Erten 1

Reviewed Work: *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* by Jennifer Rubenstein

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Jennifer Rubenstein’s *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* problematizes the conventional wisdom of viewing these organizations as either benevolent actors, or impediments to humanitarian action. The book serves as a mapping exercise of the political ethics concerns these INGOs face, as well as the concerns they create. Combining ethics with fieldwork provides a unique entry point to studying humanitarian INGOs, a topic of growing importance in the 21st century.

The major contribution of the book is highlighting the political nature and activities of humanitarian aid organizations. Rubenstein defines the term “political” in two ways: first, effects of INGOs are political or take place through political processes; secondly, INGOs exercise “discursive power.” Differentiating governance from political processes, Rubenstein argues that these INGOs should be regarded as political entities.

The book covers a wide span of ideas, at times at the expense of conceptual clarity. Several weaker concepts in the book are “sometimes somewhat governmental,” which aims at exploring the distinction between conventional versus global governance. Rubenstein’s concept building here lacks clarity and relies on endogenous definitions, such as that of “conventional governance,” which refers to “the activities, relationships, capacities, and effects that are widely seen as the bailiwick of conventional governments.” The conceptualization of “norms” carries another endogenous definition problem, where norms are defined as “abstract idea(s) with normative content.”

Perhaps most significantly, the key constitutive concept of the book, humanitarianism, is not explicitly defined while frequently used. Humanitarianism and humanitarian action has evolved significantly in recent decades, especially due to the increased active participation of “middle powers” that are not Western donors. Rubenstein implicitly follows the United Nations’ OCHA understanding of humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. However, the book does not address the changing norms and humanitarian principles, resulting from...

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1 Rubenstein, p.9.
2 ibid.
3 Rubenstein, p.55.
4 Rubenstein, p.56.
5 Rubenstein, p.16.
6 Rubenstein defines “humanitarian norms” on p.220 as: “Humanitarian norms articulate the (now) widely accepted idea that there is something distinctively valuable about human beings, such that everyone deserves to have their basic needs met and their dignity respected, simply as a virtue of being human.”
7 Gilley, p.41.
several non-Western humanitarian INGOs’ reconfiguration of humanitarianism. This development strongly challenges the assumption of a singular “humanitarianism.”

While the discussion of the choice of humanitarian INGOs is clear, humanitarian principles and their changing topography are not discussed anywhere in the book, likely due to the limited selection of INGOs. Rubenstein could respond to this critique by highlighting the scope conditions of this work that are explicitly discussed. The author limits her scope conditions of the INGO conception to “large-scale, mainstream, Western-based humanitarian INGOs.” There are several problems with this approach. First, the study claims to exclude INGOs that are “strongly religious” yet nevertheless includes Catholic Relief Services in its set of INGOs. Secondly, the book claims that it provides “a cartography of humanitarian INGOs,” while at the same time explicitly ignoring a large and emerging population of such organizations.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there is a gap between the theory and the selection of empirical cases, since the ethics discussion and the theory itself do not have any inherent limitations that lead to this particular limitation of empirical case selection to Western-based INGOs. The theory, part of which is visualized via the “map of humanitarian INGO political ethics,” portrays what “humanitarian INGOs are.” Nothing in the theory demands or leads to the limited scope conditions Rubenstein then assumes without exploration. She argues that the INGOs focused in this work are chosen based on humanitarian spending. However, the theory itself does not hold this spending limitation, making the case selection limitation logic problematic. At the first instance, theory does not guide the empirical selection. At the last instance, since theory and empirics are mutually constitutive, this empirical selection problem underscores significant shortcomings of the theory in return.

The example of Turkey’s conception of humanitarian action demonstrates what is at stake when there is this gap between theory and empirics. Following its political humanitarian engagement in Somalia and the Syrian refugee crises, Turkey emerged as a prominent humanitarian actor, symbolized by its hosting the first ever UN World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. Many Turkish humanitarian INGOs, however, approach humanitarianism very differently than the principles outlined by UN-OCHA. This conceptualization follows that “all internal and external aid…is motivated by a sense of human sympathy…(and) humanitarian assistance and development assistance are therefore often discussed in conjunction.” Furthermore, understanding Turkish INGOs’ humanitarianism as distinct from a variety of religious motivations would lead, at best, to a limited understanding of this conception of humanitarianism in practice. Beyond Turkey, INGOs based in countries such as Brazil, China, South Korea

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9 For an elaboration of this idea with case studies from nine countries, please see Binder, Meier and Steetz.
10 Rubenstein, p.23.
11 Rubenstein, p.2.
12 Rubenstein, p.21.
13 Rubenstein, p.3.
14 Rubenstein, p.84.
15 Rubenstein, p.22-23.
16 For details, please see [www.worldhumanitariansummit.org](http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org), last accessed on December 5th, 2015.
17 Binder and Erten, p.7.
and Saudi Arabia are developing their varying notions of humanitarianism, and these INGOs are increasingly becoming major humanitarian donors.\textsuperscript{18}

Given this context, Rubenstein’s theory-empirics gap becomes an impediment in two important ways. First, Rubenstein makes a convincing theoretical claim that INGOs should focus on consequences and not intentions.\textsuperscript{19} If this holds, empirical cases do not need to exclude religious organizations. INGOs with religious intentions could carry out humanitarian action upholding ethical considerations, such as egalitarianism, just like INGOs without religious intentions could practice humanitarianism in ways that result in unequal consequences for some groups.

Secondly, the “ethical predicaments”\textsuperscript{20} of democratic, egalitarian, humanitarian, and justice-based norms observed and advocated for in this work gain meaning only within specific contexts. While focusing on Western INGOs provides multiple important contexts, a claim about universal ethical predicaments cannot be made given the reach of these Western contexts. When moved outside these examples, several, if not all, of these ethical considerations may adopt fundamentally different meanings. To provide a concrete example, INGOs that follow the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Code of Conduct\textsuperscript{21} on humanitarian principles, such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) in Turkey, have a vastly different conception of democratic norms in the case of Gaza than Oxfam. Thus, when Rubenstein explains that she focuses on these four norms “because they are implicitly or explicitly endorsed by many humanitarian INGOs,”\textsuperscript{22} the evidence is unclear especially given the changed topography of humanitarian INGOs, not merely Western humanitarian INGOs.

Nevertheless, the book is a fascinating attempt at understanding humanitarian ethics and transnational politics, written by a meticulous author well versed in political theory, philosophy, and fieldwork. Conceptual clarity and a more careful linkage between theory and empirics would add to the impact of this work. Especially given the large scope of the theory, a theory-driven variety of cases would have supported—or perhaps problematized—the ethical claims that are aptly articulated throughout the book.

\textsuperscript{18} Binder, Maier and Steetz, p.2.
\textsuperscript{19} Rubenstein, p.6.
\textsuperscript{20} Rubenstein, p.5.
\textsuperscript{21} Binder and Erten, p.6.
\textsuperscript{22} Rubenstein, p.16.
Works Cited