THE POLITICS OF WARTIME HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Thomas G. Weiss
Tuesday, 11:45 am – 1:45 pm
Spring 2019, PSC 76401 (3 credits), Room TBA

Purpose
Over the last century and a half, and more particularly over the last quarter-century since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed a dramatic expansion of organized humanitarianism, or the institutionalization of the desire to reduce the suffering of others. Efforts in war zones, the focus here, are considerably more fraught than where natural disasters strike. A network of states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) along with private military companies and transnational corporations populate the international humanitarian marketplace. Their existence has helped to create and been nourished in turn by a complex array of norms and legal principles. This network and the normative fabric have resulted in something that resembles a “system” of global humanitarian governance—that is, humanitarian action is organized to help protect and to assist distant strangers, and more recently to address the causes of suffering as well. The intertwining of compassion and governance, however, signals that humanitarianism is more complicated than merely helping those in need. After all, “isms” invariably are less pure in practice than in theory. In particular, resources (financial and human) are usually not far behind a movement with popular support. The bottom line for this course is that responding with the heart requires responding with the head as well.

Subject Matter
This course examines the history as well as the domestic and international politics that undergird the ideas, social movements, and organizations designed to regulate the conduct of war, to improve the welfare of those victimized by armed conflicts, and to prosecute war criminals. The big topics that many students will have heard about but perhaps not studied include just war theory, international humanitarian law, humanitarian action, and intervention for human protection purposes.

Beginning with a look at the political, philosophical, ethical, and economic underpinnings of humanitarian thought and action, the seminar concentrates on the emergence of the international humanitarian system, including specifically of international humanitarian law and even more especially of aid agencies. With these foundations in mind, the class examines the behavior of agencies and the outcomes of their actions in specific crises as well as the value of legal mechanisms in constraining the use of force and in holding violators of law accountable. We begin with the nineteenth century and continue to the present, with an emphasis on the post-Cold War period. In particular, case-by-case analyses of crises since 1989 help inform the overall study of contemporary trends in the humanitarian sector as well as illustrate contemporary challenges. We also take up innovations such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). Finally, the seminar evaluates the current system of protection and delivery as well as its future in light of “new wars” and “new humanitarianisms.”

Section One (four sessions) begins with “the basics” of humanitarianism: the foundations (political, philosophical, ethical, and economic), logics, dilemmas, and consequences of humanitarian action. It continues with the history of responses during the first two formative periods (from 1864 to World War II, and during the Cold War).
Section Two (three sessions) focuses on the early post-Cold War period with analyses of early crises of “the tumultuous 1990s”—northern Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Haiti, Kosovo, East Timor—that help inform the overall study of trends in the humanitarian sector and illustrate contemporary challenges.

Section Three (five sessions) turns to “the twenty-first century” and generalizations about the nature of so-called new wars and new humanitarianisms; it also probes R2P and why it replaced “humanitarian intervention.” The recent cases of Libya and Syria are essential as well as the political economy of the contemporary international humanitarian system as backdrops to evaluate whether the pace of expansion over the last two decades will continue. The size, nature, and rewards of the humanitarian “business”—as offensive as that label is for its practitioners—become major themes.

The seminar makes eclectic use of historical, administrative, political, and legal materials related to coming to the rescue of civilians caught in the cross-hairs of armed conflicts. Although in-depth knowledge of international organizations is not expected, I assume familiarity with the basic theories of international relations and with world history since 1945.

It is worth underlining that the seminar is not a platform for me to lecture but for you to interact and to gain basic skills (in oral presentations and reacting on your feet as well as writing). Students should be prepared to do a significant amount of reading and to discuss it seriously. Graduate courses only work when everyone, including those who have little background or whose mother tongue is not English, comes prepared for a critical and informed conversation.

**Required and Other Texts**

The books for “required” reading will be on reserve in The Graduate Center Library as hopefully will those in “suggested reading”—books seem to disappear, however. Virtually all of the articles can be found in the library’s online journal databases, but I no longer put them on reserve. The best sources is the Google Drive folder created specifically for the course, [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1LX_HhbEnEnL52eBOO10OHWipKN2qjiaS?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1LX_HhbEnEnL52eBOO10OHWipKN2qjiaS?usp=sharing). Those leading a discussion should make sure that the shared documents are all there and up-to-date a week before they are to be read.

All participants should be familiar with the required reading for each week. Required reading is, well, compulsory for each session; it is not onerous because I prefer that students read what most interests them from a much wider selection, but we need a common point of departure for each week. The works under “suggested” are intended for discussion leaders and others truly interested in a topic. I have listed “additional” sources that I have found most useful for those interested in pursuing a topic in this seminar or another. The endnotes in the readings provide additional hints. Obviously, the literature (academic and policy) is substantial and growing. You may also bring to our attention sources of which I am unaware.

