
FORCE MULTIPLIERS

THE INSTRUMENTALITIES OF IMPERIALISM

The New Imperialism, Volume 5

Edited by
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Chapter 6

HUMANITARIAN RELIEF VS. HUMANITARIAN BELIEF

Iléana Gutnick

“The most important exclusion, however, was and continues to be what development was supposed to be all about: people. Development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress’”. (Escobar, 1995, p. 44)

Famines in Africa, wars in the Middle East, and tsunamis in Japan: the world seems to have gone haywire. Are these a sign of God’s final punishment? Or are they simply reminders of the ordinary, redundant poverty or misfortune that exists because the world is just an unfair place? This uneasy mix of desperate and ambivalent rhetoric seems to characterize the main discourse of a variety of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs): no one can specifically be held accountable for how the world works, but with your money and your kindness, we can end poverty today.

However, this rhetorical skew is actually a lot more than a simple attempt to get inside people’s wallets. It actually contributes to the decontextualization of poverty, and in a context of neoliberal structural adjustment under globalization, failing to mention it is like ignoring the odds that the floor will give way because of the huge purple elephant in the room. If one truly sets out to end poverty, overlooking essential factors that have several times been pointed out seems quite odd. In this case, to purposefully omit the role of underlying structures from the public discourse conceals the fact that they actually are part of the problem. It therefore does not

seem unreasonable to assume that these organizations are driven by some kind of political agenda. But what on earth could well-intentioned, white, Western, rich and developed organizations want from the rest of the world?

This chapter will argue that humanitarian aid discourse is intentionally misleading in that it shifts the public's focus of attention toward seemingly immediate yet irrelevant ways of coping with global poverty and underdevelopment. If "lack of fertile land, war and political strife, government corruption, unfair trade policies, disease, and famine" (The Life You Can Save [TLYCS], 2014a) are the main causes of poverty, I will argue that such situations are intentionally generated by Western states in order to, as Susan George (1988, p. 5) bluntly puts it, keep the "Third World" in line. The underlying political agenda of NGOs is therefore ironically very similar to that of the powerful states that back them, that is, to impose a foreign presence in order to advance imperial political and economic interests, in the name of development. In this perspective, "humanitarianism is nothing more than a virtuous disguise for reasons of state" (Fassin, 2013, p. 275). One NGO whose discourse will be at the focus of my examination is The Life You Can Save, which describes itself as "a movement of people fighting extreme poverty" (TLYCS, 2014b), and is useful as an average example of the kind of humanitarian rhetoric typically used by NGOs seeking visibility and funding from the Western public (TLYCS, 2014c).

Helping Others

Donating to a Good Cause

The Life You Can Save is based on the creator Pete Singer's philosophy, which he calls "Effective Altruism". Effective Altruism is defined as "[combining] both the heart and the head": donating money is therefore a feel-good initiative as well as one that is reasonable and legitimate. If every Western individual donated a couple of dollars, then together we would have the financial resources to end poverty. This particular focus on Western individuals is also a big part of the rhetoric aimed at convincing potential donors. The Life You Can Save claims that "giving makes us happier," an apparent fact backed up by the mention of a certain Harvard study (TLYCS, 2014c). "Giving is tax deductible" (TLYCS, 2014c), which

means it is possible to “reduce the cost of your donation” (TLYCS, 2014c). Finally, “giving is in our nature” (TLYCS, 2014c): humans feel naturally compelled to help those who suffer, and experience guilt when they do not.

Placing the burden of ending world poverty on individuals completely obliterates donor states’ responsibility for the social consequences of their foreign aid to recipient states. As Agier (2008) puts it, humanitarian aid can be considered as the empire’s left arm. It kills with the right, and cares with the left (p. 296). So while US \$30 billion lands in Africa through foreign aid, US \$192 billion leaves the continent in the form of debt servicing, tax evasion, and multinational companies’ profit, to name a few examples (Health Poverty Action et al., 2014). Aid is typically granted by countries that benefit from Africa’s resource exploitation. If “giving makes us happier” and is a universal part of human nature, then the ambivalence generated by NGOs’ humanitarian rhetoric can be striking. Since wealthy states and international financial institutions are exploiting the “underdeveloped” world, while performing superficial altruism often in tandem with NGOs, then the moral standards of giving are not that universal after all, and for those who benefit most from Africa’s exploitation, taking is what apparently makes them happier than giving.

