





LUKAS SCHEMPER

# HUMANITARIANISM AND SOVEREIGNTY

Lifesaving is one of many activities regulated by sovereign states. Historically, sovereignty has seen various definitions. However, since the 19th century, sovereignty has often meant the control of borders and the passing of laws within them. This subproject investigates the multifaceted links of the concept of sovereignty with shipwreck and lifesaving in two ways: First, it explores the practice of sovereignty as a form of legal, (bio)-political, diplomatic, territorial, or rather, maritime control, which in the 19th century became increasingly interlinked with humanitarian, commercial, and security issues. Secondly, it focusses on the figure of the sovereign who acted as supporter and patron of humanitarian initiatives, including lifesaving societies.

I. If one were to agree with Michel Foucault that, at the end of the 18th century, life – and its protection – became the object of political governance, the emergence of lifesaving associations could be testament to this very phenomenon. The first “humane society” in Europe was founded in Amsterdam in 1767. Successful local lifeboat societies appeared in Britain and elsewhere from the 1770s onwards, and 1824 saw the foundation of the British Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) as the first national life-

saving society. The religious and political authorities’ support for their activities of rescue and resuscitation, i.e. the decision to save life rather than to simply leave imperilled seafarers to their fate, underpinned state sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>

Changes in the capitalist system may have been another factor in the emergence of lifesaving associations. These changes were not unrelated to the development of biopolitical governance during the 19th century, as the saved could be inserted into economic processes of production. Furthermore, market expansion and industrialization led bourgeois reformers to develop a new sense of responsibility and advocate for the establishment of a moral order that coincided with capitalist requirements.<sup>2</sup> That the creation of several lifesaving services such as the German sea rescue society, *Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Rettung Schiffbrüchiger*, DGzRS, in 1865 received support from representatives from the shipping and insurance industries would be a case in point.

Amongst the factors that led to the foundation of lifesaving societies in the 19th century, many of them point to manifold connections with the state and its apparatuses. Not only did lifesaving associations provide an essential social service within the state, but at times they also sought close institutional and ideological proximity to it. The most obvious example is the *Gleichschaltung* of the DGzRS in Nazi Germany and its integration into naval campaigns during the Second World War. Less controversial but equally telling is the importance the RNLI lends to celebrating its royal patrons to this very day. In imperialist contexts, lifesaving societies sometimes helped to create off-shoot volunteer lifesaving

services in colonies (for instance in French colonial possessions in Morocco). In the Ottoman Empire, a lifesaving service was founded in 1866 that was operated by an international commission of foreign delegates from states with shipping interests in the Black Sea, bearing testimony to the way in which the Ottoman Empire was treated as only a semi-sovereign power by 19th century European diplomats. These historical examples show how different ways of organizing lifesaving services reflect different configurations of sovereignty.

II. The sovereigns themselves – first monarchs, then republican heads of states – were also vital to the creation and self-perception of lifesaving societies. This can be viewed in the broader context of 19th century humanitarian patronage, when the sovereign was reimagined as a benevolent, paternalistic, and patriotic figure aware of the importance of social causes. The relationship was mutually beneficial. On the one side, philanthropists and reformers used these new monarchical roles to their advantage by gaining sovereign patronage for their projects and organizations. On the other, being publicly linked to causes such as lifesaving reaffirmed the standing of sovereigns and their families, even in republican or socialist circles. Nautical lifesaving

societies effectively illustrate the dynamics of sovereign patronage; the unpopular King George IV’s patronage of the RNLI since 1824 is an example of how patronage was used as a means to present monarchical rule in a more positive light.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the symbolic value of royal patronage was even higher than the monetary one as the attribute “royal” provided these organizations with a competitive advantage over other associations. Monarchs would also lend their portraits to be engraved on medals honoring achievements in lifesaving. In 1866, a prestigious medal was established by Queen Victoria in memory of her late husband, the Albert Medal for Lifesaving, which was awarded for particularly brave acts in lifesaving at sea. In Germany, the *Prinz-Heinrich-Medaille* was equally important. Both reflect the construction of an ideal type of civic heroism and moral character in the 19th century<sup>4</sup> that was to serve as an example to people at the lower end of the social hierarchy. For them, receiving such a medal could constitute an important act of recognition. Of course, this recognition through medals and other symbols was strictly regulated. As an expression of political loyalty and state centralization, it could only be received from a sovereign.

