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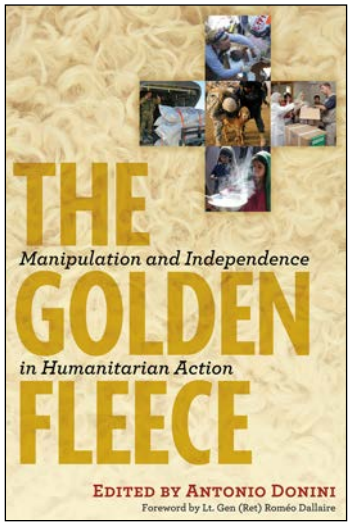
The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action

edited by
Antonio Donini



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Introduction

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The Golden Fleece

According to ancient Greek myth, Jason and his band of Argonauts set out on a quest to find the fleece of a golden-haired, winged ram. Success would result in Jason achieving the throne of Iolcus in Thessaly. Some versions of the legend emphasize the fleece, others the quest. There have been many interpretations of what the fleece might mean: power, forgiveness, the riches of the East, sun reflecting on the sea, alchemy. In modern usage *to fleece* means to shear the fleece from an animal, such as a sheep, but it also means to con or to trick someone out of money.

The political economy of humanitarian action embodies all of these concepts and more—if not in fact, then certainly in perception and popular observation. The quest for independence, and, by extension, respect for the humanitarian imperative, has long been subject to manipulation by governments, warlords, public opinion, disembodied *realpolitik,* and the calculations of humanitarians themselves. The results have often been less than golden.

This book delves into questions that are rarely asked and seldom answered. To what extent—if any—have the manipulators of humanitarian action, including humanitarian agencies themselves, achieved the objectives of their manipulation? Would humanitarian action, shorn of manipulation, be more effective in saving and protecting lives? Is political manipulation greater today than at other times in history, or are we experiencing fluctuations within a standard historically consistent bandwidth? Does the dramatic growth of the aid enterprise in the last two decades open up humanitarian action to greater manipulation? Our book examines a variety of geographic and thematic contexts to shed light on these questions and offers some observations about whether and where possibilities for change exist, change that could point toward Thessaly.

In this book we use *instrumentalization* as shorthand for the use of humanitarian action or rhetoric as a tool to pursue political, security, military, development, economic, and other non-humanitarian goals. *Instrumentalization* is not quite the same as *politicization* or *manipulation*, though it contains elements of both. The following chapters unpack these terms by illustrating the many ways in which humanitarian action is misused. Examples include the blatant abuse and distortion of relief operations to achieve political objectives that are often antithetical to humanitarianism and lead to increased rather than reduced mortality. They also include more subtle manipulations arising from the convergence of interests between aid workers and their organizations around agendas related to globalization, peace consolidation, nation-building, human rights, and justice. We also examine how humanitarians themselves have manipulated governments, international organizations, the donating public, and even intended beneficiaries in support of lofty partisan or institutional objectives.

We take a long view, starting with the origins of organized humanitarianism in the mid-nineteenth century. Three distinct periods in humanitarian action are identified: pre-1945, 1945 to the end of the Cold War, and from 1990 onward. The immediate post–World War II years saw a rush of norm making with important changes to international humanitarian law, human rights law, and refugee law that set the parameters for future relief operations. After 1990, the end of East-West confrontation saw a reduction in proxy wars, but myriad unresolved quarrels within states burst into flame, generating major displacement of, and harm to, civilians. Rather than a period of peace dividends and consensual problem solving, the 1990s were scarred by an increase in global turmoil and suffering—along with a growth in the humanitarian apparatus and questions about its core purpose.

