European Research Council, Consolidator Grant

Archipelagic Imperatives: Shipwreck and Lifesaving in European Societies since 1800 (AISLES)

Abstract:

Why does humanitarianism take the form of an archipelago, an aggregation of "single issues," selective, resistant to generalization, and even at times inconsistent? In order to answer this question, which is crucial to, but has been sidelined in **histories of humanitarianism**, the project develops a novel approach. This approach homes in on **the rupture of humanitarian morality with quotidian moral norms and values**.

For this purpose, the project investigates the **history of a particular moral norm**, the imperative of saving lives from shipwreck, that emerged in the ambit of volunteer lifeboat movements from the 1820s onward. Such movements had emerged first in Britain and the Netherlands, then elsewhere, most prominently France and Germany. The imperative in question took the form of a novel unconditional norm that demanded **taking counterintuitive risks in order to save lives**. Previously, assistance to the shipwrecked had been situational. Moral detachment from suffering had been recognized as a value. Existential risk had constituted an exemption from lifesaving duty. Lifeboat movements overturned this quotidian moral rationale. This shift was neither determined by economic incentives nor by technological or legal innovation. The saving of lives from shipwreck thus provides an ideal laboratory, with a rich and varied source base, for **understanding humanitarian-moral innovation** on its own terms.

The intervention of the project is twofold. On the plane of historical knowledge, it provides a model for the **deep contextual analysis of moral culture** in terms of the emergence, sustenance, representation, and insular distinctness of humanitarian imperatives. On the plane of theoretical knowledge, the project develops **innovative answers to questions of moral theory**, especially about the generality of norms and the conflicted relation of humanitarianism and everyday morality. The project develops novel methodological tools for combining moral theorizing and historical research.

Synopsis

I. Basics

1. What? The project studies an innovation in moral culture. It does so in the framework of the history of discourses and practices of the organized saving of lives from shipwreck in northwestern Europe – namely Britain, Netherlands, France, and Germany, where rescue work was established on the basis of philanthropic donations and volunteer engagement. The project aims to cover not only the emergence but also the sustenance of the humanitarian imperative in question, from around 1800 well into the twentieth century. The emergence of organized rescue at sea was neither tied to direct economic incentives – the focus on lifesaving, in particular, was never profit-oriented – nor was it driven by technological or legal change. The imperative to attempt to rescue the shipwrecked with almost complete disregard for one's own safety, not merely by occasional acts of heroism, but consistently, is the primary subject matter of the project.

2. What for? The overall goal is to establish an innovative approach to the history of humanitarianism that will open a new perspective on the history of moral norms and values in general. Most importantly, it will become possible to analyze humanitarianism as a form of deliberate disruption of quotidian arrangements of moral reasoning, a process the project will address as "humanitarian rupture." In the disruption of ordinary moral imperatives, humanitarian morality becomes limited to single issues, that is to say, specific types of situation. These types require laborious work, in discourse and practice, to be kept in a balance of concreteness and generality. This balance renders them distinct from other humanitarian causes.

3. Why? The approach established by the project will go beyond, not merely previous historical research literature on lifeboats and rescue at sea; but also beyond previous research literature on humanitarianism that usually ends up in a compound of ideas about moral sentiments; emotive practices in which the normative component is not described clearly; a teleological directedness toward legal codification in the form of human rights; and a line of explanation that emphasizes religious culture and its politics as the ideological structure behind all humanitarianism. The shared underlying problem of all of these lines of analysis is their unmotivated leap to an unwarranted level of generality and their inability to analyze morality on convincing historical and theoretical terms.

4. How? The project is based on archival as well as published sources (document collections of lifeboat organizations, publications of those organizations, historical newspapers, "gray literature," pertinent governmental records, pertinent collections of personal papers). Since the project aims to analyze wider symbolic forms in which moral and other values are represented, it also draws on literary and visual sources. In terms of method, the project will rely on a synthesis of approaches that comprises hermeneutic close reading, analyses of discourse and practice, iconography, and media historical analysis (with attention to the significance of channels of symbolic communication). The key methodological innovation of the project is bringing cultural historical analysis to bear on theoretical argument in the area of moral theory and from this point of view to fundamentally revise the historical understanding of humanitarianism and the cultural history of moral norms.

