

Rieff: Navigating the Pain of Others

American writer and advocate David Rieff has a complex relationship with humanitarianism and the assistance it provides. On the one hand he sees aid as a fundamental function of human society, on the other he worries that it is manipulated toward political ends. He believes in “just” wars, but only in context, a view that has led him to question American involvement in Afghanistan. One thing he’s certain of is that aid workers are workers like any others. They’re not above the law and need to adjust to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

compiled by *Francesca Lancini* photos by *Marta Zaccaron*



David Rieff is an imposing 60-year-old American writer and journalist with piercing eyes and cowboy boots. He’s written a dozen books that run openly counter to commonly held views, becoming among the most recognized critical minds of modern times. Over the years, he’s focused considerable attention on the impact of wars. He was strong critic of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. More recently, he’s become interested in humanitarian crises and how they’re handled in domestic and international terms. His 2003 book “A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis,” which he completed in 2001, is complicated, edgy, yet illuminating voyage through the realities and management of civil strife in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Rieff recently endured personal hard times, which he also chronicled. The illness and death of his mother, the acclaimed essayist Susan Sontag, led him to published “Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son’s Memoir,” in which he recounts her last years and her fear of dying. Since then, he’s returned to writing about pressing social issues. He chatted with east in Ferrara just before leaving for famine-plagued Somalia. As always, his chief concern was human suffering, including the concept of just wars (he mentions the Rwandan genocide). Rieff is a Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute at the New School for Social Research as well as a ranking member of Human Rights Watch.

Tell us about the emergence of the ideology of humanitarianism. It began in the 1970s and 80s and flowered in the 1990s, as a result of with communism. It mostly attracted peo-

ple on the left, but also young idealists. The founders of humanitarian organizations like Doctors Without Borders, who belong to the May 1968 generation, saw humanitarianism as helping to fill a void. It was a place to nurture feelings of idealism that weren’t made good on by 1968, which didn’t bring about hoped-for change. Humanitarianism also played another role. With the privatization that occurred in Margaret Thatcher era, the idea spread that private groups should address social issues, particularly since the state was playing an ever-smaller role. The birth of NGOs reflects the spirit of the times.

Yet you see humanitarianism as in crisis?

Not really. In 2001, when I wrote that it was in crisis, I meant two things specifically. The first was that the world’s most powerful states were using the prestige of humanitarian operations to further their own interests. The second point was that humanitarianism was beginning to interfere with the human rights movement.

Regarding major states, it’s now pretty much a fact that they’ve appropriated most of the credit due to international agencies and to NGOs. The focus today is on the second issue, humanitarianism and human rights, which is best understood in terms of the creation of The International Criminal Court at The Hague (Editor’s note: The court was created by the Rome Statute of 1998 and became a working entity in 2002). Aid workers want to work in defense of human rights, but do to so can also hinder their work. Now that they can be called as witnesses in war crimes trials in The Hague, many of these workers are no longer welcome in some areas.

What are the main defects of humanitarianism?

Utopia is always a defect. Humanitarianism is negative if it’s utopian. Humanitarianism is riddled with contradictions. It says it wants to respect other people and other places, but intervenes based on the principles embraced by who go in. Humanitarianism has never found a solution to the idea of the charitable empire.

In modern times, its origins can be traced back to European colonialism. But it’s no longer feasible to speak in terms of colonialism. By definition, humanitarians should be able to go wherever they want, as non-govern-

David Rieff faces the audience during the Festival of “Internazionale” in Ferrara, Italy, where he discussed conflicts and refugees.

ment entities, based on assisting with basic needs and as carriers of good intentions. There’s politics implicit to all humanitarian action, so the question is whether the politics make sense. Humanitarian action has an impact on war. Just being in a war-torn country can bring about change, maybe positive change. Even groups working for human rights agencies are the agents of a kind of political action. But from my perspective, the best humanitarians are those with the most modest goals.

One might say that in ideal world NGOs shouldn’t even exist. Why shouldn’t governments take care of their people?