In the twenty-plus years since the end of the Cold War, organized humanitarian action has blossomed from a relatively marginal activity in the shadow of interstate wars to a central tenet of the West's approach to crisis and conflict. Humanitarians are no longer confined to providing succor outside the theater of conflict. Intervening beyond borders has now become the norm. In 2012, humanitarian agencies are expected to disburse close to US$20 billion in support of those affected by disasters, manmade or not, and for the maintenance and development of the humanitarian system.[1] Humanitarianism, once an endeavor that was mainly voluntary and driven by a sense of mission, is now a business and a profession that, according to one estimate, employs a quarter of a million workers.[2] And this is only the dominant "official" humanitarian enterprise. The contributions of emerging humanitarianisms—both of Islamic and other hues—and those at the national and community levels who, almost invariably, are the first responders

when disaster strikes do not make it to the international statistics of compassion. With growth has come power, the power to raise and move resources and personnel, to decide where and where not to intervene, to influence government and the media. Humanitarianism has become part of global governance, if not of government. It has also become a global fig leaf that covers up for global misgovernance. The world's collective unwillingness or inability to prevent conflict, to address the plight of millions in drought- or flood-prone lands, and the growing incidence of climate-related disasters, creates the need for a humanitarian enterprise out of all proportion to what would be required if we had more responsible and just governance in the world. This enterprise continues to evolve in the twenty-first century—with emerging powers including China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and Middle Eastern countries likely to play an increasing role—as does our understanding of vulnerability and of the action needed to help those who find themselves *in extremis* in the face of catastrophic events.

Our starting hypothesis was that although humanitarian thinking and practice have evolved significantly over the past 150 years, there never was a "golden age" when core humanitarian values took precedence over political or other considerations. Several chapters in the book confirm this. Many of the problems and pathologies faced by the humanitarian enterprise today, most notably challenges to the values of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, are not new. They may seem more pronounced because they are more studied, but today's humanitarian angst may not, in fact, be caused by new threats to its core principles. It may simply result from an increase in the number and severity of concurrent crises; the vast growth of the humanitarian apparatus; the increased ability of governments to dictate the shape of agency programming; more intense real-time scrutiny made possible by improved communication technologies; and the conditions, restrictions, and expectations that this increased scrutiny has generated in the funding environment. Threats to humanitarian principles are very much present throughout history. Today's may be qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of the past, but they are not new. What is clear, however, is that the stakes are higher: more money, more people, higher expectations from a better informed general public, and a growing demand for accountability from those on the receiving end all conspire to place humanitarian action—a relatively low key and minor endeavor for many decades—at the center of the international system. And with centrality comes unprecedented responsibility.

Because humanitarians and donors tend to have short memories, it is important to revisit the past. If instrumentalization has been a constant in the history of humanitarianism, a fundamental question arises about the

apparently unbridgeable disconnect between aspirations and reality. Must we accept that saving and protecting lives in crisis situations is an urgent and necessary but always deeply flawed endeavor? Or can humanitarianism be transformed, made immune or less vulnerable to manipulation? Can the gold standard—the mythical *fleece*—ever be attained, or will it remain little more than a dream? There are different ways to answer this question, few of them definitive because of the evolving context in which the humanitarian endeavor exists. Our hope is that the chapters in this book will provide some useful markers for analysts and policymakers as well as for humanitarians themselves. Learning from the past may well help us to navigate the choppy seas of the perpetual present. The quest continues—not for a mythical golden ideal, but for real solutions to real problems that affect the lives of millions. If humanitarians decline to question unethical policy and practice, they risk being complicit with avoidable death and suffering. Being immune to wanton or deliberate loss of life is a stark negation of what it is to be human.

Dramatis Personae

In order to capture the complexity of a "typical" crisis setting, we have, based on the data compiled for this book, developed the following diagram that shows the actors and agendas involved. The "bubbles" indicate the actors that are generally present in a crisis situation, and the arrows show the direction of the pressures they apply in pursuit of their agendas and those that they are subjected to.

Not all actors are present in all crises, and not all arrows represent vectors of instrumentalization. Donors, for example, can have a positive or negative impact on humanitarian action; they can support efforts to enhance protection and provide relief supplies liberally or place conditions that undermine the impartial provision of aid. Similarly, host governments or de facto authorities can block access to particular groups or locations or facilitate the work of humanitarian agencies. Figure 1–1 describes a complex emergency in which there is an outside military intervention and where nonstate actors are involved. In a flood or earthquake situation the makeup of the bubbles would be different (and the third-party military might not be present at all). The size of the bubbles would vary with the nature of each crisis and over time.