II. Sequence of work packages and objectives, with notes on the state of the art

1. Cultural history of saving lives from shipwreck: The history of lifeboat movements has mostly been written by the organizations themselves, as a fundraising activity meant to encourage long-term donor loyalty. These histories are not devoid of information, but usually lack a scholarly apparatus and are marked by blind spots for e.g. the economic history of the charitable organizations and their transnational as well as political aspects (de Booy 1959 is the most comprehensive and broad-minded of these works that I have seen; Evans 2003 provides an update along similar lines).

> *Objectives:* The project will provide a more **comprehensive and contextual account of shipwreck humanitarianism**, including an exact analysis of the functions and traits of historical writing within the humanitarian effort.

2. Moral economy: The first target of this historical analysis will be the "moral economy," the specific mixture of moral and other values present in lifeboat movements (following Thompson 1971, for humanitarianism Haskell 1985, Fassin 2012). More precisely, these movements ought to be understood, the project will argue, in terms of the interrelations of monetary and ostentatiously non-monetary sets of values. In accordance with Simmel (1900), these interrelations are unstable. The project will show that saving lives from shipwreck was incentivized by monetary premiums for volunteer rescuers, and that it afforded mostly indirect economic opportunities to the organizing philanthropists, such as a surveillance function of nautical

accidents for insurers, or opportunities for specialist boatbuilders. Yet emphatically, these incentives do not suffice to explain the value structure around the existential risk-taking that the practice of saving lives from shipwreck required. Negotiations between existential risk and economic risk were necessary.

Objectives: The project will develop an explanation for the **mixture of monetary and non-monetary value systems** in place. It will gauge the degree to which this mixture was distinctive. It will discuss ways in which moral imperatives were founded upon values, and ways in which disparities of values were utilized to **introduce rupture into normative orders**. It will devise novel tools for making the notion of "moral economy" more workable.

3. Symbolic forms: Values require symbolic representation. For monetary values, representation through currency is rather straightforward. Non-monetary values, by contrast, rely on more complex symbolic forms. The project will analyze such forms starting out from a discussion of the classical topos of "shipwreck with spectator" (Blumenberg 1979). This image served to praise the calm and even joyful detachment, with which a truly philosophical observer was to behold a shipwreck from the safety of the shore. The world was chaos and suffering, and detachment was imperative, *next to* the rendering of assistance, where opportune. Blumenberg thought that the topos fell out of use as novel norms of engagement canceled those of detachment in eighteenth-century scholarly and philosophical discourse. The project will argue that the duty of engagement was not conceived as applying to everyone equally, but fell unevenly on the coastal population that was accused of prior impassivity and indifference. Shipwreck happened in front of spectators-in-the-plural, in a complex social setting.

Objectives: The project will develop an account of the forms of **symbolic representation of shipwreck and lifesaving,** from around 1800 into the contemporary period. This account will draw on a range of notions from the aesthetic field – most prominently the poetics of tragic drama and the iconography of shipwreck – in which also the **simultaneity of suffering and witnessing over significant distance** played a major role. The project will provide novel analyses of (a) the **poetic forms** of discourse about shipwreck and lifesaving, both in literary (see Wolf 2013) and in news media discourse; (b) of the respective **iconography**, across different visual media (painting, photography, graphic art: Venning 1985, Goedde 1989); and (c) of the problem of **contemporariness** as a way of shaping cultural notions about time (Rabinow 2007) that also tied humanitarianism to then novel forms of historical writing.

Wreck of the "Granite State," deliberately beached off Porthcurno, Cornwall, in 1895 (Gibson Family Collection, NMM Greenwich): The stylized photograph displays the continuing intelligibility of genre norms for showing shipwreck spectatorship along with humanitarian sensitivity. By the 1890s, the suffering themselves are no longer depicted; the spectators are marked as respectably middle-class.