Neither the international financial institutions nor powerful states have managed to diminish poverty. Not only do they fail to fulfill their moral duties on an international scale, they are also unsuccessful at home, on a national level. According to the US Census Bureau (2013), 14.5% of US citizens are living in poverty (2013), a number that is higher in other studies that take into account different factors, such as rising household debt and decreased income available for services. Poverty rates for children in the US are amongst the highest in the industrialized world (American Psychological Association [APA], 2006, p. 2). On average, every adult in the US owes roughly US \$11,000 in consumer debt, excluding real estate loans (Pressman & Scott, 2009, p. 127). That figure also excludes the per capita share of public debt. Consumer debt has risen annually at a 4.1% rate over the past 20 years, while median household income has remained essentially the same (Pressman & Scott, 2009, p. 127), which has pushed more and more people below the poverty line. Those at the top 5% of the income distribution ladder have benefited from a significant increase in their incomes, while the bottom 40% has not, gradually widening the gap between the rich and the poor (APA, 2006, p. 1). Basically, while the rich get richer, the middle class and the poor

get poorer. In this context, informing the majority at the bottom of the income scale of “how powerful [their] pocket change can become when pooled together” (TLYCS, 2014c), seems quite unethical and insensitive. Placing the burden on Western individuals obliterates the state’s economic responsibility regarding the socio-economic inequalities that affect the well being of their own citizens. “You don’t have to be a millionaire to make a significant difference” (TLYCS, 2014c), is preached to people who have experienced the negative “significant difference” that has been wrought by millionaires.

Going Abroad: The White Savior

Not only is helping the needy abroad a moral obligation, it is also as easy as the click of a button, we are commonly told by humanitarian aid agencies. The most obvious way of “helping” is by donating a couple of dollars to a charity every month. But for the most adventurous of us, our moral duty feels like it needs to be fulfilled by *actually doing something*. One must travel to the troubled zone, which suggests problems lie elsewhere, and are in no way connected to the northern/western hemisphere. By assuming this is the case, humanitarian rhetoric exempts the global North from blame. It instead legitimizes and promotes non-governmental intervention, by adopting the moral principle that any privileged individual not only has the duty to help the weak, but is also competent enough to do so just because of his or her material advantage. Useful assistance is therefore depicted as “[requiring] nothing more than the presence of a Western Volunteer” (Biehn, 2014, p. 82). Assuming that any Western foreigner is equipped to understand, evaluate and act upon local issues suggests that the locals themselves are not so equipped. Locals are depicted as being unaware and incapable of assessing their own needs, and their capacity to fulfill them according to their own value- and belief-systems.

Locals are also often erased from the list of main motives for volunteers to venture abroad. The emphasis is not put on the actions that potentially help the poor, but rather on the “experience of a lifetime” that volunteering can be. As Biehn points out, the feeling of cultural immersion is often one of the promises made to volunteers by organizations (2014, p. 80). This seeming celebration of multiculturalism is furthermore constructed through the images published on NGO websites, which mostly range from smiling non-white children to sad non-white women wearing “exotic” clothing. Rather than to celebrate, these images essentialize and

ghettoize societies by stamping each and every individual with “Help me! I’m poor” on their foreheads. This representation further reproduces the same discourse offered by development theories, which portray the “Third World” using terms like “powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance” (Escobar, 1995, p. 8). The individual internalization of this rhetoric does nothing more than to reproduce at a personal level the North/South power relations that this rhetoric entails. If resourcefulness is enough to justify one’s competency, then we should be asking ourselves why locals do not have those resources. It therefore becomes fundamental to recontextualize poverty.

Saving Lives at Gunpoint: The Militarization of Humanitarian Intervention

War, sometimes justified as a humanitarian intervention, is itself one of the many justifications for humanitarian intervention: war is bloody and endangers human lives, the same lives that some NGOs claim they strive to save. In the case of intervening in a conflict zone, NGOs regularly insist that they adopt a neutral framework, meaning that they consider all civilian lives to be worthy of protection, regardless of political allegiance. In reality, the humanitarian approach is often not as impartial as it claims to be. More often than not, humanitarian aid is deployed “in a context where political and economic interests, the logics of states and agencies, and imperial and nationalist ideologies are at work” (Fassin, 2013, p. 270). The same nation-states that engage in armed intervention are those which generate the humanitarian aid. In addition, those living in countries that possess profitable resources frequently appear to be more worthy of saving than those who do not. Perhaps NGOs can find a way to argue that they cannot be everywhere at once. However, even within countries where NGOs are at work, the principle of neutrality still does not apply. It turns out life does have a cost, and that is the cost of state security. To ensure state security, it is agreed upon within international law that some human suffering is necessary and inevitable (Orford, 2010, p. 338).

