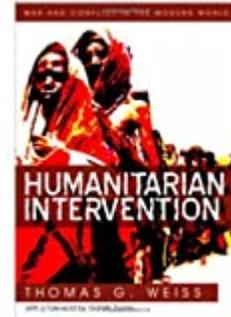


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Thomas G. Weiss.** *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. 176 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-4021-1; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-4022-8.



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## New Wars, New Humanitarianism, and New Ideas

Thomas G. Weiss's *Humanitarian Intervention* is a concise, eloquent discussion of humanitarian intervention set in the complexities of contemporary world politics. Overall, it is best described as a very accessible overview of changing human need, norms of world politics, roles of international organizations, and state sovereignty. The first three chapters are rather general and suitable for a non-academic or undergraduate audience. At the same time, this clarity and accessibility does not detract from the sophisticated story Professor Weiss tells. Here Weiss explores the bedrock of sovereignty and the Westphalian order as it conflicts with growing norms of humanitarian engagement. The author provides a cogent discussion of the anarchical international system that is grappling with efforts toward political order and human security.

Although there is no theoretical framework that guides the discussion, Weiss introduces several continuums throughout the book. In this manner, we see how within the many components that influence military intervention to protect people, there are several dynamics involved. One includes a range of level of military com-

mitment; here the author addresses the spectrum of military engagement that varies from the presence of lightly armed peacekeeping to NATO's aerial bombing campaign in Kosovo. Weiss insightfully places sovereignty and state consent on a continuum as well and explains how some states have more sovereignty than others. Finally, state "consent" is also fluid, as some states have no ability to provide consent (Somalia) and others do so under duress. Moreover, in situations where the state is controlled by the perpetrators of the violations of human rights, obtaining consent is impossible. In each case, humanitarian need may necessitate the infringement on sovereignty, particularly in light of an evolving normative context that established an obligation to protect human rights. Thus, Weiss's sophisticated conceptualizations allow for a more dynamic understanding of recent developments in humanitarian intervention.

Weiss provides a valuable historical context as his analysis as well. Unlike so many others, he reminds us that the history of humanitarian intervention does not begin with Somalia. Instead, it begins with the creation of the state system and legal parameters of sovereignty

and which collide with the parallel developments of human rights and emerging norm of state Responsibility to Protect (R2P). It is the latter development where Weiss offers the most contribution to the current literature. There are essentially three subjects that he follows: new wars/demands, new ideas/norms, and new humanitarian interventions/policies.

The author finds significant changes in the international operational context. He explains that warfare has changed dramatically and identifies these “new wars” as “internal armed conflicts waged primarily by nonstate actors who subsist on illicit and parasitic economic behavior, use small arms and other low-technology hardware, and prey upon civilians, including aid workers and journalists” (p. 72). The new wars are leading to an increased demand for humanitarian interventions and their structure increasingly renders traditional peacekeeping ineffective. These new challenges include the fact the war no longer corresponds with state borders, the rise of nonstate actors (both benign and violent), the illegal financing of war, and increasing trends that make civilians the primary victims of war. He describes “unconventional political units with dramatic security implications” (p. 67). In addition, he claims that the economic consequences and financing of these new wars are on one hand costly to societies, yet beneficial to a select few individuals and corporations. Therefore, in many cases, “new war” is actually profitable.

Weiss then examines the last fifteen years in terms of successive failures of humanitarian interventions (i.e., Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia) and the collective view that “there must be a better way to assist and protect people.” Weiss invokes Srebrenica, where thousands were killed in the very presence of UN peacekeepers and the 800,000 ghosts of Rwanda. These failures and others forced the relief community to realize that good intentions did not always produce good outcomes. Weiss finds that “the collective learning curve has been especially steep” (p. 79). Again he writes that “even the best efforts were producing unexpected but pernicious results” (p. 77). Therefore, we are learning that when dealing with these “new wars,” the bedrocks of traditional peacekeeping (consent, impartiality, and neutrality) are no longer functional or feasible.

