

## Chapter 11

# Universalism in Emergency Aid before and after 1970

### Ambivalences and Contradictions

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On 8 October 1965, the Twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross Movement, the world's oldest and most significant humanitarian organization, adopted seven fundamental principles.<sup>1</sup> These were meant to guide its members and inform the world at large about the ways of conceiving and organizing emergency aid. The most important principle, namely humanity, reflected the humane dedication at the core of humanitarianism and hinted at both the wideness of this generous feeling and the comprehensiveness of its consequences. While humanity may be seen as 'the one concept that humanitarianism cannot exist without' (Radice 2018: 158; see also Klose and Thulin 2016), it may also be understood as one of the emotive concretizations of a more abstract concept: universality (Feldman and Ticktin 2010: 1, 3, 7).

This concept (*universalité* in French, *Universalität* in German and *универсальность* 'universalnost' in Russian) was also officially endorsed by the Red Cross as the seventh principle, pertaining to its own structure as a global federation of equal national societies. At the same time, the Red Cross doctrine as such, including all seven principles, was regarded as universal, as a cross-cultural moral substratum with a 'lasting character [that] is perhaps a sign of its superiority over everything that happens here on earth' (Pictet 1979: 11). The Red Cross appeared therefore not only as a 'world-wide institution' but also as a supreme body that possessed 'a universal doctrine, a humanitarian basis common to all peoples' (ICRC 1965a: 569; 1965b: 574).

There was no further definition of the principle of universality at the time. Neither was there any explanation for the choice of the term, and all participants who used it during the discussions in the conference seemed to harbour no doubt about its meaning (ICRC 1965a). At no point was it compared or contrasted to linguistic variants such as universalism. The speakers, in accordance with French lexical use (and conceptual history), presumably considered universality as a reality and universalism as a doctrine (Robert 1969: 720) – without spelling out that the former can be seen as an outcome of the latter, or vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Equally noteworthy is the absence of any reference to counter-concepts, of which particularity and particularism may be the most obvious.

Such a lack of antonyms is relevant for both systematic and historical reasons. Hence, universality (and universalism) is a term that is best defined by *elenchus*, namely by stating what a phenomenon lacks to be considered universal. Humanitarianism is particular in the sense that it is a corrective in an emergency situation and therefore ideally would not be required. Moreover, the claim to universalism is easily challenged when confronted with practice (Balibar 2014 [2007]). If humanitarianism is supposed to have a universal aim of helping all people in need, it ought to be rooted in the realities it aspires to change. By definition, these realities are conditions of more or less overwhelming crisis, so humanitarian aid causes need to be selected and prioritized, that is, triaged. This applies both to medical treatment hierarchies and to the decision to – or how far to – adopt any particular aid cause (Götz, Brewis and Werther 2020; Ten Have 2014). Thus, in humanitarian efforts universal ideals become inseparably intertwined with differentiating practices (Fassin 2010).

More generally speaking, emergency aid is a set of practices, encompassing routines forged by experience and contingencies dependent on the actors and the situation. While humanitarianism aims at helping human beings in general, each individual is distinct, and each situation is in some way unique. Here again, there seems to be a contradiction in terms. Humanitarian doctrines of many organizations encompass universal aims in such a paradoxical manner, but only the International Red Cross Movement (to be renamed International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement from the 1980s) can plausibly claim to represent a universal structure. Therefore, they tend to address universality as something referring to dissemination and local embeddedness throughout the world rather than to an overarching doctrine or generalized scope of action. In these latter fields the concept of humanity has a more concrete appeal than is implied by universality or universalism, for any organization. While the notion of humanity is almost tautological as a mission statement of humanitarianism, it exonerates the latter from the

suspicion of the narrow-minded zeal inherent in any ‘ism’. This is a liability even for the term universalism, which, due to the ‘universalising rationale’ of the ism suffix as such (Kurunmäki and Marjanen 2018: 244), may be regarded as the ultimate ‘ism’.

Nonetheless, declaring the universality of Red Cross aid as a reality still poses fundamental problems, which may be concealed either deliberately or because of blinding certitudes. This in turn begs questions such as why the ambiguity was concealed, how particularism was handled, how other actors reacted and what this management reveals, both from a conceptual and from a humanitarian point of view. Due to the prominent role of the Red Cross, we take its case as an indicator of the impact of ‘universalism’ in emergency aid in general. Considering the broad scope of the proposed overview, we restrict the analysis to a period during which these issues were especially visible. Around 1970, when humanitarianism was undergoing profound changes, there was a sudden proliferation of organizations and undertakings with divergent approaches in the wake of the particularism-sensitive decolonization process – only a few years after the Red Cross Movement officially proclaimed its universality and while the Cold War continued as a context of competing universalisms.

### **The Temptations of Universalism Until the End of the 1960s**

The inclusion of universality among the seven fundamental principles in 1965 was the first occasion on which the Red Cross gave it such explicit official prominence. However, as an ambition it had always been key to the Red Cross since its foundation in 1863. The idea of universality was confirmed in 1918 and 1921, and after the Second World War when they were presented as such, it became one of the fundamental principles (Palmieri 2015).