[1] Johannes F. Lehmann, ‘Infamie versus Leben. Zur Sozial- und Diskursgeschichte der Rettung im 18. Jahrhundert und zur Archäologie der Politik der Moderne,’ in *Rettung und Erlösung. Politisches und religiöses Heil in der Moderne*, Johannes F. Lehmann and Hubert Thüring, eds. (Leiden: Brill/Fink, 2015), p. 45–66. [2] Thomas L. Haskell, ‘Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1,’ *The American Historical Review* 90.2 (1985), p. 339. [3] Frank Prochaska, *Royal bounty: the making of a welfare monarchy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995). [4] As demonstrated for France by Frédéric Caille, *La figure du sauveur: Naissance du citoyen secourateur en France, 1780–1914* (Rennes: PU, 2006)

JONATHAN STAFFORD

# HISTORICISING THE HUMANITARIAN IMAGE: THE VISUAL CULTURE OF SHIPWRECK AND THE MORAL SPECTATOR



An image of shipwreck: the ship itself at the left of the scene, a mangled mess of sailcloth and splintered wood, desperate seafarers struggling for life, clinging on, climbing, beseeching the heavens. The wrecked vessel is tantalisingly close to the rocky shore, both a refuge and a site of danger. The wild sea bursts over the rocks – in places water, sky, and land indistinguishable

in the storm’s violence. A rope stretches across the canvas, a lifeline linking ship and shore, where other figures seek to aid the imperilled mariners, both in their prayers and through more practical means, by securing the rope. Survivors struggle at the image’s centre, where our eyes are drawn by the illumination of the sun’s rays breaking through the dark clouds which

hang over the scene. Four figures attempt to transport a woman to safety, her chest exposed, her lifeless body hanging limp in a clear echo of the pieta. Is she dead, or can she still be brought back to life? How many of those still on board will reach the safety of shore?

We are no strangers today to images of human suffering. Those affected by war, famine, disease, natural disaster, and other humanitarian emergencies fill the screens of our televisions, computers, and phones. Such images invite us to respond, as responsible citizen-subjects, in a register which is at once ethical and emotional – they elicit feelings of pity, compassion, empathy. The appropriateness of such a mode of engagement with the representation of suffering seems almost a given. Yet what are the historical origins of this topos? To what extent can we trace the discursive tropes which govern our moral and affective encounters with the humanitarian image – ‘compassion fatigue’; the compulsion to look – through the iconography of suffering’s history?

One distinctive and ubiquitous feature which pervades the history of the West’s visual culture provides fertile ground for exploring these questions. The representation of imperilled seafarers holds a privileged place in this narrative: from Dutch Golden Age painting of the 1600s; through the works of the 18th-century French painter Claude Joseph Vernet; to the proto-modernism of J.M.W. Turner, the shipwreck at sea provided a powerful and enduring theme for the artist. Moreover, shipwreck images were also a familiar feature of more quotidian representations throughout the modern era, in books, prints, even adorning everyday

gies,” but in the specific sense that, in the event of damage occurring, responsibilities must be regulated.

Following the expansion of the scope of what practically could be done, the question of moral obligations to intervene undergoes significant revisions. For, as the ability to act is augmented through technological means and know-how, the obligation to act, that is to make use of these capacities to save those in need, also increases proportionally. At the same time, due to improved equipment and professionalized practices, the perilous venture of lifesaving loses, or is assumed to lose, some of its terror. The imperative to act, so the narrative goes, takes on a more rational character, as its risks are diminished by technological empowerment. (Over-)emphasizing the increased sense of ability, however, with its inclination towards progressivism and perfectibility, tends to obscure the more complex dynamics at work. The case of lifesaving at sea demonstrates that existential risks cannot be eliminated entirely. Furthermore, the contingent occurrence of emergencies caused by the technologies themselves cannot be fully tamed by precautionary measures. It therefore appears that the relation of norms and means, of morality and technology, is unduly simplified when the norms are more or less directly derived from the degree of feasibility, suggesting a strange inversion of the Kantian “You can because you ought to” into “You ought to because you can.”

