiles, Tourists and Refugees in the New America*; *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*; and *The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami*. He is a contributing editor to "The New Republic Magazine" and writes regularly for such publications as "The New Yorker", "The New York Review of Books", "The Los Angeles Times Book Review", "Vanity Fair" and the "Washington Post".

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Short biographical note (reviewer)

Dr. David Becker, born in Germany in 1954, is a psychologist with a Ph.D. from the Free University of Berlin. He lived in Chile from 1982-1999, working in issues of mental health and human rights at the Latin American Institute for Mental Health and Human Rights; he also taught psychology at the Diego Portales University in Santiago. Since 1999, he has taught intercultural education at the Free University of Berlin and is the managing director of the "International Academy for Innovative Education, Psychology and Economy (INA)" at the same university. Together with colleagues from Germany, Switzerland and South Africa he formed the "Office for Psychosocial issues (OPSI)", through which he continues working as an international consultant for psycho-social projects and developmental agencies in crisis regions.

David Becker

Office of Psychosocial Issue (OPSI) / Büro fuer Psychosoziale Prozesse
c/o Internationale Akademie für innovative Pädagogik, Psychologie und
Ökonomie GmbH (INA) an der Freien Universität Berlin

Königin Luise Str. 24-26, D-14195 Berlin

Phone +49 (30) 8385-23 62 and +49 (30) 8385-20 31

Fax. +49 (30) 8385-21 30 and +49 (30) 8385-20 30

Email dbecker@zedat.fu-berlin.de

URL <http://www.opsiconsult.com>

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