In fact, since time immemorial, bystanders and (religious) corporations have provided emergency aid on an ad hoc basis. This was notably the case for assistance to wounded soldiers, while the ineffectiveness of such aid often contributed to true humanitarian disasters (Destexhe 1993). This insight struck Henry Dunant on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859 and incited him to propose that so-called civilized states sign an international pact in which they would agree to form neutral associations dedicated to helping wounded and sick soldiers, without regard to which camp they belonged. He believed that such help, organized at the national and international level, would be more effective than the system prevailing until then. He resented the fact that the fate of the victims depended on peculiar circumstances, such as the degree of hatred between belligerents, the existence of prior agreements, the number of doctors or the goodwill of civilians. From this point of view, the

universalization of emergency help was the best way to avoid the contingencies of particularism.

The founders of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), inspired by Dunant's ideas and idealization of universality, were eager to help any victim of any international war in the world (Hutchinson 1996; Moorehead 1998). Although their undertaking was novel, its theoretical and practical premises were not entirely original and corresponded to the contemporary way of solving crucial international issues. During the last third of the nineteenth century, the number of international conferences increased steadily – a good number of them being held in neutral Switzerland. They were supposed to manage and regulate various societal issues, from prostitution and abandoned youth to postal communication and technical standardization. This provided the context in which the first international organizations were founded, facilitating a multilateralism that seemed to offer solutions to most problems around the world (Lyons 1963; Reinalda 2009).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the belief in the necessity of international collaboration was even considerably reinforced, not least because of the globalization of conflicts. The two world wars, with their military and civilian casualties, genocide and refugees, forced governments' attention to the humanitarian field. Here again, it was apparent that human needs and suffering had to be addressed by general rules and practices. This kind of reflection was at the core of the creation of the League of (national) Red Cross Societies in 1919, which was to complement the League of Nations in the humanitarian field. It was meant to be the main and possibly even the only humanitarian structure after the First World War, aimed at playing a leading role in peace time humanitarianism, among other similar organizations such as the ICRC (a board made up exclusively of Swiss citizens), and newcomers to the field, such as the Save the Children Fund (SCF) or the American Relief Administration (ARA). The members of the ICRC perceived this attempt as sheer usurpation, based on the appropriation of the symbolic capital their institution had built up over the decades. They fiercely defied their unwanted counterparts and succeeded in remaining the principal humanitarian body until the creation of various UN humanitarian agencies after the Second World War (Herrmann 2012–2013: 13).

This conflict prompted deep reflection that put universality and universalism at centre stage. Having defeated National Socialist Germany, the leading powers worked on the hypothesis that peace would be better maintained on the condition that states were speaking to and negotiating with each other. Opposing war was not only of general concern; it was also to be solved by using general means. This is exemplified by the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, which embodies the idea that no action ‘to make peace secure had more power and a wider scope than the formulation and effective implementation of an international bill of rights’.<sup>3</sup>

This period was also a time when the ICRC was subjected to harsh criticism that was indirectly and a posteriori linked to this state of mind. Whereas most belligerents had praised the institution’s action during the hostilities, the victors – who no longer needed its help – changed their position. Western countries now criticized ICRC inaction on the massacre of European Jewish populations, the emerging symbol of ultimate human suffering. The communist states criticized its lack of initiative to help partisans and Soviet prisoners of war (POWs), who were considered as fighting for human values against inhumane ones.

These reproaches were tendentious, as the ICRC had no legal basis to alleviate the fate of Soviet POWs as the USSR had refused to sign the 1929 Geneva Convention that would have protected them. Moreover, despite their military means, the victors had shown little inclination to rescue Jewish victims during the war and even continued to display antisemitism after it. Many borders remained closed so that displaced Jews often had little choice than to go to Palestine. Blaming the ICRC allowed the critics to turn a blind eye to inhumanity more broadly (Herrmann 2018: 117).

Nonetheless, the ICRC took the accusations seriously. One of the most decisive countermeasures was to officially embrace the credo and reaffirm the term that was then so promising and popular: universality. In the mid-1950s, the jurist and future member of the governing body of the ICRC, Jean Pictet, suggested that the universalism of the Red Cross Movement should be officially proclaimed and acknowledged by everybody, not least by the national Red Cross societies that were organized along the same scheme, respected the same principles and whose actions had to be homologated by the Red Cross Conferences (Pictet 1955 [Eng. transl. 1956]: 82): ‘The very idea of universality implies identity in certain respects. The name and emblem of the Red Cross can have only one and the same meaning everywhere... For we must again emphasize here that everyone can acknowledge that ideal, whatever his views on life and man’s destiny’ (ibid. 86ff).