The bubbles are useful for depicting the different types of interactions and pressures that humanitarian and other actors are subjected to as well as relations, on the one hand, with civil society and affected populations, and on the other hand, with donors, political forces, and the media. Many of the arrows are two way and show the complexity of the potential instru-

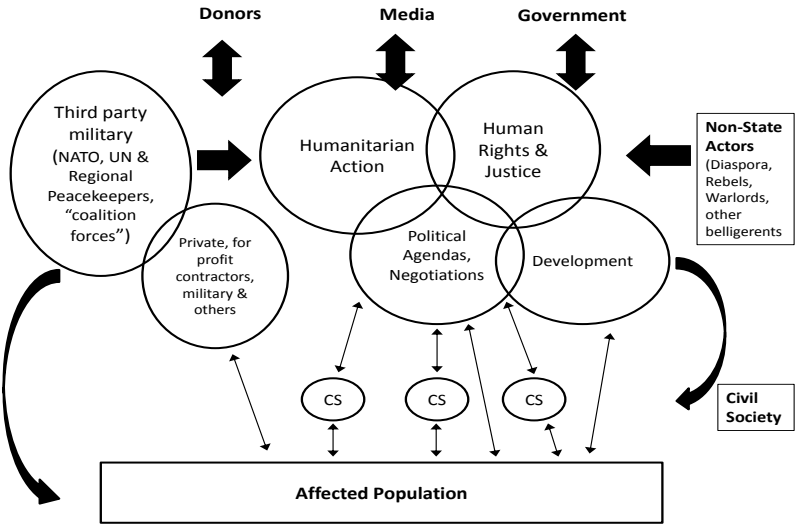

Figure 1–1. Instrumentalization: Actors and Agendas

mentalization flows. For example, donors may subordinate the provision of funds for humanitarian activities to their own political agendas, while at the same time being influenced—or even manipulated—by the perspectives and leverage of aid agencies on the ground. Similarly, it is not unusual for affected populations and/or the civil society organizations purporting to represent them to be caught in a two-way relationship in which they need and receive life-saving help but also use it to advance interests that go beyond a humanitarian remit. Several of the chapters use variations of the bubbles, or what they represent, to illustrate the pressures to which humanitarian action is subjected in a particular context.

Types of Instrumentalization

The use of suffering to achieve political objectives predates organized humanitarianism. Lord Byron, agitating for Greek independence in the 1820s, used the same moral and political levers as did his epigones in the service of Biafra or the boat people fleeing Vietnam.[3] Despite the rhetoric and lip service to principles and accountability—as General Dallaire notes in the Foreword—instrumentalization comes with the territory, and humanitarian actors, however much they dislike it, will always be confronted with partisan agendas. Humanitarians almost always operate in highly politicized and contentious environments where humanitarian values are

not a central priority of belligerents or power holders. This conditions what humanitarians can and cannot do. Moreover, their mere presence may be seen by some as a political act, an affront to sovereignty, and an expression of Northern/Western hegemonic agendas.

But can humanitarians be truly nonpartisan in their own actions? For the purposes of our analysis, it is useful to distinguish between partisan politics and a "politics of humanity," that is, the politics of moral resistance against intolerable suffering,[4] because this is where humanitarian theory comes up against reality of power in crisis settings. The former is a politics of transformation and power—whether fueled by greed, grievance, or lofty ideals; the latter derives its legitimacy from universal values, codified in international treaties and instruments (international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions). And while humanitarians may resort to political tools, such as lobbying governments or negotiating access, they do not do so for partisan gain but to secure the survival of affected populations. Even though this apolitical balancing act is, as Michael Barnett puts it, "part confidence trick and part self-delusion,"[5] one that often results in humanitarian actors overplaying their claim to a moral high ground, reference to the law and to humanitarian values remains a useful barometer in studying the pitfalls of instrumentalization.