4. Work of distinction: The next step of the envisaged historical analysis will be to examine the efforts of lifeboat movements to distinguish the moral imperative of saving lives from shipwreck from other, only seemingly similar norms. Not merely organizationally, but also in terms of humanitarian-moral argument and practice, saving lives from shipwreck was different from adjacent humanitarian causes, such as the coeval movement for saving lives from drowning (see still Brokken, Frijhoff 1992, Lehmann 2015). This work of

distinction was where the single issue character of humanitarian movements was forged. It was here that the balance between generality of the situation-type and particularity of the tie to such a situation-type was established and sustained.

Objectives: The project identifies two main areas of the drift toward distinction in shipwreck humanitarianism: (a) the staunchly **secular** character – surprising for a humanitarian pursuit from the early nineteenth century – of lifeboat movements that was upheld by a careful avoidance of religious rhetoric and symbolism; and (b) the **"biopolitical" meaning of prioritizing sheer lifesaving**, as a privileged, enhanced form of access to the human body in an emergency on which normative claims can be based. On account of such claims, lifesaving humanitarianism developed discursive and practical forms that were sharply distinct from the moral cultures of emancipatory, charitable, or educational humanitarian movements. Yet, the work of distinction did not stop at this point. (c) Shipwreck humanitarianism distinguished itself from other forms of lifesaving movement as concerned the dead bodies of the recently deceased victims of shipwreck washing up ashore or found aboard wrecks. The **dead of shipwreck** were treated as beyond identifiability and as ciphers for the universal dead beyond any particular communal belonging (for context see Simpson 1984). They formed a symbolic counterpoint to simultaneously evolving patterns of the "work of the dead" (Laqueur 2015) in modern European societies. The project will study the work of humanitarian distinction until present times.

5. History of humanitarianism: The history of humanitarianism is an extensive field. It is marked by an overarching plotline that treats the emergence of humanitarian moral movements since the eighteenth century (often starting with abolitionism) as a unified process. This process is often regarded as driven by a presumptive rise of empathy as a moral emotion (Laqueur 1989, Rorty 1993, Nussbaum 1995, Hunt 2007; more broadly on the place of empathy within the field of the history of emotions Frevert 2011, Plamper 2012); by changing discursive models for processing distance, including enlightenment philosophical discourse on moral sentiments (especially Boltanski 1993); and by the imperial-ideological and capitalist features of humanitarian movements (Haskell 1985, Barnett 2011). The premise that "humanitarianism" is a unified phenomenon with a common root underpins the field of the history of humanitarianism. This premise has also enabled the history of human rights, as a closely adjacent field, to marginalize, to some extent, the historical significance and efficacy of humanitarian imperatives (moral culture does not become a primary target of analysis in representative works in this field, e.g. Moyn 2010, Hoffmann 2010, Eckel 2014).

Objectives: The project questions the premise of the unity of humanitarianism. It argues that the **fragmentation of humanitarianism** in single issue movements is not simply a consequence of pragmatic constraints and principles of expediency; but that this fragmentation is a precondition for the type of moral argument through which humanitarian movements are established. It then becomes doubtful whether there can ever be a unified, systematic, general humanitarian morality.

6. The history of humanitarianism and moral theory: As far as existing explanations of the fragmentation of humanitarianism go, the project is in an intensive and critical dialogue with Krause's (2014) conclusions drawn from the economic logic of contemporary single issue work; with Janse (2007) on the significance of single issue movements and pressure groups for the development of nineteenth-century European political public spheres; and with Althusser (1970) on the foundations of fragmented moral imperatives in "ideological state apparatuses," i.e. a plural array of agencies that condense modern state power in particular sets of behavioral norms with divergent areas of pertinence. The project will also engage with and challenge actual philosophical arguments on the unity and, respectively, the plurality of morality, with Nietzsche (1887) as a pioneering author, but also with contemporary interlocutors (e.g. Williams 1985, Dancy 2004, Parfit 2009, Appiah 2010).

Objectives: The project challenges extant lines of theoretical argument (a) by developing a far more broadly contextual **historicization of moral norms** than would seem admissible in the very coarse-grained manner in which cultural history has hitherto been admitted into moral argument – and has drawn on moral theory itself; and (b) by taking fully into account the pluralizing, **fragmenting role of humanitarianism within everyday moral cultures**, a function that has provoked little philosophical or historical contemplation. The project will (c) also offer a novel account of how **legal regulation** relates to the histories of humanitarianism and morality. It will do so by developing the notion of a fragmenting **humanitarian rupture, based on single issues,** within moral culture.