Pictet’s recommendation had two related effects. First, it countered the reproach that the ICRC had deliberately abandoned some categories of victims by implying that others were responsible for this failure. Second, it suggested a dominant position for the Red Cross, which claimed to be universal, contrary to other humanitarian organizations that did not (and usually could not plausibly) apply this rhetorical argument: once it had branded itself as universal, the Red Cross made its competitors appear as non-universal, and hence inferior, organizations.

## Reasons for Crafting Universality

Owing to the ICRC's humanitarian field of action and the significance of its moral capital for the continuation of its activity, political and mundane reasons for adopting universality as a doctrine were not openly discussed. They would have impaired the image of benevolent humanitarianism. Therefore, discussions about the universality of the Red Cross were subtended by other strategies of altruistic reason. Most significantly, both from a historical and ethical perspective, was the argument that human suffering is universal (Blondel et al. 1996: 2). Whereas this assertion may seem unproblematic, it presupposes that the experience of suffering is the same, whenever and wherever one lives. Yet, anthropologists have shown that the perception of pain depends on numerous factors; it varies with context, from society to society, from epoch to epoch, and from person to person (Hinton 2015: 505–506).

Second, the claim to universality emanated from the observation that war may occur at any time and in any place (ICRC 1958: 57). Again, this depends on how war is defined. The Red Cross Movement espoused a traditional understanding centred on international conflicts of opposing state armies and therefore envisioned dialogue only within the framework of the nation state. Less formalized variants of armed conflict were not taken into account, including massacres of civilians, genocide (defined as a crime after the Second World War), violent fights involving non-official combatants (as seen during the Second World War) and most internal hostilities. Moreover, the leaders of the ICRC obviously did not consider that their neutral homeland might ever become a belligerent country. Thus, they revealed a biased understanding of universality: it was limited and did not necessarily include themselves.

The third point shows that such exceptionalism, particularly of themselves, was not entirely intentional. Both the founders of the Red Cross and their twentieth-century heirs reckoned that it was their task to alleviate universal suffering. This self-assigned mission was profoundly rooted in religious belief, as most religions value dedication to one's fellow human in need. Henry Dunant and his co-founders belonged to a specific branch of Calvinist Protestantism, the *Awakening* (*le Réveil*, see Warner 2013). This movement pleads for an intimate private relationship with God and professes that each individual has a moral duty and sacred responsibility to do good. Even in the mid-twentieth century, most leaders of the Red Cross perpetuated this belief and acted by virtue of their Christian Messianic ideal. In this framework, humanitarianism was triggered by an ambiguous mix of (nonexclusive) superiority complex and a wish for universality.

Finally, there was the widely shared conviction among nineteenth-century political elites that a universal means to regulate war, human suffering and the whole planet already existed, namely international law. This confidence was also rooted in the ICRC's history and *raison d'être*. The institution was created at a time when many Western intellectuals aspired to regulate and manage the contacts between states through a body of law, respected by all its signatories. Even this idea might be called Messianic as it aimed at unifying so-called civilized countries and inciting others to join them to forge a 'civilized world'. On these premises, the Red Cross contributed to the elaboration of international humanitarian law (Quataert 2014). Between 1864 and 1949, it decisively participated in drafting the four Geneva Conventions, meant to protect an increasing number of victims and categories of victims. At first, this body of law protected only wounded or sick soldiers, but by 1929 it also addressed prisoners of war and finally, as of 1949, it included civilians.

### Challenges after the Second World War

In the years between 1949 and 1965, when universality was proclaimed as a guiding principle of the Red Cross, the world changed considerably. Not only did the Cold War unfold, but it was echoed and reinforced by the dynamics of decolonization. These developments thwarted the smooth resolution of tensions with the Eastern bloc, for which the ICRC had hoped; they even worsened its position in international relations, with marked consequences for the claim to universality.

The liberation wars that started after the Second World War profoundly challenged the idea of humanitarian universality, which was tied to the recognized sovereignty that was still concentrated in Europe. International humanitarian law, even as it had recently been improved and extended, was ill adapted to anticolonial uprisings. This body of law was still principally designed to regulate classic state-to-state armed conflicts, and the humanitarians' only official interlocutors remained the governments. Therefore, emergency aid during the decolonization wars depended on the goodwill of the European empires – on an issue in which they were inclined to display none. In its official communications, the ICRC (e.g. 1961: 17) tended to downplay the problem by presenting it as merely temporary impediments.

Moreover, the very rationale of decolonization proved that the goal was difficult to reach as such, because of the tenacious persistence of irreducible particularisms. Initially, the colonial powers considered these armed conflicts as mere internal problems that confronted legally constituted armies with insurgent groups. They intended to manage these situations without

interference of humanitarian organizations that might prolong the uprising and give it publicity, which, in turn, might spread revolutionary 'ideas' among neighbouring peoples. For some time, the ICRC seemed to share the imperial point of view and remained passive, considering these issues as temporary difficulties. As the number and the duration of armed conflicts for independence increased, the Red Cross considered taking serious action. However, it soon discovered that it lacked effective tools to help the victims of this type of war (Branche 1999).