I’m not interested in an ideal world. Italy is a utopian country, profoundly peaceful in its modern incarnation. There are people here and there who truly believe that an ideal world is possible, but I’m not one of them. It’s that governments sometimes give up on taking care of their people, but sometimes they do because they lack the ability to carry out the process.

Take Somalia. You can’t say they gave up because they never had a process to start with. It’s fine to dream about a better world, so long as you don’t criticize humanitarians for what they’re attempting to do. A Red Cross representative in Rwanda, Philippe Gaillard, once told me,



“My job is to give a human dimension, which will always be inadequate, to a situation that should not exist.” The task of humanitarian isn’t to save the world or to make it better. As Sadako Ogata, the former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, once said, There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems.

Between 1992 and 2001, you reported from Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Afghanistan. The last decade has been different. In 2003 and 2004 I was in Iraq. Then I went back to Congo. Now

maybe I’m a little old for war zones. I am, however, fascinated by humanitarian issues. In November I’m headed to Mogadishu because I’m writing a book about the global food crisis. In the last three years I’ve also been in India, China, Brazil, Mexico to investigate chronic malnutrition. After 15 years of focusing on the humanitarian emergency, I felt it was logical to take a close look at development. There are seven billion people on the planet and one in seven doesn’t have enough to eat. At the same time, we have a strange outlook toward humanitarian crises. We fall in love with some cases which, based on how serious they, are far less devastating in human terms than others. Take Palestine. Some 8,000 people died in the two Intifadas, while a million died in the Congo. In every European city you can almost instantly find 10,000 young people who’ll take to the streets against Israel. You can only find 100 non-Congolese to take up the cause of the Congo.

Does mass media bear some of the blame?

They’re not that powerful. Better said, they’re powerful only when there’s context that favors them to start with.

You’ve written that democracy without economic justice is a privilege only few enjoy. Thousands of desperate people arrived Italian shores. There have been riots and violence in several Arab states. Don’t you think the media and politicians have given exaggerated emphasis to the “success” of the so-called Arab Spring? Look, every revolution produces insecurity and migra-



tion. But something very important is happening, something that was literally unthinkable just short time ago. The Arab Spring shouldn’t let its promise evaporate. At the same time, it’s also true that revolutions often fail. That’s been the case in a number of countries, whether Hungary in 1956 or France in 1848. The Arab Spring may fail if the poor can’t be guaranteed a better life.

You’ve written, about the Italian situation: “The migrants arriving in Lampedusa are ghosts sitting at democracy’s banquet.”

Don’t you think that the distinction between migrants and asylum seekers, implemented by UNHCR, risks discriminating against the latter?

It’s a matter of law. UNHCR makes its decisions in terms of international law. It’s not responsible if its authority derives from articles set down by the Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1951. It’s the Geneva Convention that’s created the problems.

For example, it has no provision for displaced people. Is there is a distinction between official migrants and political refugees? Yes and no. Most of the migrants are not going hungry. That’s romantic myth, a sentimental fantasy. Migrants often have greater energy, enthusiasm and education than their peers. They know how to get out and usually do so to guarantee getting an education or to secure social stability. Hungry people don’t get on boats.

There’s an anti-migrant view common in the south of the world. Plenty of people complain that a society’s most talented and educated members, instead of staying put, leave hospitals without doctors and schools without teachers to move to the Northern Hemisphere.

The latest humanitarian war was in Libya. But Western military intervention seemed to have been decided based more on political and economic reasons than humanitarian ones.

Does what happened in Libya remind you of Kosovo?

It’s complicated story. I opposed intervention in Libya. The just part might have been intervening to protect civilians in Benghazi, but, once accomplished, that would

have been the limit of the humanitarian action. Foreign military actions would have had needed to end with that. I do not believe in the idea of wars to overthrow dictatorships. The great powers have long used humanitarian pretexts to justify military action, or to avoid it. In Bosnia, where there some 250,000 were dead and millions displaced, the West said: “We can’t intervene militarily to do so would block the humanitarian effort.” In Kosovo, you had the opposite. That was not a humanitarian crisis, as many still say, but a political, because the mass deportation of Albanians began only after the war was under way. Eventually, in 1999, the approach changed because there was a desire to get rid of [Sloboban] Milosevic, who was seen as a risk to an orderly Europe.

