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Book Review: Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action by Thomas G. Weiss

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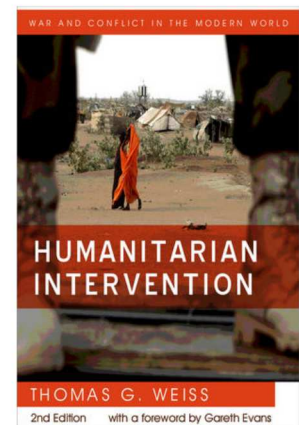
*Drawing on over two decades of research, **Thomas G. Weiss** aims to provide a persuasive introduction to the theory and practice of humanitarian intervention in the modern world.*

*Weiss examines the normative evolution of what is increasingly known as the “responsibility to protect” in the context of the global war on terror, UN debates, and such international actions as Libya. **Henry Radice** notes that the book succeeds best as a plea for R2P to become more than the latest rhetorical alibi for inaction in the face of atrocity.*

Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action, 2nd edition. Thomas G. Weiss. Polity.

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[Thomas G. Weiss](#), alongside his frequent collaborator Michael Barnett, can lay claim to being the doyen of humanitarian studies. [His writings](#) on humanitarian intervention have been agenda-defining throughout the post-Cold War period among policymakers, practitioners and academics. In this updated edition of his survey of humanitarian intervention, he evaluates the state of the practice a decade on from the important shift in the discourse towards the notion of a “responsibility to protect” (R2P), a shift Weiss himself contributed to as research director of the 2001 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) which formulated the doctrine in a landmark report.



Weiss outlines some of the conceptual building blocks of humanitarian intervention, before drawing a series of “thumbnail sketches” of interventions from the nineteenth century to the present. He then examines the ways in which our understandings of both war and humanitarian action have been contested in the post-Cold War period, assesses the practical and conceptual contribution of R2P to these debates, before turning to the political obstacles to a fuller implementation of the R2P doctrine.

Weiss argues that “[o]ver the last decade, we have witnessed not too much but rather too little armed force to protect human beings” and laments the fact that “the hard edge of the R2P stick thus has been ignored” (p. 13). This perhaps explains why, though the book is ultimately more convincing as a survey of R2P than of humanitarian intervention *per se*, with each triumph and setback of the new norm carefully detailed, this is not reflected in the title. Weiss reminds us that one of the purposes of R2P was to move away from the terminology of humanitarian intervention and some of the entrenched debates around it. But he is clearly concerned that an emphasis on prevention and less coercive measures should not come at the expense of enabling timely humanitarian interventions in response to the worst atrocities.

Later, Weiss writes that the “essential challenges of humanitarian intervention are not normative but, rather, operational” (p. 133). The first part of this claim is perhaps somewhat premature: it is difficult to see humanitarian intervention as anything other than a normative challenge. The sanitising language of R2P, often helpful as it is, cannot do away with the inescapable paradoxes inherent in using military force for humanitarian ends, in killing to save. Certainly R2P can provide a useful language in which to argue a

particular case. But no normative innovation is likely to make the hard choices that characterise humanitarian interventions any less hard, or any less controversial. As such, there is something of a false dichotomy at play in distinguishing between the normative and operational challenges that humanitarian intervention faces, as both are linked to questions of the political will of putative interveners, and of the political context in which interventions might be carried out. This political context is well set out in the chapter on “New Wars and New Humanitarianisms” and in the concluding chapter, tellingly entitled “So What? Moving from Rhetoric to Reality”.

Weiss ends this last chapter, and the book, where one might have expected him to begin, by invoking profound definitional questions about the nature of humanitarianism. He briefly summarises the ongoing debates on the identity of humanitarianism, to which his own edited volume with Michael Barnett, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008) is one of the outstanding contributions. But at times, Weiss’ patience for the endless soul-searching of aid workers seems to be wearing thin: “Nothing could be more obvious than the need for professionalism among aid workers who act side by side with soldiers during humanitarian interventions.” (p. 168) While he is right to bemoan some of the lack of coordination and skewed incentives of the current aid industry, the reluctance of many aid workers to “act side by side with soldiers” is partly a recognition of just how hard “the hard edge of the R2P stick” might be, and of some of the practical limitations of intervention that Weiss acknowledges elsewhere in the book.

Although a survey by name, the book actually comes across as intensely personal, a reflection of several decades of engagement with a knotty problem that has no easy answers: how to generate the political will to act effectively, and if necessary forcefully, to halt mass atrocities. As a general introduction to humanitarian intervention, it is perhaps slightly distorted by the centrality of R2P, and the policy debates surrounding it, to its analysis. Ultimately, it succeeds best as a contribution to the debates on R2P, and as a plea for R2P to become more than the latest rhetorical alibi for inaction in the face of atrocity.

Henry Radice is Research Manager of the Justice and Security Research Programme in the Department of International Development at the LSE. His research focuses on “the politics of humanity”, on how we understand and negotiate conceptions of common humanity and solidarity in response to humanitarian crises. His work explores the ethics and politics of humanitarianism and, increasingly, climate change. He holds a PhD in International Relations, an MSc in the Theory and History of International Relations, and a BSc in Economics and Economic History, all from the LSE. [Read more reviews by Henry.](#)

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