In addition, the organizational principle that had allowed the Red Cross to intervene in internal conflicts until then, namely the ramification into national societies, proved ineffective. This shortcoming was not totally novel: during the Second World War, the Deutsches Rotes Kreuz had diligently served the National Socialists and thereby demonstrated that the existence of national societies was not always sufficient to cope with particularities (Merkenich and Morgenbrod 2008). Moreover, the international humanitarian law promoted by the ICRC based on the principle that *Pacta sunt servanda* among 'civilized states' – and hence assuming that the signatory states would honour their commitments – proved ineffective in totalitarian states. What was new, however, was that such an instrumentalization of the Red Cross machinery did not only occur under authoritarian regimes but in democracies as well. Hence, despite claiming universality, the Red Cross failed to reach all persons in all countries, especially outside Europe.

The end of anticolonial wars did not put an end to the refutation of universalism. In some countries the ICRC faced peculiarities it had not imagined until then. It came across civilizations, for instance in Kenya and in Somalia, in which 'war' was a common and accepted ritual. There, 'low average' suffering was not only admitted but even desired. The populations concerned had no intention of stopping their culturally embedded feuds just to please a Western organization, however disturbed the latter was (Palmieri 2003).

The leaders of the ICRC were aware of the difficulties, to which the Eastern bloc added a second dividing line, be it through the Soviet societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, through the national societies of the countries included in the Warsaw Pact, or through the (sometimes) independently acting Yugoslav society. Even with the 'thaw' following the death of Stalin in 1953, communist criticism of the International Red Cross continued. Somewhat counterintuitively, USSR animosity mostly stemmed from a similarity in values and objectives. Like the Red Cross, the Soviet regime claimed that its ultimate goal was peace. However, the Eastern bloc did not regard international humanitarian law as sufficient to oppose war and, more generally, regarded the Red Cross approach to armed conflict



and human suffering as bourgeois and merely palliative. In their opinion, the ICRC was too removed from the wider realities of war and provided insufficient remedies to a systemic problem.

Despite this fundamental disagreement, the Eastern bloc did not question the universality of the Red Cross Movement and even admitted that ‘the humane purpose of the Red Cross Society commands respect throughout the world’ (*Izvestiya*, 18 June 1963: 4). Irrespective of how sincere this concession might have been, it provided the socialist states with an efficient rhetorical tool. At the International Red Cross Conference in Vienna, in 1965, they deplored the fact that most capitalist countries did not respect the fundamental principle of universality, as they had not invited the Red Cross Society of Communist China (ICRC and LRC 1965: 49, 77, *passim*). By presenting themselves as guardians of Red Cross universality, they gained a moral advantage and used it to promote what they suggested was the true universal goal of humanitarianism, namely peace. Under this pressure, in 1969 and in 1975, the ICRC participated in a number of East–West conferences, but without changing either methods or its universalist objectives (Herrmann 2019).

The reactions of both the Eastern bloc and the Red Cross are telling. The USSR and its allies challenged not the notion of universality as such, but the kind of universality the Red Cross represented. They were convinced that socialist ways of internationalism and ultimately communist universality had precedence over any alternative (see also Chapter 4). This not only illustrates that there may not be any true universality in humanitarianism, but even shows that the claim to universality may serve as a rhetorical move that imposes a specific universality. Thus, the suggestion that something is universal, or that a (humanitarian) reality has a general quality, can never be more than a claim to universality. It is a doctrine, rather than an observation, as the ICRC itself acknowledged. Whereas the decolonization wars challenged the universality of the Red Cross as they revealed its particularism, the Cold War had a similar effect, but on the basis of an allegedly superior universalism. In this context, it is intriguing how fiercely the ICRC stuck to its claims.

## The Dialectics of Universalism and Particularism Since the 1970s

In the mid-1960s, when the Red Cross Movement enshrined universality as one of its fundamental principles, drawing on a centennial tradition, Western societies began to embark on a trajectory that left the universalism of the twentieth century behind. The 1970s saw a move towards post-material,

increasingly individualistic values, post-Fordist or neoliberal economics and the emergence of a postmodern and narcissistic culture. The growing endorsement of reality as a fragmented site of contention might even be due to lessons learned from the twentieth century's wrecked totalitarian projects, implying that 'today no cause can be universalized' (Finkelkraut 2000: 97). In humanitarian studies these trends are encapsulated in the figure of the ironic spectator and the humanitarian so-called NGO that struggles to 'maintain consumer [i.e. donor] loyalty under conditions of compassion fatigue' and frequently submits to the vested interests of a facilitating government (Chouliaraki 2013: 52, 49).