Some might wonder what military violence has to do with humanitarian aid. They actually have a lot more in common than some might wish to consider. First, humanitarian and military personnel both act within a limited timeframe and extraordinary circumstances—that is to say, an “emergency” framework—which leads them to “consider their own role [as being] above the com-

mon law” (Fassin, 2013, p. 284). It is important to emphasize how similar this type of framework can be to that of colonial rule. Furthermore, as stated above, humanitarian morality is used to legitimize foreign presence, which is most often military. It is therefore not surprising to see NGO personnel and the military continue to collaborate once they are in the shared “theatre of operations”. First and maybe more obviously, humanitarian workers need protection from armed forces in order to deliver help. This means they must adhere to (and benefit from) military logistics and organization to manage sites, such as “corridors of tranquility” (Anderson, 1996, p. 343), living quarters and refugee camps (Fassin, 2013, p. 284), but also to manage which lives are to be saved, how and on what basis. If humanitarian aid and military intervention are deployed in countries that are of strategic interest to the West, it should come as no surprise that they pursue the same political objectives. In this case, analysis should focus on how foreign interest has shaped and contributed to the occupied countries’ political situation that is used to justify further occupation, and how this incapacitates locals from self-determination. Given what has been presented here, one can see the case that is made by military writers in framing NGOs as “force multipliers” (see the Introduction to this volume).

Recontextualizing Poverty

In the Name of Development

“Without stable institutions like efficient banks, a reliable police force, functioning schools and fair criminal justice systems, it is very difficult to compete on a global scale” (ILYCS, 2014c). It is no secret that development is at the heart of many NGOs’ concerns: for more than 50 years, it has been the basis of foreign action of Western institutions and considered the only way in which “the American dream of peace and abundance [can] be extended to all the peoples of the planet” (Escobar, 1995, p. 4). Seen in this light, it makes sense that developed nations would help underdeveloped nations.

The notion of development following a universal model stems from the belief that Western society and culture have evolved into ones that are better-equipped and therefore more efficient in dealing with satisfying basic needs. Apart from being evidently ethno-

centric and condescending, this interpretation assumes efficiency is of advantage to the poorest. The concept of efficiency is now embedded in Western culture: cars go faster than donkeys, and four-minute microwaveable foods are less-time consuming. The removal of time-related constraints allows for one's time to be used efficiently: "they can work, they can go to school, they can contribute to their household income, and they don't take someone else's time and capacity to work by requiring care" (ILYCS, 2014c). In this perspective, the goal of efficiency, understood as the conceptualization of time in terms of economic value (simply put time equals money), is to create workers and consumers. And technological innovation is what makes efficiency possible. Indeed, development promotes a type of progress that favors technological advancement and industrialization. Since development is praised for its practical superiority, it becomes legitimate to impose this progress onto others, supposedly for their own good. Setting the conditions in which development can thrive, subsequently becomes a priority. The cultural traits, values and political ideals that set the stage for development processes must then be exported in order to impose a framework in which it becomes advantageous and desirable for locals to (literally) clear the way for the establishing of foreign institutions. Modern technology makes the globalization of culture much easier.

The privatization of national telecommunication infrastructures in the 1970s, strongly urged by US corporations and governments, meant the US could broadcast US values, ideologies and images on a truly global scale (Mirlees, 2006, p. 199). The US ideals that are transmitted both implicitly and explicitly tend to suggest that living by "possessive individualism" and "excessive consumerism" is bound to lead to a preferable and more adequate existence (Mirlees, 2006, p. 200). US-style democracy is also extensively featured as being of superior moral nature, as it presents individuals as being free and equal under the law. However, what is claimed as a universal ideal of individual liberty also has as an effect to "[reduce] all types of people to interchangeable units of labour" (Wood, 2006, p. 11). Television, computer and mobile screens become the conveyors of a world where the US becomes a template for an avowedly beneficial global culture, and does so by exporting the means that strengthen its political and economic values (Mirlees, 2006). So much for multiculturalism.