According to observers, the war in Afghanistan, which took on humanitarian connotations with the notion of saving Afghans from the Taliban, has failed to bring about the desired results. Do you see it as a failure?

At first I supported it because I thought it was right for the United States to strike back at those who had hid them on September 11. There were close ties between Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar (editor’s note: the Taliban leader of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001). Ten years later, I don’t think U.S. troops should have stayed. It’s not up to the U.S. to decide who runs Afghanistan. It’s impossible to say at this juncture whether the second part of the war is a failure, though I consider it a mistake.

Is a just war still possible in these days and times.

Sure. I’m not Italian and so I’m not a pacifist. Pacifism isn’t universal. This isn’t an opinion but a fact. I don’t believe in pacifism because there are too many wars in the world.

Aid workers in Kabul admit that NGOs are too removed from the local population, barricaded behind high walls and barbed wire.

I don’t see it that way. Humanitarian work is like any other. There are corrupt ones, just as there are corrupt



journalists, lawyers or engineers. It’s just that humanitarian workers face higher expectations, which isn’t really fair. It’s true that there’s a lot of waste in Kabul, and that many people take advantage of the situation, but there are also plenty of people doing a good job.

It also true that in the poorer parts of the world you can find empty hospitals and school programs that went nowhere, notwithstanding heavy spending. Can inefficiency and corruption negate the effectiveness of humanitarian intentions?

Yes, absolutely. But aid workers can’t change the world. You can’t idealize or demonize them. It’s not fair. There might be 10 percent that don’t work out and 90 percent who do well. The real problem is that anyone can become an aid worker. All you need to do is collect enough money to start a program somewhere. NGOs also shouldn’t support political party, but it happens that they pay off warlords to have the right to operate on controlled territory. By this logic you could say that NGOs fund wars. But if an agency came to Italy, it couldn’t say it wouldn’t pay taxes because it didn’t like Berlusconi.

What are the limit to compromise in a crisis situation?

There’s no mathematical formula. In general you reach the limit when you realize you’re doing more harm than good. Or when NGOs realize they’re contributing more to the war than to human welfare. This happened in Rwandan refugee camps in the Congo in 1994 (editor’s note: MSF and other agencies left the camps when they saw Hutus, held responsible for the genocide of the Tutsis, reorganizing for future actions.). Humanitarian actions can have negative consequences. But context is vital. Most places where they operate are in very bad shape. Purity is a totalitarian ambition. There’s no assurance that public life is better than private life.

You’re helping with ending malnutrition in India, which affects 47 percent of children, which is 18 percent higher than Sub-Saharan Africa.



Is this dark side of Indian democracy a taboo?

People love the slogans and oversimplifications. New ideas are emerging, for example that the time of America and the West is over while the East is growing. If Indian and Chinese markets are doing better than those in America, Europe and Japan, which are flat, that doesn't mean their societies are improving.

They'll just consume more. American technological innovations continue to astound. Look at my iPhone: Ten years ago they didn't exist and now everyone wants one. India has a population of 1.2 billion, and just a fourth, 300 million, live on par with Western middle class standards. The government isn't interested in taking serious social welfare measures. Indian democracy has yet to make a commitment to the poor. The same holds true in China. That's not the case in Brazil and Mexico.

You've said that had you not become a writer you probably would have become an aid worker. Do you still believe that?

Yes. I admire the humanitarian world, even if I'm a critic. Most of the people I know in MSF and Save the Children know what they're doing.

What are your ties with Doctors Without Borders?

I travel with them. I write about the situations they face. I contribute regularly to their activities, including debates. I'm a strange sort of insider/outsider.

What would you say to a young reporter who wants cover international politics?

That this is a really bad time to be a reporter. The Internet allows you to publish more easily, but in general it pays poorly. It's a hard road, because you're on your own. Many young people think they're reporters just because they have a video camera. Blame that on journalism schools, which pump them up. I wish that journalism schools were like medical schools, where they teach you that being a doctor is full of frustrations. ●