While the discretionary reality of aid entailed by these prototypes was far from new, a striking change occurred in the reference and scaling of humanitarianism. Concrete relief efforts had traditionally been framed as expressions of a universal commitment to humanity at large, despite the always more or less selective background of donors and recipients. In the course of the twentieth century, aid causes had been deliberated extensively in various societal contexts, the experience and gratitude of aid beneficiaries had been valued and the circle of compassion had expanded greatly beyond Europe and the North Atlantic (Götz, Brewis and Werther 2020). By the end of the 1960s, a situated and utilitarian way of expressing solidarity began to take hold that was more unequivocal in its self-referential aspiration and salvation than theretofore. The growing frankness about the motives of aid, including assumed win-win outcomes of apparently altruistic behaviour, accompanied the loss of a transcending universal narrative suited to highlighting the entitlement claims raised by those suffering from disaster. Thus, there was a marked departure from the ideals of a mass society and its generalizing models and solutions. The latter had included global teleologies such as modernization theory, development optimism and the assumption that capitalism and communism would eventually converge. Major humanitarian efforts during and after the First World War, such as Herbert Hoover's Commission for Relief in Belgium or the ARA (both of which collaborated with the American Red Cross), had maintained spatially and temporarily limited objectives. However, like the SCF's focus on 'enemy children' at the time, ARA relief to a hostile, famine-ridden Soviet Russia demonstrated a universal zeal. SCF also learned that isolated initiatives for children were not always feasible and therefore coordinated its work with food programmes for adults funded by other organizations. After the Second World War, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration supported Jewish refugees on the assumption of universal suffering, ignoring the particularity of antisemitism. The Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (CARE) became a permanent multi-purpose organization that soon changed

its full name to Cooperative for American Remittances to Everywhere. The conceptual shift from Europe to ‘everywhere’ reflected the shouldering of global responsibility by a pseudo-continental, but essentially national humanitarian enterprise (Wieters 2017: 63).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Oxfam, initially a local committee tasked with alleviating the Greek famine during the Second World War, rapidly evolved into a transnational agency with worldwide activities (Black 1992). However, while CARE, Oxfam and other organizations became globally engaged and adopted doctrines of universal scope, they rarely used the terms universality or universalism and did not, like the Red Cross, draw on a structure of national branches across the world.

Organizations such as the Red Cross, Oxfam and CARE continue to pursue their at least implicitly universal claims, further accentuated by the increased internationalization of the 1970s and the expansion of the humanitarian field in the wake of vanishing Cold War blockades in the 1990s (Sluga 2013; Paulmann 2013). However, this trend of governments outsourcing official functions and degrading aid agencies to the status of ‘force multipliers’ restricted the latter’s latitude and vision. Compared to earlier times, fundraising drives increasingly emphasized the role of relief providers and disregarded the causes of the need for aid. Brand maintenance and celebrity profiling became crucial elements of fundraising, whereas the gratitude of aid recipients – which was important to humanitarian donors of earlier times – has lost significance in parallel with an increasing distance from the beneficiaries.

This development has reinforced the overall tendency for circles of beneficiaries to widen over time, as in the Western popular engagement for the secessionist Eastern Region (Biafra) against the Federal Military Government of Nigeria at the end of the 1960s (Götz forthcoming) or for victims of famine in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s. However, what emerged could be called a ‘thin universalism’, dependent on contingencies of mobilization, in which the beneficiaries of aid mattered less to the donors and had a more limited agency than in earlier efforts targeted at culturally closer groups of people (Götz, Brewis and Werther 2020). The little-discussed example of famine in Yemen 2018–2019, qualified by UN officials as rapidly becoming the worst in living memory (UN and Partners 2019), shows how muted an international response to a humanitarian disaster can be when notions of religious and ethnic strife go along with an understanding that the support of one party by the US president and the military intervention of powerful neighbours will inhibit impartial humanitarian action. The sex scandals practically all humanitarian agencies faced after the 2018 revelation of abuses of Oxfam representatives in the wake of the Haiti earthquake signify another type of particularistic aberration (Charity Commission 2019).

## Universality as Unlimited Particularity

The early 1970s proved to be a watershed, with far-reaching consequences for the Red Cross, the humanitarian sector's semi-official flagship organization whose fundamental principles remain a benchmark of humanitarian action. The Biafran War (1967–1970) was a postcolonial conflict; the federal government of Nigeria's policy was to maintain it as a domestic internal conflict that would not be negotiated at the international level, whereas the ultimately unsuccessful Biafran leadership skilfully rallied public opinion across the world to its own separatist cause. Conditions in Biafra became quasi-universal because they were on display as the first televised famine, but also through mobilizing slogans such as “A” as in Auschwitz, “B” as in Biafra’ (Heerten 2015). The relation of these sites of mass destruction appeared universal in the sense of them both being manifestations of genocide and the ‘infinitely particular’ (Kouchner 1991: 45). The problem, that famine conditions in Biafra were largely self-inflicted and deliberately exploited to discredit the military enemy, was not widely understood at the time.

The Red Cross as a whole stuck to its traditional neutrality, avoiding alienation of the recognized government on which it depended to access the larger conflict area. Most of its activity therefore benefitted areas controlled by Nigerian forces, though this permitted some relief to be given to the insurgent province. At the same time, the flood of horrifying images from Biafra and their personal experiences on the ground made several Red Cross representatives uncomfortable with the cautious manoeuvring of their organization. Staff from the French Red Cross formed the *Comité de lutte contre le génocide au Biafra*, and although their empathy for this abortive nation was initially voiced and appreciated within a polyphonic Red Cross discourse, this group was the nucleus of what became a defecting organization from the Red Cross: *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders, MSF; Desgrandchamps 2011).

