Humanitarianism, Antislavery, and Transnational History

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The recent historiography of humanitarianism and human rights has led to debates surrounding the historical moment at which these ideas began to coalesce. Some historians emphasise post-World War II developments as providing the impetus for humanitarianism and human rights; others focus on the international history of human rights during this period. Others still emphasise the need to consider the earlier foundations of these concepts, not just by looking to the nineteenth century, but as far back as the early modern period. If a tendency to focus on the expansion of human rights agendas during the twentieth century remains, new attention is being given to the earlier foundations for transnational humanitarianism. Margaret Abruzzo’s *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (2011) and Peter Stamatov’s *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires, and Advocacy* (2013) are recent examples of this historiographical impetus. Both approach the history of humanitarianism through its transnational development prior to the twentieth century, paying particular attention to its influence on the antislavery movement.

Humanitarianism was enacted before there was a word to define the concept. Though human rights and humanitarianism are not one and the same, the ethos associated with latter is often described alongside an expanding conceptualisation of rights, which in the twentieth-century coalesced around the concept of human rights. The new attention to the “‘pre-history’ of human rights,” according to Abigail Green, is conceived through three key areas of inquiry: the eighteenth-century emergence of a humanitarian sensibility and the nineteenth-century activist mobilisation that followed; nineteenth-century diplomatic and military humanitarian intervention; and the discontinuity between the revolutionary discourse of rights and the post-World War II ideology of human rights. The work of Abruzzo and Stamatov interacts with the first category, broadly conceived. Rather than attempting to situate the origins of human rights within transatlantic antislavery, which has been a focus of other scholars, Abruzzo and Stamatov instead position this movement in terms of a burgeoning sense of humanitarianism.

Many historians briefly describe the transatlantic impetus toward social
reform that took place during the long nineteenth century in terms of an expanding humanitarian ethos, especially in regards to abolitionism. Instead, Abruzzo and Stamatov make it their purpose to ask: How did this flourishing humanitarian ethos come to be? These monographs complement each other in that they find differing, but not competing, transnational historical underpinnings for humanitarianism. Beginning in the sixteenth century, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism* can be viewed as a useful prelude to *Polemical Pain*, which focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Stamatov and Abruzzo, humanitarianism has its origins in an aversion to cruelty, and the consequent pain inflicted upon others. Both emphasise the importance of social, political, and philosophical circumstances that contributed to the development of such a perspective. Transnationalism is the key: interactions between the old world and the new become central to the growth of a humanitarian consciousness. The abolitionism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries thus becomes not simply the locus of a new humanitarian ethos, but rather as the outcome of broader historical interactions.

*The Origins of Global Humanitarianism* situates the foundations of what Stamatov terms “long-distance advocacy” amongst the sixteenth-century Catholic missionaries who challenged the treatment of indigenous peoples by European colonists in the Americas. Beginning with Spanish colonisation in the Caribbean, the Catholic mendicant orders’ preoccupation with indigenous salvation and evangelisation led some, particularly Dominicans, to challenge the exploitative labour practices associated with imperial expansion (p. 17). According to Stamatov, the consequent response of some sixteenth-century missionaries represented the beginnings of a humanitarian ethic. This provided the foundations for a recognisable pattern of long-distance advocacy: religious missionaries became radicalised in response to the mistreatment of indigenous peoples; a process of monarchical appeal and counterappeal ensued; and the state ultimately weighed colonial abuses as the lamentable product of imperialism (p. 73). The paradox was that slavery became untenable and illegal in Europe as the slavery of Africans became normative in its colonial possessions (p. 75-77). Long-distance advocacy, Stamatov concludes, was repeated in the British colonisation of North America, and influenced the transnational antislavery strategies established by Quakers. Transnational engagement on behalf of the oppressed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries is thus viewed in terms of humanitarianism.