The reaching of new audiences and therefore potential consumers becomes instrumental in laying the basis for a system that eventually "allows the systematic creation of objects, concepts and

strategies; [and] determines what can be thought and said” (Escobar, 1995, p. 40). These regulating objects, concepts and strategies are embodied by “efficient banks, a reliable police force, functioning schools and fair criminal justice systems” (TLYCS, 2014c) argued to be the basic foundations of overcoming poverty. It is to be noted that the economy, defense, education, the implementation of rule of law and the promotion of democracy are cited as NGOs’ top priorities in their fight against poverty, especially in the case of The Life You Can Save. In this sense, NGOs’ interventions on foreign territory are themselves another object that participates in the creation of a set of relations between “institutions, socioeconomic processes, forms of knowledge, [and] technological factors” (Escobar, 1995, p. 40) that form the system that creates workers and consumers. However, increased modernization comes with many increased costs, which is minimized in the discourse of NGOs such as The Life You Can Save.

External Debt: Eternal Debt

Extreme poverty as defined in NGO narratives is often explained in terms of individual daily spending. TLYCS’ Extreme Poverty Report states that 65% of the global population lives on less than US \$2 a day, implying this is not enough to meet basic necessities such as food and shelter (TLYCS, 2014d). Regardless of the merits of the implication, the report leaves out the part about “Third World” countries being heavily indebted to their Western counterparts, which is one of the reasons they are financially insecure in the first place. Although The Life You Can Save mentions “unfair trade policies” as harmful to “Third World” development, it never contextualizes them, nor does it provide a basis of action to counter them.

Whether development is implemented in order to raise “Third World” living standards to match the West’s, or whether development reflects the fact that, “Third World economies were only integrated to the global capitalist system in order to serve the Centre’s needs” (Mushkat, 1975, p. 42), might be open to debate. When one analyzes the way in which the development model actually works, there appears to be less room for debate: historically development has neglected the majority to the advantage of the few, justifying this by endorsing the “trickle-down” process” (George, 1988, p. 15), which would somehow eventually improve everyone’s living conditions by first improving the conditions of the wealthy, and as experience has taught us, fails to generate eco-

conomic growth, greater investment, or job creation. In addition, in the name of development, “Third World” countries have been now swamped in debt: the West lends money for them to develop their economies by exploiting their resources, to meet the needs of the developed centre, and to benefit the wealthy that are the first concern of trickle-down development policies.

We can summarize some of the key features of development policies and projects that should raise questions about NGO discourses that may blur the causes of poverty. First, the pattern of foreign investment in development is not one that is driven by the needs of the majority, of course, as much as it by the profit concerns of investors. Typically investors have focused on the extraction of resources that fuel Western consumption (George, 1988). In some cases development loans have been used to finance “hardly profitable and useless projects” (Guillén & Gandy, 1989, p. 37). One must also remember that the basic purpose of lending is for creditors to gain capital through (rising) interest. It therefore seems safe to assume that when a disaster such as famine is pointed out as being one of the leading causes of poverty, it is not necessarily a natural phenomenon, but rather one with a long political and economic genealogy. Loans are used to finance rapid industrialization, not diminishing rapidly growing hunger. When loans are not directed towards productive and/or income-generating activities, backlashes such as food shortages and food riots have occurred. Furthermore, because of free trade agreements, such as NAFTA’s implementation in 1994, some peasants are forced off their lands, while others are forced to change crops because they cannot compete with the prices offered by multinational corporations (Janvry et al., 1995). In 2009, fertile land made available to foreign investors amounted to 56 million hectares around the world (Oakland Institute, 2011, p. 3). Banks are involved in this global economic land coup, since they are the ones financing these corporations (George, 1988, p. 36).