Six paperback texts (reasonably priced when new, and available used as well) are to be read almost in their entirety and undoubtedly should be purchased from Amazon.com and be part of your library. I have tried to assign as much of the required reading from them as possible. I have emphasized my own recent books in the hopes that you may get to know me and my thinking.
better without my having to put you to sleep in class. They also provide
the basis to question me when points are unclear or challenge me when they seem wrong. The mammoth royalties will
go into a beer-and-wine account for the “bonus” class.


**Office Hours**
The most convenient time to find me is Tuesday immediately before (10:45 to 11:45 am) or after class (1:45 to 2:45 pm) in 5203 at The Graduate Center. I usually am available right after class in our classroom for short consultations, especially for the following week’s presenters. I am available at other times but by appointment only. Please do not simply show up at my office but rather email me at tweiss@gc.cuny.edu. I respond quickly, whether I am in New York or elsewhere (which is not infrequent).

**Assignments and Grading**
In addition to reading attentively and participating actively, all students enrolled or auditing are expected to arrive punctually for every session of the seminar. Professionalism and courtesy dictate that anyone unable to attend a particular session should notify me in advance. All students should come to class prepared to contribute to the discussion—which requires you to have read and reflected on the materials assigned for a particular session. I do not give a specific grade for
participation, but those who demonstrate a mastery of the materials and do not fall asleep will help their final grade.

I will lead the first three sessions of the seminar. Thereafter, every student enrolled or auditing will be expected to lead two or three (depending on enrollment) short discussions of central topics from the required readings for the following ten sessions (from #4 to #13). Kicking-off requires familiarity with required, suggested, and additional readings. The task, in a brief (10-12 minutes) presentation, will not be to regurgitate the readings but to launch our conversation about what was insightful or not in them (referring back to relevant international relations or legal theory can be part of the effort); this exercise pre-designates a “discussant” (as in a professional academic conference) to start what hopefully will be a good conversation. Perhaps the best way to approach this exercise is inductively by taking a recent or historical event as illustrative or not of a general topic—for example, the alleged trading of food for sex by French peacekeepers in the Central African Republic in relationship to the topic of “Chapter VI.5”; or the evolution in the numbers of women in peace operations as part of the conversation about the evolution of operations and norms; or the casualty figures for humanitarians as a reflection of “new wars.” Emphasizing the most salient features (or shortcomings) in the assigned reading is also a good way to launch our conversation. Power points or hand-outs are encouraged.

At the first two sessions, students can sign up on a first-come-first-served basis for time slots that should be spread out throughout the course; if you do not opt for particular choices, I will “volunteer” you. Your first and probably second choices will be honored, but I will undoubtedly have to juggle in order to ensure even coverage for all sessions—ideally, two or three presenters for each session. These presentations are serious and will constitute about one-half to one-third of your final grade (my subjective appreciation enters into the equation). For planning purposes, those who are responsible for a specific session typically meet with me and the other presenters for a few minutes after the class preceding the scheduled presentation. This permits the “team” to divide responsibilities, avoid overlap, and foster coherence. I fill in what I see as important conceptual or factual lacunae.

The other half of your grade will result from your answering two simulated first exams on 2 April and 14 May—called “mid-term” and “final” for purposes of the registrar. I will provide several questions, and you will select only one to answer. There are no “correct” answers (although obviously the factual information and theoretical framing should be accurate). The challenge is to synthesize course material in an original manner and make a persuasive, well-written argument. At the session following the assignment, we will set aside a bit of time to discuss my reactions to your written answers.

Students routinely express anxiety (unmerited in my view) about what to expect from first PhD exams, and how they are graded. This seminar is designed to alleviate some of the tension. I will do my utmost to return the exams within a week. Students have two hours to respond to a question, which is a particular skill. You are obliged to use computers in a computer lab room to be announced. It is important, as it will be someday for the real first exams, to demonstrate a thorough political, historical, legal, and economic knowledge of particular cases, and of international relations and international organization theory. The grades for the first exam are: PhD pass with distinction (fairly rare); PhD pass; and failure. For this class, grades will be the usual with pluses and minuses that would convey the following: A+ or A for a PhD pass with
distinction; A- or B+ for a solid PhD pass; B or B- for a weak PhD pass; C+ or lower, failure on PhD exam if not this course.

If you have already passed the first exam but wish to take the course because the substance coincides with your academic interests, a research paper (@ 6,000 words) can be substituted for the two exams. The deadline for this paper is no later than 14 May (when others take the second simulated exam), but you should discuss its content with me well in advance of that deadline; an outline is due on 2 April (when the others take the first simulated exam).