In our chapters we discuss a wide variety of instances of manipulation and politicization. Historically, some were relatively benign—for example, the "disaster inflation" that drives the media and agencies to overestimate needs.[6] Others, like the use of "humanitarian" aid to support the resuscitation of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, was deadly and disastrous for Cambodians in need of life-saving assistance and protection (Chapter 11). Similarly, generous assistance to mujahideen factions in the anti-Soviet period of the Afghanistan crisis has had dramatic and long-term consequences that continue to reverberate today (Chapter 4). In some cases instrumentalization may have worked for the instrumentalizers, although it is hard to identify an example of this where human suffering did not increase. In others—as in Afghanistan or Somalia (Chapter 5)—it has backfired spectacularly. Crises of high strategic import have clearly generated great amounts of blow-back from instrumentalization, while in those of lesser political import the independence of humanitarian action can be better protected.

Table 1–1 (pages 8–10) provides a typology of actors and examples of instrumentalization. Our chapters on Darfur, Somalia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan highlight the perils of subordinating humanitarian concerns to political or military agendas. But the same chapters, as well as the historical analysis in Chapters 2 and 3, show that there were moments when the humanitarian imperative did trump political considerations and/or where

humanitarian actors were able to resist the pressure to become the handmaidens of a political enterprise. Chapters 4 and 11 also provide examples of aid agency collaboration to challenge *refoulement* policies and, more recently, to document systematically patterns of harm to civilians associated with the intensification of conflict. In Afghanistan, both coalition forces and the insurgents could not ignore the nonpartisan data collected by the United Nations and other agencies and the resulting media attention and condemnation. To an extent, this obliged warring parties to amend the conduct of hostilities and contributed to the reduction of civilian casualties.

Typologies are of course arbitrary and do not capture nuance. While the agents of instrumentalization are relatively easy to identify, the nature of their objectives and the outcomes of their actions, especially in the longer term, are often murky. For example, our Haiti chapter (Chapter 9) argues that the privatization of aid promoted by the United States and other donors resulted in the "NGO-ization" of the country to the detriment of the Haitian state and civil society. This severely undermined government capacity, including its ability to head off or respond to disasters. This is a pretty straightforward case of manipulation. However, the role played by international NGOs (INGOs) in this process is more difficult to categorize: were they willing agents of instrumentalization in a manner similar to US NGOs in Vietnam (see Chapter 3)? Or were they motivated more by a desire to preserve or expand programs? Or was it a case of poor analysis and programming? And is it possible to draw a link, the chapter on Haiti asks, between this decades-long use and abuse of aid by NGOs and conditions that contributed to the post-earthquake cholera epidemic in 2010?

It is also important to distinguish among active, passive, and default forms of instrumentalization. The active is often blatant, as when a belligerent or a donor denies humanitarian help to a particular vulnerable group. The criminalization of the provision of life-saving assistance to areas controlled by groups proscribed as "terrorist" by the United States or international organizations, such as the Al-Shabab in Somalia or Hamas in Palestine (Chapters 6 and 7), falls into this category, as does the abuse of food aid described in Chapter 10. The Cold War provides many glaring examples perhaps best epitomized by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1976: "Disaster relief is becoming increasingly a major instrument of our foreign policy."[7]

Passive instrumentalization can take more subtle forms ranging from seductive cooption—for example, INGOs gladly accepting donor largesse for assistance projects in Afghanistan and Iraq that were effectively part and parcel of a counter-insurgency agenda—and asking questions later, if at all, about principles. Institutional growth and development at the expense of