Local government elites play their part as the force multipliers of global capitalism, with many receiving payments for ensuring the undisturbed establishment of multinational corporations in their territories. These elites protect themselves, hire armies, and kill. They are also guilty of transferring loan money into foreign bank accounts (George, 1988, p. 19), allowing interest rates to pile up over their citizens’ heads while they drink champagne— in 2013, Nigeria had the second fastest growing champagne consumption rate in the world (Hirsch, 2013/5/8). As Hirsch puts it, “not everyone in [a] country where 63% live on less than \$1 a day is im-

pressed with the \$50m and rising spent each year on fizz” (Hirsch, 2013/5/8). However, just as champagne bottles are usually shared, corruption is a game played by two (or ten, or hundreds), and is not always called corruption when it is structurally legitimized by international financial organizations as well as market (de)regulations.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) officially bills itself as, “an organization of 188 countries, working to foster global monetary cooperation, secure financial stability, facilitate international trade, promote high employment and sustainable economic growth, and reduce poverty around the world” (IMF, 2014). Official statements aside, the fundamental role of the IMF, which is largely organized around US interests given its dominant share of votes in the organization, is to promote trade by ensuring that debts will be repaid to creditor banks (George, 1988, p. 47). It imposes what are called structural adjustments, which administer national economies in order to “guarantee that countries will continue to have the means to pay” (George, 1988, p. 49)—in other words, the focus is on short-term debt servicing rather than ensuring the well-being of the majority. Austerity measures are supposed to increase income and reduce spending (George, 1988, p. 52) in order to save money to pay debts back quickly. The most common measures imposed and undertaken by structural adjustment programs include, “devaluation of currency, wage freezes, increased privatization, removal of tariffs and other ‘protectionist’ measures, and reduced government spending and employment” (Bradshaw, 1991, p. 322). These adjustments most often lead to reduced quality of life, severe cuts in social spending (such as food subsidies or medical care), and usually increase both unemployment and poverty (Bradshaw, 1991, p. 322). Bearing in mind “Third World” countries already lack the financial resources required to meet their citizens’ basic needs (a fact that is at the heart of NGOs’ concerns and interest), reducing their access to services in order to reduce spending is directly responsible for creating a “need” market for NGOs. Furthermore, if countries do not comply with IMF measures, they will not be deemed as “acceptable credit risks” (Bradshaw, 1991, p. 321), which means they will not be able to borrow to pay back their debts. Considering “Third World” countries often depend on new loans only to service old ones (George, 1988, p. 13), it becomes impossible even for countries that are not governed by corrupt elites to step out of the game. This would mean no more foreign cash flow (Bradshaw, 1991, p. 325), which is crucial to their economies. To better contain the threat of a popular social

backlash, the IMF imposes austerity measures on social spending, but not on military expenditures (George, 1988, p. 22).

War and Political Strife: Militarizing the “Third World”

NGOs repeatedly point to war, political strife and government corruption as being some of the main reasons of poverty. However, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult to imagine how heavily indebted “Third World” countries find the millions necessary for seemingly endless wars. The IMF has shown little interest in the issue, justifying this inattention by claiming it does not want to interfere with government sovereignty (George, 1988, p. 22).

Rather than a straightforward question of sovereignty, what is at play is a highly lucrative international arms trade. The US was responsible for 79% of the weapons sold to developing countries in 2011 (Grimmett & Kerr, 2012, p. 25). On top of owing billions in debt, “developing” countries that by definition possess limited financial resources are the main recipients of arms trade agreements (Grimmett & Kerr, 2012, p. 31). Weaponry imports have in turn functioned as “a significant contributory fact to Third World indebtedness” (Looney quoted in Dunne, 2004, p. 128). Military expenditure is yet another example of debt being used for unproductive activities: “[arms purchases] produce no wealth and, when not manufactured locally, they don’t even create jobs or inject money into the local economy. They are nothing but pure consumption” (George, 1988, p. 24). Funds allocated to military expenditure in Africa and the Middle East often take priority over those allocated to health and education (World Council of Churches, 2005 p. 15).

Repoliticizing Poverty

Despite the prevailing NGO narrative as reproduced by *The Life You Can Save*, poverty is a politically constructed phenomenon, and not just at the local level. NGOs are increasingly leading the way in popular representations of “Third World” countries in commercial media in the West; advertisements are filled with poor, powerless and passive individuals awaiting foreign help. Such an approach obscures Western states’ responsibility in creating or aggravating socioeconomic disparities. By asking for personal donations, NGOs place the burden of saving the poor on individuals, many of whom are themselves already strained by austerity measures, instead of on those who impose these measures worldwide.

This is justified in the name of development, described by Susan George as “a myth-word in whose name any destruction, and any expenditure, may be undertaken with impunity” (1988, p. 15)

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