This is essentially the point at which *Polemical Pain* commences. Alongside the unprecedented aversion to pain Europeans and Americans developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an array of social movements proliferated for the purpose of alleviating pain and abolishing its infliction (p. 1-2). Two threads of eighteenth-century humanitarian thought are then emphasised: the value Quakers placed on self-denial, embodied suffering, and martyrdom; and the growth of a moral philosophy that objected to “the deliberate and unnecessary infliction of pain” (p. 63). In contrast to Stamatov’s attention to long-distance advocacy, Abruzzo problematises the notion of sympathy for distant individuals through a rhetorical
consideration of the slavery debates in nineteenth-century America. Shifting to a rhetorical analysis, Abruzzo demonstrates how the concept of humanitarianism, perhaps surprisingly, shaped antebellum antislavery arguments against cruelty as much as it influenced paternalistic proslavery understandings of humaneness. A search for “moral clarity” meant it became a question of whether or not “slavery entailed pain, and whether such pain was both intolerable and worse than the alternatives” (159). The influence of these philosophical threads of humanitarian thought can therefore be observed both within and beyond the moral perception of abolitionists.

The significance of transnational networks of ideological exchange and advocacy is central to this appraisal of humanitarianism. Without imperial networks and European interaction with the colonial ‘other’, it is implied, humanitarianism would have necessarily developed differently. In this vein, Stamatov’s discussion of the role Christopher Columbus played in the Spanish colonisation of the Caribbean, together with his advocacy of slave trafficking, is particularly noteworthy (pp. 29-33, p. 78). The more institutionalised processes associated with long-distance advocacy are complemented by the analysis of the philosophical and rhetorical dimensions of the slavery debates. Yet both studies lack any great attention to the important role women played in these social movements. In emphasising Anglo-American networks, the voices of the indigenous and the enslaved also remain largely absent. That both ultimately situate antislavery as the transnational outcome of this growing humanitarian ethos has implications for understanding how the history of humanitarianism relates to contemporary social movements.

Indeed, these monographs draw important lessons for the way social movements use this concept in the twenty-first century. Stamatov views the long-distance advocacy formula as having influenced contemporary humanitarianism (p. 11-13). The continuities that have shaped humanitarianism in different eras, according to Stamatov, emerge because activists “produce, consciously or not, a culturally and cognitively available model that has already been tested in practice” (p. 11). Where Stamatov mainly finds continuity between historical and present day forms of institutionalised activism, Abruzzo instead presents a cautionary tale. Her focus on the rhetoric of both sides of the nineteenth-century slavery debates reveal the competing ideological projects for which a humanitarian ethos can be used. For Abruzzo, the way discussions of cruelty and humaneness were used to bolster arguments on both sides demonstrates the limitations of centring on humanitarianism and building “moral judgements solely on objections to pain.” Since “appeals to humaneness competed with languages of human rights, racial equality, and other ways of defining moral obligation,” Abruzzo emphasises the need for humanitarianism to be part of broader discussion about rights, humaneness, and equality (pp. 241-242).

It is perhaps for these reasons that transatlantic abolitionism becomes a key reference point in the rhetoric of contemporary social movements. As antislavery was the movement in which nascent forms of humanitarianism coalesced, reformers have, since the nineteenth century, used it as a historical achievement to be mirrored, and even recreated. The phrase “new abolitionism” has been used to describe many subsequent social movements, from the “white slavery” activism of the early
twentieth century to the present-day prison abolition movement, anti-sex trafficking, and modern antislavery. Like their predecessor, these movements are at once local, national, and transnational in their outlook; unlike nineteenth-century antislavery, however, they actively covet a humanitarian ethos. Similarities though there may be, there are dangers in appropriating the complicated history of humanitarianism, which has privileged the voices of activists over that of the exploited and enslaved, and has even be used to justify questionable ideologies. The history of humanitarianism has a legacy that shapes contemporary social movements, but it should be understood in its entirety rather than as a partial historical memory.