Along with your knowledge of humanitarian action, my intention is that your oral presentation and writing skills should improve over the course of the semester. Please note that there are NO ACCEPTABLE EXCUSES for an inability to make presentations or to take exams on the date prescribed. Should for any reason (e.g., illness, jitters, your dog dies, etc.) you do not do comply, you will be automatically penalized one full grade. You will be expected to write a 5,000-word essay on the same discussion or exam topic that is due not more than one week later and will be automatically penalized one full grade. Deadlines are part of a professional ethos. No exceptions. In case that is not clear, let me repeat, NO ACCEPTABLE EXCUSES.

SEMINAR OUTLINE, WEEK-BY-WEEK SCHEDULE

Session 1 (29 January: Participant Introductions, Overview, Getting Organized

SECTION ONE: THE BASICS

Session 2 (5 February): Some big concepts and theories


Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

12 February NO CLASS, Lincoln’s Holiday per Graduate Center Calendar

Session 3 (19 February): Why Care? Humanitarian Goals and Principles
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 33-34, 18-29

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

Session 4 (26 February): The Origins of Organized Humanitarianism: From Solferino to the Holocaust
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 18-29 (reread)
• Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*, chapters 2 (Fearon) and 3 (reread Calhoun).

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

Session 5 (5 March): The Cold War Experience: From the Berlin Airlift to Biafra, and the Shape of the Contemporary “System”
• Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, chapter 2 (reread)
• Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 18-29 (reread), 29-55, 96-122
• Barnett and Weiss, eds., *Humanitarianism in Question*, Chapters 6 (Barnett and Snyder).

Suggested reading:
1. Thomas G. Weiss and Don Hubert, *The Responsibility to Protect: Research, Bibliography, Background* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), chapter 4

Additional reading:

PART TWO: THE TUMULTUOUS 1990s

Session 6 (12 March): Some Key Early Post-Cold War Crises: Northern Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia
• Hoffman and Weiss, *Humanitarianism, War, and Politics*, 57-94.

Suggested reading:
Additional reading: Case material is abundant.

Session 7 (19 March): Some Key Later Post-Cold War Crises: Rwanda, Haiti, and Kosovo
- Weiss, Humanitarian Intervention, chapter 2 (reread)
- Hoffman and Weiss, Humanitarianism, War, and Politics, 57-94 (reread)
- Barnett and Weiss, Humanitarianism Contested, Chapter 5.
- Thomas G. Weiss and Don Hubert, The Responsibility to Protect: Research, Bibliography, Background (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), chapter 5.
- Barnett and Weiss, eds., Humanitarianism in Question, chapters 4 (Hopgood), 5 (Stein).

Suggested reading:
1. Weiss, Military-Civilian Interactions, Chapters 6, 7, 8.

Additional reading: Case material is abundant.

Session 8 (26 March): International Judicial Pursuit and Peacebuilding
- Hoffman and Weiss, Humanitarianism, War, and Politics, 113-130.

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

**SESSION #9, 2 APRIL, SIMULATED FIRST EXAM, PART #1, Room TBA**

**SECTION THREE: THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**Session 10 (9 April): Halting Mass Atrocities? The Responsibility to Protect**

- Annual reports for the General Assembly’s Inter-active Dialogue from the secretary-general (drafted by his special adviser on R2P) are of interest, including the most recent *A Vital and Enduring Commitment: Implementing the Responsibility to Protect*, UN document A/69/981-S/2015/500, 13 July 2015.

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

**Session 11 (16 April): Today’s Landscape of “New” Wars: What’s New?**

Suggested reading:

Additional reading:

### 23 APRIL NO CLASS (Spring Recess per Graduate Center Calendar)

**Session 12, (30 April): The Landscape of “New” Humanitarianisms: What’s New?**
- Weiss, *Humanitarian Business*, 56-95

**Suggested reading:**

**Additional reading:**


**Session 13, Part #1 (7 May): Humanitarian Business Continued: After Afghanistan and Iraq, What about Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, Syria, Gaza, Georgia/Ukraine**

- Barnett and Weiss, eds., *Humanitarianism in Question*, chapter 6 (Barnett and Snyder), 7 (Hammond), 8 (Redfield), 9 (Rubenstein).

Suggested reading:

Additional Reading:

**Session 13, Part #2 (7 May): The Future: What Next?**


Dennis Dijkzeul, Dorothea Hilhorst, and Peter Walker, “Introduction: Evidence-based Action in Humanitarian Crises,” *Disasters* 37, no S1 (July 2013): s1-s19

Suggested reading:

**SESSION 14, 14 MAY, SIMULATED FIRST EXAM, PART #2, Room TBA**

**Session 15: Bonus Session! Drinks at Time and Location TBA**