The French doctors inaugurated a new style of humanitarianism in contrast to the lowkey and supposedly confidential approach of the Red Cross. By means of a strategic use of media, the organization of protest marches and especially an effective rhetoric renouncing silence, they made Biafra a symbol resembling ‘a second Solferino’ (Finkielkraut 2000: 84). When MSF was formally founded in 1971 they answered the call for ‘a new Dunant’ (Davey 2015: 35–36) and their choice of name was programmatic. ‘Without borders’ signalled a ‘distinctly universal ambition’ (Redfield 2013: 1) that departed from the status quo of a world seen as a composite of nation states. Within a few years the organization also came to challenge the traditional understanding of humanitarian neutrality and to champion advocacy

(*témoignage*) on behalf of sufferers, including denunciation of human rights abuses by governments. This emphasis on engagement and transgression of the governmentality of the Red Cross agency expanded the scope of humanitarian action. The irony was that the foundational moment of MSF was flawed as the universal cause contemporaries saw in Biafra – despite reasons for discontent with the federal government of Nigeria – in hindsight appears as an idiosyncratic crisis that had been manufactured by cynical secessionist exploiters of aid (Barnett 2011: 134–35).

### Continuities and Ruptures: MSF Universalism and Beyond

The Red Cross Movement had been torn apart over the shortcomings of neutrality and the existing system of sovereign states as gauges and placeholders for universality. Despite this schism, not only did the principle of universalism survive unscathed, but even neutrality and statism continued to be held in high esteem. Hence, it was difficult to distinguish the concise charter that MSF adopted in 1971 from the doctrines of the Red Cross. It included defensive statements framing MSF as an apolitical organization with the sole object of providing humanitarian assistance and an article that reconciled neutrality and universalism:

Operating on a strictly neutral and independent basis, refraining from interference in internal affairs of state, governments and parties in the areas where they are called to serve, the members of Médecins Sans Frontières demand, in the name of the association's universal mission [*vocation universelle*], full and unhindered freedom in the exercise of its medical functions. (Binet and Saulnier 2019: 24)

The fact that the MSF charter was framed in such conventional terms reflects the foundational alliance of Biafra activists with more established groups alongside a newcomer's (and perceived 'medical hippie's') quest for respectability (Redfield 2013: 57). At the same time, it shows that action preceded conceptual change, both in a temporal sense and as a perceived priority over formal codification.

While the baseline of the 1971 charter was the submission to established patterns of international affairs, the essence of *sans-frontiérisme* and the recognition of the paradox that parties formed significant elements of the universal opened a back door to circumnavigate national sovereignty. As the structure of this order was in flux until the mid-1970s (and again in the 1990s), such an understanding was sensitive to shifting realities on the ground. It subtly challenged the working hypothesis of the Red Cross,

namely that the universal was sufficiently approximated as an aggregate of official totalities. The MSF became more discriminating, more considered and more boldly involved in shaping the particular realities that had a bearing on the universal at a given point in time. By the mid-1970s, the organization began to build on aspects of the Biafra legacy of witnessing and speaking out, denouncing governments if need be, which eventually became its trademark, alongside the transgression of borders and media spectacle. This included the strident withdrawal from aid projects such as in Ethiopia in 1986 or later in Congo and North Korea (Weissman 2011; Binet and Saulnier 2019: 27; Vallaëys 2004: 189), but also from a global event like the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Since the late 1970s, MSF has conducted clandestine missions without approval of the government in charge, drawing conflicts that were difficult to address otherwise into the humanitarian realm (Tanguy 1999: 239). While all this can be interpreted as a universal approach that served principles higher than that of consensus, it was also akin to the ICRC's 'Western' and 'Northern' bias and its troubled relationship with the communist bloc and the global South during the Cold War.

When they redrafted their charter in 1989 to its current form (adopted in 1991), MSF abandoned the principles of confidentiality and non-intervention, although they were still cautious to stipulate a document that would function as a 'business card' vis-à-vis authorities and not complicate their access to humanitarian calamities. Key conceptual moves were MSF's claims to act in 'the name of universal medical ethics' ('au nom de l'éthique médicale universelle') and of anyone's 'right to humanitarian assistance' (Binet and Saulnier 2019: 145). Although different from the Red Cross in style and approach, MSF has nevertheless been seen as 'defending the great timeless principles that inspired Dunant, the naive universalism of the organization's moral code' (Finkielkraut 2000: 86–87).

