Desportes, I., Corbet, A., & Siddiqi, A. (Eds.). (2024). *Depoliticising Humanitarian Action: Paradigms, Dilemmas, Resistance*. Taylor & Francis.

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The humanitarian sector has long been grounded in the four basic principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. While they have remained largely unquestioned, debates began to emerge in the 1990s to dispute both the validity of these principles as well as their unintended negative impacts. This interdisciplinary volume, edited by Desportes et al., further contributes to this debate by providing compelling arguments and evidence on the political nature and implications of humanitarian work.

The two central arguments are that being apolitical is—in itself—a political choice and that it does not allow the addressing of the root causes of humanitarian crises. To make the case, the book's three sections take the reader progressively from theory to practical dilemmas in humanitarian practice and then shift to alternative models of humanitarian work emerging from the Global South. The book includes testimonies from practitioners, providing further depth to the work and enriching the discussion through the voices of those working on the ground. This publication comes at a time when the world is witnessing complex political humanitarian crises, which raise critical questions within the humanitarian community at large.

The book begins by critically examining the ideological underpinnings of classical humanitarianism. Its neoliberal roots are explored by Bertrand Bréqueville, who argues that despite the seemingly "progressive" language that has become adopted in more recent years, including terms like "resilience" and "empowerment" are not as radical a departure from neoliberalism as at first may seem (p. 33). Mulder zooms in on the localization debate revealing how both the resilience and surveillance paradigms—while seemingly standing at opposite ends of the spectrum—depoliticize aid and affirm the status quo (p. 45). Strong challenges the assumption that humanitarian crises take place "elsewhere" by looking at the interplay between austerity policies in the UK and the rise of food banks. Concluding this section, Mosurska analyzes the role of media in perpetuating the current discourse and exacerbating existing power

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dynamics, affirming the necessity of the humanitarian sector to produce counter-narratives in order to render powerful actors responsible and uncover the root causes of crises.

Having effectively deconstructed classical humanitarian discourse, section two focuses on the deep moral dilemmas humanitarians face in practice. The constant need to make "trade-offs" to secure access to people affected by crises is examined in-depth within the contexts of Myanmar and the Philippines, where Burnley and Cadag, respectively, dissect the complex relationship between regimes and humanitarian action. They provide evidence of how the humanitarian sector can be coopted by the state's use of various tactics from administrative barriers to threats of imprisonment. They argue that not only do these cases demonstrate the lack of capacity within the sector in the face of such situations but hint at a potential complicity with systems of oppression. In the final chapter of this section, Facon-Salelles effectively demonstrates how donors and UN agencies continue to entrench power imbalances in Lebanon by limiting who receives the overwhelming majority of funds (p. 159).

Finally, section three lays out alternative models of humanitarianism in practice. Mawi, founding member of a community-based organization in Myanmar reflects on how the humanitarian work her organization leads necessitates making choices and taking actions that are considered "political" in the classical paradigm (p. 184). The chapters that follow include a study of grassroots feminist movements in Colombia by Izquierdo, an in-depth case study of a Colombian peace community presented by Aparicio. In the final chapter Roborgh undertakes a comparative analysis of the medical volunteering initiatives that accompanied public protest movements in the 2010s across the Middle East, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Each of these cases effectively demonstrates how grassroots movements create context-specific models of humanitarianism that are both principled and have clear political stances. In so doing, they directly and indirectly challenge the way in which classical humanitarianism defines its mandate and underscore how it is often divorced from lived realities on the ground.

In conclusion, the volume's authors effectively break down the "myth of neutrality" in humanitarianism (p. 257). The principles that, according to the classical narrative, have facilitated the access of humanitarian workers in challenging contexts and enabled them to carry out critical life-saving work, have also failed in times of deep crisis. A stark but by no means sole example is the International Committee of the Red Cross's knowledge of the atrocities during the time of the Holocaust, to which it later admitted to being unable to act or speak out against. The debate about the relevance of humanitarian principles continues to be ever more relevant at a time when conflicts have become more complex, urging humanitarians everywhere to question their positionality.

There is an urgent need for humanitarians to critically examine how their decisions and actions (or inaction) may inadvertently perpetuate power imbalances and ultimately do more harm than good to populations affected by

disasters and crises. Such reconsideration of humanitarianism's principles is especially critical in contexts such as Gaza, where humanitarian aid has been politicized. The blocking of aid; the deliberate targeting of shelters, hospitals, ambulances, and members of the medical community; the targeting of humanitarian workers; and most recently to the banning of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in October 2024 underscore the urgency of the arguments in this volume. Thus, I recommend it as essential reading for scholars and practitioners with an interest in humanitarianism, decolonization, international relations, and other related subjects so that they too can rethink how aid is conceived and delivered.