

In November 1999, the New York Institute for the Humanities, in conjunction with the Open Society Institute, launched a select year-long seminar, meeting roughly every two weeks, to explore the current crises of vision and practice confronting the Humanitarian and Human Rights movements. The seminar is limited to roughly thirty participants and is convened simultaneously (via teleconferencing) in New York City and Washington.

Our premise is that both the humanitarian movement (by which we mean NGOs and UN agencies concerned with providing relief in manmade emergencies like wars or politically induced famines) and the human rights movement are at a crossroads - cognitively, intellectually, practically, and, to some extent, morally.

Humanitarians have discovered that despite their best intentions, they often succeed in doing as much harm as good. The example of Rwanda, where a heroic effort to feed Rwandan Hutu refugees in Eastern Zaire had the unintended consequence at the very least of prolonging and, perhaps, of exacerbating the war, is the obvious case in point. But the crisis of faith within the human rights movement is almost as acute. The tried and true tactic of the 'heroic' period of human rights activism - the period falling roughly between the Helsinki Final Act and the Siege of Sarajevo - which was to shame governments of powerful countries to either cease their own violations or rein in those of client regimes no longer works nearly so well in this age of global economics and ethnic cleansing.

Most human rights activists and humanitarians would insist that the situation is anything but entirely bleak. The very fact that recent interventions in Kosovo and East Timor, however halting or ill-conceived or carried through, could have been undertaken not on the grounds of state interest but on humanitarian and human rights grounds supports this view. So, arguably, does the steady expansion in both the scope and authority of international humanitarian law (witness the Pinochet case), certain innovations like the International Criminal Court, and the increasing influence of humanitarian and human rights organizations.

At the same time, for all these 'civilizing' tendencies, the world could at least as easily be described as growing more barbarous. The paradox is obvious. If we are making such progress, then why do things seem so terrible? And are the rights-based, increasingly prosecutorial emphases of the human rights movement having the intended effect on the ground?

It is this tension that we will be exploring across the breadth of these seminars. We are inviting both fellows of the two Institutes and people outside with expertise and experience in the fields of aid and human rights to ponder together the splendors and miseries of the current situation. Ideally, a new synthesis or, at least, a far deeper understanding will issue from the meetings. At the least, we will be endeavoring to frame the right questions - itself no small feat in an area so confused and mythologized as this one.

We will generally meet alternate Thursday evenings from 6pm to 8pm, beginning November 11 with an introductory talk by David Rieff. A schedule and transcripts of the guest speakers' remarks will be made available on the web, as will selected articles and resources that seminar members suggest. For more information contact Scott Hughes

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Co-conveners