Table 1–1. Typology of Instrumentalization

Key Actors	Objective	Examples of Instrumentalization of Aid
A. States		
Donors and other external state actors - political	Geo-strategic advantage	Resuscitation of the Khmer Rouge and denial of asylum to Cambodians in need of life-saving action. Supporting mujahideen to counter Soviet intervention and "pulling" refugees to Pakistan/Iran 1980s. Criminalization of NGO aid to Hamas/Somalia post-9/11.
- military	Security/military/COIN agenda	Hearts and minds, PRTs in Afghanistan/Horn of Africa Misuse of "humanitarian" moniker Militarization of aid, denial of access and "humanitarian war" in Sri Lanka
- economic	Competition for markets/ oil/resources	Denial (or manipulation) of food aid (Somalia)
Host state	Political/military advantage Targeting particular groups/ethnic agenda	Denial of access (Sri Lanka, Darfur) to attack particular groups unimpeded Control/harass NGOs (Sri Lanka, Darfur, etc.) Diversion of assistance
Third-party state	Geo-strategic advantage Advance political/military agendas	Afghan refugees in Pakistan/Iran used to support fighters, as buffers, or to counter opponents (DRC) Control of access; diversion of aid

B. Non-State		
Non-state armed actors	Seeking legitimacy Political advantage Greed/economic advantage	Diversion Denial of access Control/abuse of humanitarian assistance Attacks against aid workers
Local community	Optimize self-interest Greed Coping mechanism	Magnification of needs Diversion of aid Denial of aid to others
C. Agencies		
Intl. Organizations - political - humanitarian - development	Political agenda Institutional preservation Attracting (more) funds	Calling for "humanitarian" intervention; subordination of HA to political, "integrated," or "coherent" agendas Low-key approaches/downplaying of protection concerns Safeguarding institutional relations with governments.
INGO/NNGOs	Attracting funds Seeking profile Justifying presence Force multiplier role	Exaggerating/minimizing need/risks; accepting lower standards/keeping quiet Goma, Iraq Afghanistan, Iraq
Advocacy/human rights groups	Profile Naming and shaming Pressure from public opinion	Save Darfur coalition "Feel-good" statements condemning the Taliban Using info from humanitarian groups to advance HR agendas (DRC, Somalia, etc.)

(continues)

Table 1–1 (continued)

D. Other		
Individuals	Self-aggrandizement Sense of mission Political ambition	From Lord Byron manipulating the nascent British media to Bernard Kouchner, enterprising individuals have often "used" the humanitarian pulpit to pursue personal/political agendas.
Media	Sell copy/Prominence Influence agendas	Biased reporting in Darfur Demonization of Taliban in Afghanistan
Religious groups	Influence agendas Anti-west/Jihad	Anti-aid Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka Attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia
Private-sector actors	Greed/economic gain	For-profit humanitarians Landowners diverting floodwaters into smallholders' land (Pakistan)
Political parties	Electoral gain Influence agendas	"NGOs are worse than warlords" (Afghan politicians) Anti-NGO/anti-western rhetoric (Sri Lanka, Haiti, Somalia)

independence and principle has too often been the default position of NGOs and even international organizations operating in politicized contexts. The pressure to raise and spend funds and to ensure the continuation of projects can constitute instrumentalization by default. The top-down and supply-driven nature of the humanitarian system can lead to other, not necessarily visible, forms of instrumentalization. As the saying goes, when your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Food agencies may well be driven by the supplies at their disposal in determining priorities on the ground. A refugee agency will naturally target groups on the move rather than those that remain behind.

Finally, there is "instrumentalization by story telling." The initial way of telling the story tends to shape the response. The Vietnam War generated massive human suffering, but it was not "told" as a humanitarian crisis. The narrative on one side was about defending the "Free World" and about aggression by the forces of imperialism on the other. Civilian deaths and body counts were reduced to sub-themes. Biafra was a political and military crisis cast almost entirely in humanitarian terms, and it was dealt with almost entirely in that light. More recently, representation by the media and advocacy groups of the conflict in Darfur as one between nomadic "Arabs" and sedentary "blacks" served to simplify and polarize a much more complex reality and to obscure the nature of the displacement and suffering of groups who would not necessarily identify themselves with those labels (Chapter 5). The demonization of the Taliban by Western media and feminist groups had similar effects prior to 2001. The black-and-white discourse focusing on burqas, beards, and buddhas undermined UN and NGO fundraising and the prospects of addressing urgent needs of vulnerable Afghans suffering from the combined effects of war, displacement, and the worst drought in recent history (Chapter 4).