MSF permeated borders even within its professional field. In the early 1970s, when the newly founded organization did not yet command the means to run its own programmes, it 'functioned like a placement agency' that sent volunteers abroad through other organizations, including the Red Cross and SCF (Redfield 2013: 57; see also Binet and Saulnier 2019: 24). Such permeability exemplifies an overall compatibility and division of labour within the humanitarian sector that transcends the quarrels over different approaches, the coexistence of particular interpretations of universalism and the assumption of specific humanitarian missions. It can partly be explained by the difference between pragmatic field work and headquarters dogmatism: despite the latter's claims to universality, practitioners may have a greater inclination towards universalism than those who govern them.

Coordination has been an issue throughout the twentieth century and the humanitarian sector has attributed increased significance to it after failures in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In this sense, the overworked concept of a worldwide ‘NGO community’ had and continues to have some bearing as an overarching ideal. What is more, over the past decades MSF and the Red Cross have become close collaborators again and their agendas have reconverged (Brauman 2012: 1533–34).

Nonetheless, MSF itself soon split, in 1979, over the pursuance of a more charismatic or bureaucratic line of action. Former frontman Bernard Kouchner left MSF and founded the more emphatically political *Médecins du Monde* (Doctors of the World, MDM). His perspective, recognizing the universality of conflict and disequilibrium rather than that of harmony and countering it with a minimal universalism of sorts based on response to suffering, remained very much in line with that of MSF (Kouchner 1986: 13–16). In addition to the organizational breakup, throughout the 1980s the relationships among national MSF sections were highly conflictual, including legal battles concerning the ownership of the movement (Redfield 2013: 60–63). The fact that an organization that claimed to transcend borders organized itself in national branches with particular profiles and responsibilities was a contradiction in terms (Pallister-Wilkins 2019: 148). Moreover, the term ‘French doctors’ has become a brand name for MSF and MDM at large.

More generally, the 1970s saw a marked proliferation of humanitarian organizations, each with its own specific background and profile (O’Sullivan 2014). By the 1980s, the rise of identity politics and the recognition of a fragmented reality came to the fore in an official redescription of the Red Cross system as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – a move designed to accommodate major particularities under their universal umbrella. In 2005, a third official symbol was added (but not included in the name): the Red Crystal. This ultimately neutral, perhaps genuinely universal, symbol comes at the price of a reduction in meaning for large audiences and is henceforth seldom used (Bugnion 2007).

Apparently, MSF was an eminently secular organization, and some observers stress this legacy (Redfield 2013). Others suggest that MSF rather merged a secular leftist tradition of humanitarianism with a Catholic one, thereby developing ‘a new universalism that transcends the right–left divide’ (but is also distinctly French; see Taithe 2004: 147). Still others see it as an eschatologically oriented ‘parareligion’ that has successfully propagated its credo and myth by wrestling with the ICRC as Luther or Calvin once did with the Catholic Church, while it continues to stand aloof of other humanitarian organizations in the manner of a sect (Benthall 2008).

Be this as it may, humanitarian engagement in the last decades of the twentieth century was far from a predominantly secular – and in this sense supposedly universal – matter. Rather, missionaries and churches remained crucial intermediaries, for example in mobilizing public opinion in the global north for Biafra (with its Christian population; see Omaka 2016; Chapter 8). Moreover, many new aid agencies still had religious backgrounds. The most prominent example that emerged from solidarity with Biafra was the Irish organization Africa Concern, which after a few years changed its name into Concern Worldwide (O’Sullivan 2012; thereby resembling the universalization of CARE two decades earlier).

By 1977, the Geneva Conventions were extended with two additional protocols, improving the protection of victims of international armed conflicts and introducing detailed rules for civil war. Thus, endorsed by most nation states in the world, in the 1970s the ICRC began to chart domestic territory. According to the ICRC, these amendments ‘were adopted ... to make international humanitarian law more complete and more universal’ (and to adapt it better to the demands of modern conflicts) and created an opportunity for newly independent countries to contribute to developing international humanitarian law (ICRC 2009). Nonetheless, the form of protocols was chosen because the ICRC anticipated that governments around the world might accept a lowkey format more easily than additional conventions. While this strategy may have been successful, the presumption of a lack of universal appeal was confirmed by the subsequent development. Although the protocols have been ratified by the vast majority of states, they have not achieved the same universal outreach as the four Geneva Conventions. The US and a compact belt of South Asian countries stretching from Turkey to Papua New Guinea remain outside the orbit of the protocols – suggesting the existence of separate ‘Asian’ values (ICRC 2018).

## **Conclusion: Stubborn Conceptual and Historical Contradictions**

From the founding of the Red Cross, universal principles have dominated the self-understanding of humanitarian organizations. The opposite – partiality – is widely considered to be incommensurable with modern humanitarian aid, and practical work with specific groups tends to be justified by arguing that their disadvantaged position defies the general standards of humanity. Hence, universality as a maxim, universalism as a practice and universal as an attribute all remain key concepts. The growth and ramifications of the humanitarian sector, illustrated by the rise of MSF in the past half-century, corroborate this observation in a paradoxical manner.



However, they also highlight the contradictions inherent in the universal claims of humanitarianism.