And yet, this seemingly monolithic kind of argumentation will be hardly ruled out by insisting on the sheer singularity of particular cases. Drawing on the concept of situation, in contrast, allows for a different

household objects. They present perhaps the most persistent subject matter in the secular iconography of suffering (although, as Voltaire’s painting suggests, they also provided a significant meeting place for religious themes in an earthly context).

What kind of moral subject do such representations presuppose as their viewers? What sort of responses do they invite of these spectators? How does this iconography develop through time? Such images were produced concurrently with the rise of bourgeois social and cultural hegemony and the emergence of the ‘modern’ subject, in the terms of liberalism, the private individual. Increasingly, this was a figure whose constitution of their sense of self (and their membership of their class) hinged upon a set of assumptions regarding their moral outlook on the world. Shipwreck images thus have much to tell us about the emergence of this modern subject, the history of emotions, and its relationship to morality.

There are distinctive parallels between the visual culture of shipwreck and the history of lifesaving at sea. Indeed, George Manby, the inventor of a mortar designed to fire a line to connect the shore with an imperilled ship, commissioned paintings of notable shipwrecks intended as guides, he claimed, to both instruct and to emotionally engage their viewers. The logic of vision more widely plays a role in the history of maritime lifesaving. Accounts tracing the origins of technological innovations designed to save lives at sea – the lifeboat, the Manby apparatus – evince a sustained preoccupation with the trope of the shore-bound viewer of shipwreck as a helpless observer. Forced to gaze upon human trauma, distress, and death, yet unable



to act to alleviate this suffering, the good bourgeois *citizen* devises means, both technological and social, to bridge the gap: between shore and ship, spectatorship and suffering, affect and action. This aetiology finds its parallel in aesthetic experience, which Adorno and Horkheimer famously identified in the story of Odysseus and the sirens: tied to the mast, the immobilised bourgeois *subject* encounters the artwork as pure affect, while fittingly, it is the job of others, unwitting, unmoved, to perform the labour of rowing the boat.

Turner, and Vernet before him, employed the trope of having themselves lashed to the mast of a ship in a storm, to emphasise the veracity and realism of their depictions of the sea’s violence. However, Turner’s claim, employed in reference to his 1842 depiction

of a Steamboat caught in a wild snowstorm, seems to suggest that the kind of disen-gaged shore-bound vantage point which had typified paintings of shipwreck could no longer be sustained. In the age of the technologies of lifesaving (which he depicted in 1831’s *Lifeboat and Manby Apparatus going off to a stranded vessel making signal blue lights of distress*; cf. illustration above) the heroic figure was no longer a mere shore-bound spectator, a romantic contemplator of sublime nature, but one who was himself immersed in the liquid element. What lesson can the contemporary observer take from Turner’s aesthetic innovation? Must we immerse ourselves in the sea of images, or close our ears to its siren song?

clues that help to destabilize the grand narratives of humanitarian discourse.

If not always explicitly, the question concerning technology moreover permeates the debates on situation throughout. This attests to the growing awareness that the human lifeworld in modernity is more and more decisively shaped by technological conditions, in everyday life as well as in large-scale emergencies such as war. The urgency of such reflection, and also its difficulties and deficits, were pointed out by Benjamin already in 1930 when he stated a “gaping discrepancy between the giant means of technology on the one hand” and “its minuscule moral illumination on

the other.” Crisis situations expose such maladjustments in sometimes dramatic ways, and it becomes particularly clear in the context of seafaring – not least because of its very own technical conditions – that there is no firm ground to be gained on this issue. Rescue at sea is therefore a case in point for investigating how moral and technological claims and norms both interlock and resist each other. Examining these dynamics more closely provides insight into conditions that go to the heart of the constitution of norms in the modern era.