Our Approach

This book is the product of a research community built around the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. All the authors are either researchers at the center or have been actively associated with the center's research projects. The book builds upon the earlier work of the Humanitarianism and War Project and more recent evidence-based country studies of local perceptions of the work of humanitarian agencies conducted under the Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions project.[8] The process started with a paper prepared by Ian Smillie on the "emperor's old clothes" (now in revised form as Chapter 2). The overall approach was then discussed at a meeting of the authors and a few external experts in November

2010 in London and at a second consultation in April 2011 at which the conceptual framework was agreed and chapter drafts were reviewed.

The authors are all committed humanitarians. All have years—in many cases, decades—of experience in crisis countries as aid workers, researchers, or both. All would like to see positive change in how the system functions, and most have been actively engaged in analysis and policy development vis-à-vis donors, UN agencies, and NGOs. In other words, the bedrock of solid experience in crisis and conflict is the inductive base on which our work is built. We are fully aware of two pitfalls in this type of exercise: first, the naiveté in believing that if principles were more universally respected, all would be well with the humanitarian system. And second, the paralyzing cynicism of those who claim that change is impossible and that cosmetic surgery is pointless. We, of course, subscribe to some of the critiques of humanitarian action and add a few of our own. But unlike some critics,[9] we respect the essential humanitarian values of those who devote their energy to reducing the suffering of others. We are wary of losing healthy babies as we deal with the bathwater of instrumentalization.

For us, saving and protecting the lives of people in imminent danger is a fundamentally necessary and worthwhile activity. Humanitarian action is a safety net for the most vulnerable in times of disaster, whatever the source of the calamity. As such, it deserves to be protected and nurtured despite its obvious limitations and imperfections. And while instrumentalization is a constant, so are the efforts to improve the effectiveness of this essential enterprise. Our chapters document this tension—and what happens when the humanitarian guard is lowered. The arrow of history does not travel in a straight line; learning from the past is the best way to ensure that its arc tends toward more progress and justice for the millions whose lives and protection are at risk.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the generous grants from Norway, the Netherlands, and Australia that allowed us to conduct the field research on which it is largely based. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the colleagues and friends who gave of their time and insights, hosted, fed, watered, and sometimes provided logistics and security during the authors' time in the field. They are too numerous to be recorded here. Nonetheless, many of the ideas discussed in the following pages were born of face-to-face conversations, reflections, and verbal jousting with protagonists in the front lines of disaster response. Our interlocutors—government officials,

UN humanitarian and political staff, NGO workers in some of the remotest outposts ranging from Bamiyan to El Geneina—who have wittingly or unwittingly contributed to this book, of course, bear no responsibility for its contents, for which the authors alone are responsible. Throughout the gestation process participants in formal and informal consultations helped us to sharpen our ideas: special thanks to Michael Barnett, Fiona Terry, Mary Anderson, Randolph Kent, Bertrand Taithe, Stephen Hopgood, Raga Alphonsus, Aunohita Mojumdar, Jeevan Sharma, Krystel Carrier-Sabourin, and Tanya Zayed. We are most grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation and the staff at Bellagio (in particular Robert Garris, Nadia Gilardoni, and Linda Marston-Reid) for hosting our final authors' meeting. The congenial atmosphere and surroundings allowed us to refine much of what follows. Thanks are also due to Anita Robbins and her colleagues at the Feinstein International Center for dealing with travel and administrative headaches. Finally, the authors and the editor are greatly indebted to Jim Lance, Alexandra Hartnett, and Joan Laflamme at Kumarian Press for believing in this project and helping it through its many hoops and moving parts.