Despite its spread across the globe, the Red Cross has faced major challenges to its proclaimed universality, which have not led it either to reconsider the principle or to change its self-understanding. The organization's conceptual rigidity when encountering new conjunctures and other civilizations reflects its religious and moral European heritage and postcolonial leanings. Moreover, it was characterized by intrinsic anticommunism: Eastern bloc arguments remained alien to the Red Cross, which promoted discretionary humanitarianism rather than socialism. Furthermore, its difficulties with legislation proved that its universality was a goal rather than a baseline. More broadly, the Red Cross perceived particularism as a backward orientation that its altruistic universality bypassed in order to improve emergency aid.

Ultimately, what made the ICRC slightly reconsider its view on universalism was not any of the elements typical of the Cold War, such as communism, anticolonialism or the evidence of legal shortcomings. It was the rivalry with new humanitarian organizations, which either advocated special interests or, like MSF, made alternative claims to universality, thus challenging the ICRC's conceptual prerogative. This tension between variations on the concept of universalism came to the fore around 1970 in a context of social transformation and cultural change (see also Chapters 8, 9 and 12). The defection of former colleagues in the 1970s and their founding of MSF, with its propagation of a border-transcending universalism and departure from the old consensus-seeking approach, was a major blow to the universal ambition of the Red Cross.

In competition with the Red Cross, MSF even assumed the role of mouthpiece for the humanitarian sector as a whole – and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its 'pioneering humanitarian work'. James Orbinski, in his 1999 Nobel lecture on behalf of MSF, declared that 'humanitarian action is by definition universal, or it is not' (Binet and Saulnier 2019: 199). This proposition tied humanitarian efforts and universalism intimately together. As we have shown, this was the phrasing of an ideal, rather than an account of actual practice. MSF's claim to universality disregards several persistent contradictions that haunt the humanitarian sector as a whole.

There is a tension between humanitarianism and universality as, of necessity, any organization aiming at helping victims has a specific social basis and historically anchored reasons to be engaged (see also Lidén 2020). Contrary to what most humanitarians believe, these reasons are only partially universal; transcending these particular contexts is always difficult. This points to the ontological factor that humanitarian aid is generally provided by

those who are not in need of it, because they are outsiders to the problem they come to mitigate or solve. They help by virtue of specific interests or principles. The latter are, by definition, non-particular and tend to be considered universal. Finally, the tensions between humanitarianism and universalism reveal contradictions pertaining to humanitarianism as such. On the one hand humanitarianism, which is supposed to help people and to be triggered by human dedication and a wish to do good, is the result of discrimination (triage). On the other, given the legitimacy conveyed by the claim to universality, any speech-act involving the ‘universal’ entails a clear dimension of domination and power. From this conceptual perspective, the permanence of humanitarians’ claims to universality stems not only from their desire to be humane towards humanity, but also from the fact that they too belong to the human race – and may be all too human.

Thus, universalism is a hegemonic concept. It is mainly rooted in European efforts to transcend the nation state and reveals the internal contradictions of humanitarian organizations and of the world that needs them. Based on European and North Atlantic situatedness and bias, the concept of universality is used as an instrument of power – and might also be challenged. In fact, any universalism not only clashes with various particularisms, but also with competing universalisms based on deviating presumptions about what could constitute benchmark values. Ultimately, the inevitable entrapment of any human body and practice in particular circumstances makes the European dream of universalism and universality an illusion.

While late modernity in Europe and elsewhere is characterized by growing individualism and the decline of grand narratives, this is happening in an increasingly interconnected world. As we showed in this chapter for the Red Cross Movement and other organizations such as MSF, the humanitarian sector is exposed to both tendencies and has undergone a major transformation in the half-century since the Biafran War. Despite increasing fragmentation and a consideration of the different backgrounds of aid agents, however, the conceptual map of humanitarianism has remained remarkably stable.<sup>5</sup> European notions of universality guided the work of the Red Cross Movement from the beginning and – one hundred years after its inauguration – were codified as fundamental global principles. Ironically, this was done when the phantasmagoria of universalism became increasingly apparent, when the Red Cross Movement was about to split and a surge of new organizations shaped a myriad of new aid demands. Nevertheless, the concept of universalism as such survived in the humanitarian sector. However partial the realization of emergency aid may have been, its main rationale was considered and presented as universal, or at least universalistic.

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## Notes

1. These principles are: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.
2. '[T]he Red Cross must extend to all men, in all countries ... In doing this, the principle will take on its full meaning, that of universalism' (Pictet 1979: 87, 89).
3. Archive of the United Nations, SOA 317/1/01(1), C: Draft for a speech to be presented by Charles Malik at the plenary session of the General Assembly, written by Edward Lawson, November 1948, f°2. This affirmation, formulated within the framework of the UN, reflects a general state of mind and, as such, can be generalized.
4. A more balanced universalization, at least nominally, was undertaken in 1993, when the organization was renamed Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere.
5. For the general tension between the limited normative validity of human agency and the unlimited aspiration of meaning in universalisms, see also Albrecht (2019: 41).

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