
Reflections on humanitarianism: David Rieff's *A Bed for the Night*

ANDRAS VAILIN*

In *A Bed for the Night*¹, David Rieff² explains his frustration at the limitations and shortcomings of contemporary humanitarianism. He investigates the gap between the admirable norms of the human rights movement and the unpleasant facts of the humanitarian crises in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Afghanistan. He urges us to revise our assumptions about the reach of the human rights revolution and the workings of the international community. He concludes that, however much one might wish it otherwise, independent humanitarianism is not capable, on its own, of advancing the cause of human rights, contributing to stopping wars, or furthering social justice. Humanitarianism only makes sense as part of a larger international response to human rights crises. It is a “saving idea that cannot save”. And, for the humanitarian enterprise, the risks of collaborating in such a wider response are considerable.

Over the last fifteen years, several international human rights instruments have been signed or ratified. But there is no reason to believe that the world has changed as a result. In the words of Bertold Brecht, giving a few needy people a bed for the night does not reduce exploitation. One cannot halt a massacre with medicines or respond to ethnic cleansing with reception centres for the displaced. It is often necessary to use force to stop violations of human rights.

Rieff frequently gives in to his penchant for extreme positions. He dismisses media coverage of humanitarian crises on the grounds that it does not help people understand situations where rights violations are going on. And he wonders what relief agencies have actually accomplished for people in

* Andras Vailin is a freelance development consultant working mainly with North American and European NGOs.

1 New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002, 367 pages.

2 David Rieff is a freelance author for and a member of the Board of Directors of the Crimes of War Project.

need of “justice, mercy, bread or aid”. He believes that international law was no better respected at the end of the Bosnian war than it was at its beginning. And he argues that humanitarians remained as helpless to affect the outcome of the Rwandan tragedy at its conclusion as they had been at its inception.

For all its failings, however, Rieff believes the core assumptions of humanitarianism — sympathy for victims and antipathy for oppressors and exploiters — represent the best side of the human spirit. In the 1990s, humanitarian agencies believed they could combine altruism and philanthropy with action to defend the human rights of humanitarian victims. This meant collaborating with the political, humanitarian and sometimes military wings of powerful donor governments. While learning to work with these new partners, relief agencies lost their innocence. The donors were keen to show that generosity and altruism underlay their relationship with the rest of the world. By collaborating with humanitarian NGOs, they could claim that their actions had a humanitarian rationale.

Donors offered significant monetary inducements and logistical support to agencies that implemented programmes of political or strategic interest to them. The danger was not that humanitarianism was being used for political purposes. It was that the political ends for which it was being used were bad. In many instances, relief agencies either took the place of states that did not want to get involved in human rights crises, or unwittingly served as logisticians or doctors for some local warlord. Powerful governments were increasingly choosing to co-opt the prestige of humanitarian agencies to justify their failure to react to human rights abuses.

Rieff contrasts the neutral approach of the International Committee of the Red Cross with the self-conscious political engagement of the “Sans-Frontières” movement. He concludes that it is not possible to remain committed to the impartial alleviation of suffering while also taking policy positions to address the underlying causes of egregious human rights violations. In Afghanistan, serious commitments to both humanitarian relief and human rights could not co-exist as long as the Taliban remained in power. Humanitarianism could only alleviate. It could not save until the military intervened.

Rieff is critical of many aspects of the humanitarian enterprise *per se*. He denounces the unseemly rush to deploy, the cut-throat competition for funding, and the advertising campaigns insisting that generous donations will make the lives of victims whole again. Agency advocacy materials often attempt to transport the public to a “humanitarian tragedy-land” — a world of “wicked warlords, innocent victims and noble aid workers”. It is these images

that stick in the mind, not the political dynamic of the crises in Afghanistan, Cambodia or Biafra. There are no real individuals in the scenario, only victims, victimisers and relief workers who want to help and urgently need the means to do so. Rieff believes that the packaging of humanitarian crises in this way acts as an impediment to understanding. By basing their advocacy and fund-raising almost exclusively on needs, humanitarian agencies encourage their benefactors to believe that their principal concern should be with the suffering of populations and not the political, human rights reality underlying any particular crisis. It may be that pictures of suffering children are the best way of getting people to give money. Compassion sells. But Rieff believes the approach of most humanitarian agencies infantilises the beneficiaries of humanitarian intervention and insulates the agencies from the political consequences of their actions.

Rieff's conclusions are disappointing. He fails to mention the perceptions and actions of the victims of human rights disasters. These are the people who bear the brunt of disasters, whether or not humanitarian agencies are present. He chooses a very narrow sample of NGOs on which to base his case. And he proposes a double standard whereby he believes the promotion of human rights is possible in societies that have the means to make them realities, but not feasible in the context of societies that are too poor, too convulsed by ethnic or political strife, to do so.

He ends up contradicting himself and coming out in favour of "letting humanitarianism be humanitarianism". Whatever the compromises involved, relief agencies should attempt to save some lives, tend to victims and remind those lucky enough to have escaped misery and grief of the incalculable suffering misery and grief that billions of people feel every day. This 'charitable' approach would and does leave the poor and the weak dependent on the unpredictable support of the rich and powerful. It leaves humanitarian programmes vulnerable to the vagaries of short-term funding. It replaces concerted social, economic and political commitment and action for common welfare with isolated and often random acts of generosity. And it allows charity to mask moral and political agendas that often remain unexposed to public examination and debate. In the words of the ICRC Country Director for Rwanda, the humanitarian enterprise should continue to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist. Rieff believes that coping with a dishonourable world honourably and a cruel world with kindness is enough. In the end, one has to wonder how many victims of human rights abuses would agree with the case he makes in *A Bed for the Night*.



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