Thus, within the relief community, the approach has changed radically and now is best described as “new humanitarianism.” This transformation is identified by a politicization of the relief process as “the system had to depart from the interstate logic that had framed its exist-

ence” (p. 80). Weiss touches on the very delicate issue of aid agencies that work with and may even embolden spoilers. Military engagement—with or without state consent—is often required. Where mandates were once limited and neutrality strictly upheld, we now find a willingness to work with combatants. His discussion continually meanders into the precarious question of whether military force may actually do more harm than good.

Under the umbrella of “new humanitarianism” Weiss points out that even working within the UN framework and those of other International Governmental Organizations (IGOs) can impede relief efforts, as IGOs are rule-bound to their charters and restrained by sovereignty commitments. In addition, aid agencies are attempting to distance themselves from the purse strings of government funding so that they may maneuver around the binding structures of sovereignty. Here Weiss explains that the aid relief community has to carve out humanitarian space despite war zones, impediments from local authorities, and great-power apathy. “New humanitarianism” is also characterized by a shift from short-term and temporary relief operations to systemic and root-cause oriented interventions. This shift brings relief agencies into the business of poverty reduction, establishing rule of law, and spreading democracy and human rights. Thus, missions are becoming more complicated and the likelihood of success is diminishing.

In his “new ideas” chapter, Weiss lays out the progression from intellectual roots to the R2P—where the intrusion into a state for the protection of human rights is becoming an international norm. Here we find an in-depth analysis of the intellectual foundations of Kofi Annan’s “two sovereignties” and the profound changes brought on through his emphasis on human rights and its codification in the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty and the 2005 World Summit. This section traces the tug of war between states, legal provisions, and human demands and norms. The final chapter appeals more to the academic, as it reviews the literature and legal progression with specific focus on internally displaced peoples. Weiss artfully lays out how individuals and ideas matter, and can actually shape normative contexts and legal parameters.

Despite the legal and normative progress, the outlook for humanitarian intervention is not good. Weiss finds a general watering down of R2P as “The [UN] members had apparently forgotten—or, as is the custom, chose to ignore—that the essential element of R2P is the international responsibility to act with or without the approval

of the host country” (p. 56). He asks, “Are we in the midst of a normative revolution and a period of bullishness toward rescuing strangers?” (p. 52). He claims there has been a “collective yawn” (p. 54) since 2003 in terms of humanitarian engagement (particularly in terms of Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo). The overall picture he paints is of normative progress, practical lag, and political backlash. Weiss informs us that the political will associated with the “new world order” has dwindled and the responses to events of 9/11 have detracted from attempts to end widespread human suffering and violations of human rights. Weiss even claims that the sun has set on humanitarian intervention due to the “obsessions with Afghanistan and Iraq” and argues that U.S. and British involvements in these areas and the *ex post facto* justification of those involvements based on R2P has damaged the nascent norm. These events serve to undermine humanitarian interventions, as target states are more likely to view (or at least engage the rhetoric) humanitarian intervention as yet another hegemonic crusade. He is further dismayed by the waning influence of

the United Nations, emboldened spoilers, and increasing international economic interests in maintaining the “new wars.”

The book serves as a sharp synopsis of world politics as viewed through the lens of humanitarian intervention, that is accessible to a general audience. The overall clarity of the book is punctuated with erudite analysis. Here, the discussion of rhetoric and framing of the term “humanitarian” to describe the use of military force presents one example. If one is looking for a case study approach to the specific legal or political attributes of recent interventions, it is not here. Moreover, if one hopes to gain an understanding of the actions on the ground and interagency politics, the book does not provide this perspective. In the end, Weiss leaves the reader with a profound sense of an increasing degree of difficulty, of growing ambitions, human need, and pessimism. Overall, the book provides an elegant overview of the interplay between sovereignty of states and sovereignty of people, as well as international legal and normative evolution.

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