



Help and hindrance

Condemned to repeat?

The paradox of humanitarian action

Fiona Terry

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Wrapping one's mind around the thesis of Fiona Terry's *Condemned to repeat? The paradox of humanitarian action* takes considerable effort for someone with a bystander's perspective on international aid. Terry, a veteran worker and research director with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), argues that several large-scale humanitarian projects went badly off the rails by allowing a significant proportion of material aid to flow to combatant groups, thus contributing to the oppression (and sometimes the destruction) of refugees who were the intended recipients of help. In other words, things would have been better had the aid agencies stayed home. This is a provocative claim, and one that has already attracted derisive dismissals.

Terry's autobiographical introduction outlines the ethical dilemma that confronted her as director of the French section of MSF in Rwanda in 1994. Her personal account is intended to establish the question that underlies the book: Can abandoning a refugee crisis ever be the *right* thing to do? Unfortunately, readers have to wade through another 100 pages — 3 chapters — before Terry turns her attention to the question at hand. The opening chapter bogs down in a theoretical consideration of some of the principles underlying humanitarian action (neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity), as well as some of the benefits conferred on warring groups by external aid: protective camouflage of refugee camps, legitimacy for their cause internationally and strengthened control over civilian populations through their role in the distribution of supplies. Terry attempts to bolster these

points with examples from disparate conflicts throughout the late 20th century, but the effect is too desultory to be persuasive. She then launches into an analysis of humanitarian support for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and for Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras. Her summary (spiced with evident disdain for American foreign policy) of the governmental manoeuvring in these crises is fascinating reading, but its applicability to the book's theme is weak. Terry's admission that "humanitarian sanctuaries ... cannot be said to have prolonged the Afghan crisis" and that the Nicaraguan "refugee camps and border settlements were not significant in the conflict" makes me wonder whether these conflicts are included as occasions to criticize American blundering on the global stage rather than as relevant examples of the failings of nongovernmental aid organizations.

However, Terry's passion for her topic begins to show in her treatment of the Cambodian refugee crisis and (likely because of her direct personal involvement) peaks in her final example of the Rwandan refugee camps. Here, the argument becomes not only reasonable but compelling:

[I]t is not unusual for aid to have unavoidable side effects. But in the case of the Rwandan camps it was nothing *but* the aid which was sustaining the viability of the old regime, and it was actually being used against the refugees through distribution mechanisms, health structures, refugee administration, and policing initiatives.

Terry openly targets her colleagues in the aid community, suggesting that,

for some organizations, the boost to fund-raising provided by a media-documented presence among the Rwandan refugees obscured the ethical dilemma created by aid abuses. Even more startling is her allegation that the "crisis" may not have been as critical as the public was led to believe, claiming that "a cursory glance at results of the Rwandan refugee return suggests that aid organizations may exaggerate their importance to the survival of vulnerable populations." Finally, she criticizes nongovernmental relief organizations for allowing politicians to boast self-righteously about their contributions to humanitarian aid while assiduously avoiding the difficult political commitments that Terry considers necessary if events such as the Rwandan genocide are to be prevented.

George Santayana's dictum — "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" — stands as a motivating force behind Fiona Terry's project. However, the argument that the Rwandan catastrophe might have been avoided had we learned the lessons of the past is precisely the least persuasive part of the book. Terry herself appears unconvinced that the refugee situations in Pakistan and Honduras bear much resemblance to those in later conflicts, and the similarities she draws seem forced. By the time her argument gains momentum (in her examination of the support of the Khmer Rouge by aid organizations in the Cambodian refugee camps), I had considerable skepticism to overcome. Unfortunately, this detracts from a remarkable analysis of the situation in Rwanda, one that could easily have stood on its own and provided ample opportunity for discussion of the moral dilemmas that arise in the course of humanitarian action.

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