III. Division of labor

The **PI project** will be to establish an account of the cultural history of saving lives from shipwreck in European societies and the problem of archipelagic humanitarian imperatives, addressing the themes and

work packages outlined under II.1-6 (synthetic monograph and a series of articles on theoretical issues as outlined especially under II.6).

The PI project will provide a conceptual and empirical framework for four **postdoctoral subprojects**. These will be: A. Humanitarianism and Sovereignty (4 years); B. Humanitarian Technologies (3 years); C. The Imagery of Shipwreck Humanitarianism (3 years); and D. Humanitarian Generality (4 years). The projects are of different duration on account of their expected contribution to the overall project and on account of the different design of their work packages.

A. Humanitarianism and Sovereignty: This subproject will develop at greater length the theme of the relations of nineteenth and twentieth-century humanitarianism with the shifting understanding of sovereignty. Its starting point will be the advent of the humanitarian engagement of monarchs (which emerged next to their charitable commitments). It will pursue **the role of the sovereign in humanitarianism**, and the role of humanitarianism for the symbolic ostentation of sovereignty (a starting point will be monarchical patronage over lifeboat societies). The subproject will then branch out into questions to do with the relation of political nation state and empire, e.g. concerning the distinction, brought about not least by lifeboat station systems, of national and imperial shorelines. The subproject will also study the nexus between merchant elites and court societies in this connection. The broader aim of this subproject will be to capture the role of humanitarian morality in the reshaping of nineteenth-century polities.

B. Humanitarianism and Moral Technologies: The aim of this subproject will be to analyze **relations between humanitarian morality and material technological developments**. The subproject will in particular tackle a question the PI project will have to sideline: whether, and if so, how the rapid technological changes in lifeboat organizations during the twentieth century impinged on the foundational moral norms of the service. The standard notion within the movements is that the moral discourse remained unaltered. Yet the advent of motorized, then aerial rescue, along with professionalization, the overall change of shipping technology, and the shift of the bulk of rescue work to leisure sailing, profoundly transformed the practices in place, as well as relations between lifeboat movements and state institutions. The moral economy of saving lives from shipwreck was changed through inclusion of novel stakeholders. The task of the subproject will be to examine such changes and provide answers to the question of whether humanitarian imperatives and technological innovations are interdependent.

C. The Imagery of Shipwreck Humanitarianism: This subproject will work on **visual representations of shipwreck, lifesaving, and the dead of the sea**, since the nineteenth century. It will pursue the question of the changes these motifs underwent in the modern and contemporary eras. It will pay attention to relevant contexts such as the motif complexes of seascapes as depictions of nature, and the role of nature in humanitarian imagery. It will focus on tracking the sublimation of the iconography of shipwreck, lifesaving, and the dead, from direct to indirect representations, and observe their spread, over the entire period the overall project studies. The subproject will therefore also be free to include discussions of contemporary art when pertinent to the iconography of shipwreck, in the understanding that it will engage with the genealogy of the notion of contemporaneity in humanitarianism. The key target is to work out a better understanding of the spread of humanitarian moralities through modern and contemporary aesthetic regimes.

D. Humanitarian Generality: This subproject will focus on the **work of achieving generality in humanitarian movements**, as interdependent with the work of distinction. For this purpose, the researcher will track contacts and collaborations among distinct, but neighboring humanitarian movements. One obvious starting point in this regard are relations between lifeboat movements and the coeval societies for the saving of lives from drowning (which collaborated, for instance, on first-aid protocols in the twentieth century). Another matter of interest is the work of multi-purpose, general humanitarian societies, such as the Dutch *Maatschappij tot Nut van't Algemeen*, which can be observed as cross-financing lifeboat concerns, but also as struggling with the meaning of its own profile and a covert limitation to a single issue (primary education). A third aspect of interest will be the formation of a humanitarian "milieu" around a discourse of moral generality, with organizers and donors involved in multiple ventures. These examples illustrate the active work that the theoretical promise of general moral principles performed in the history of humanitarianism. The subproject will help to understand better how single issue fragmentation cohabited with the aspiration to generality.

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