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Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs by Jennifer C. Rubenstein (review)

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Human Rights Quarterly, Volume 38, Number 1, February 2016, pp. 228-230 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/hrq.2016.0015



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Jennifer C. Rubenstein, *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* (Oxford University Press, 2015), ISBN 9780199684106, 252 pages

When issues of international humanitarian aid become political, they usually center upon whether and when states should intervene, and in what manner, either militarily, economically, or in another mode. But of course, by the time such issues rise to the level of international political awareness, usually a whole group of actors from outside the country is already fully engaged within it. These actors include a variety of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), most often those with humanitarian aid missions. Such international actors are the focus of Jennifer Rubenstein in this outstanding and very useful book.

Rubenstein considers humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam or Doctors Without Borders, as “angelic good Samaritans, swashbuckling heroes, or ‘do-gooding machines,’ on the one hand, or as naïve miscreants ‘on the road to hell,’ or cold, narrowly self-interested, profit-driven corporations, on the other.”¹ One characterization seems certain: that

such organizations are nothing like actual states or governments. By asking a series of ontological and behavioral questions, Rubenstein reveals the essential “between-ness” of these organizations. As the title maintains, they are both/ neither Samaritans or states, but a far more complex (and interesting) hybrid of political, economic, humanitarian and ethical forces. Furthermore, the difficulties INGOs face in pursuing their mandated missions constitute a tangled web of ethical, political, and economic conundrums. As a political theorist, Rubenstein sets out to explore these two ontological and ethical questions about humanitarian INGOs: what exactly are such organizations and what ethical boundaries circumscribe their behaviors?

In the first two chapters Rubenstein interrogates the ontological status of INGOs, always comparing their real nature and behavior with publicly held misperceptions, and poses four questions, the first of which concerns different kind of humanitarian INGO actors, and how they are distinguished as unique political agents. In an extended and very revealing discussion. Rubenstein makes and defends three claims with regard to the inquiries above: INGOs are, in fact, engaged in governance even though they are obviously not governmental agencies; they are deeply submerged in politics in the sense that their work has extensive political consequences; and, compared to governments, INGOs are “second-best actors.” As such they must make several difficult ethical and political decisions about how best to proceed in carrying out their mission.

I know of no other book that so thoroughly explores in such an engag-

1. JENNIFER C. RUBENSTEIN, *BETWEEN SAMARITANS AND STATES: THE POLITICAL ETHICS OF HUMANITARIAN INGOs 2* (2015).

ing manner the structure and behavior of organizations, many whose names we know, whose work we assumed is always valuable, and whose moral status no one could possibly assail. Clearly, these organizations are important actors in the world today; to read this book is to become uncomfortably aware of how much power they wield and how little we have heretofore consciously understood about them. This book performs an important service in revealing to us what is without question, a new international political reality. Rubenstein's extended analysis makes this realization possible without getting bogged down in endless "realism and idealism" debates about the true structure of international politics.

Like all political realities, this new one is chock full of new ethical dilemmas and choices. Chapters three through seven identify and delve deeply into the "map of humanitarian INGO political ethics." Along the way, a host of theoretical and ethical issues arise both for Rubenstein's argument and for the behavior and choices of the organizations she is studying. She corrals all these questions into four major issues: the "problem of spattered hands;" the "quandary of the second-best;" the "cost-effectiveness conundrum;" and the "moral motivation tradeoff." Each issue is accorded a chapter, and the last chapter tries to bring the four maps together.

Throughout this very theoretical and deeply engaged exploration a few important realizations crystalize. First, such an in depth study of what truly is a new set of political actors requires the full resources of an accomplished political theorist. Description is not enough; nor even is a comparative analysis of any INGO structure and behavior with its stated aims and consequences. For the study to reveal the deep structure of INGO political power and ethical impact, we

need the tools that a normatively trained political theorist brings to the task. The success of this book is largely due to the exceptional theoretical skill that Professor Rubenstein demonstrates in probing deeply into fine-grained ethical dilemmas that surprise with their appearance, but afterward, make the reader wonder why this has not been explored before. There is a rich vein of work uncovered in this study, and that in itself is a major contribution to the literature of human rights.

A second realization that emerges is how Rubenstein's approach in a sense only scratches the surface in excavating the significance of INGO behavior and its impact in international politics. Questions for future work might include how the actors *within* INGO's perceive their power and the ethical quandaries its exercise produces. Rubenstein approaches INGOs as emergent entities with their own discrete, collective behavior. Though not necessarily worthy of criticism (theorists are more comfortable discussing the agency of emergent entities than most social scientists), it would also be interesting to explore the decision-making process within INGOs even more than Rubenstein does. The question she asks in her analysis is an important one: "How does close study of humanitarian INGO political ethics broaden our understanding of democratic, humanitarian, egalitarian, and justice-based norms?" Another would be, how does leadership personality affect INGO decision making? Some such organizations are clearly the product of individual creative effort—in cases like Witness or Save the Children—of a single celebrity's own sense of moral responsibility and leadership style.

Other questions will surely be taken up in subsequent work into the behavior of humanitarian INGOs, some of it done, one hopes, by Professor Rubenstein. However, this book opens a new area of

political inquiry at both a highly theoretical/normative level and at the level of empirical institutional analysis. As such, it constitutes a major contribution to the literatures of human rights, political theory, and social science generally.

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Bidisha, *Asylum and Exile: The Hidden Voices of London* (University of Chicago Press, 2014) ISBN: 9780857422101, 152 pages.

Bidisha's *Asylum and Exile: The Hidden Voices of London* gives a voice to the human spirit of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons from a number of violence-torn regions of the world. The individuals interviewed were also Bidisha's students during her residency with English PEN in London. The book's nine chapters, inspired from 2011 to 2012, ultimately seek to capture the aspirations, hindrances, and hopes of the interviewed students. This book allows the reader to trace the ways Bidisha's students tackle, engage with, or simply fear the processes of naturalizing their stay in the UK. By including many of her students' direct remarks and achievements (humorous, despondent, or literary), Bidisha seeks to centralize "voices [that] were rarely heard"¹ from within the forgotten societal layers relevant to the non-naturalized

immigrant. It is not surprising then that the book concludes with a literary and culturally rich text by a Ugandan asylum seeker, Beatrice Tibahurira.

Each chapter feeds off of what was previously implied not solely for the sake of its neat narrative structure, but also in terms of the development of the interviewees' vulnerable yet resilient subjectivities. The author connects the bits and pieces of complex legal struggles to remain lawfully accepted in the UK upon each incursion into her students' subjectivities. Reading *Asylum and Exile: The Hidden Voices of London*, furthermore, results in deepening the reader's acquaintance with Bidisha's students' lives beyond an "East London resource center."² Early in the book, Bidisha sums up the general societal and economic status of the center's tenants, explaining that "most have not been granted leave to stay and do not have the right to work or access public funds. When they do work, it's off the books: cleaning, caring, maintenance work, factory work, building work, menial work."³ Their drive, willingness to prosper, and previous life narratives, as the book carefully insinuates, often clash with the thin or degrading opportunities in the UK. The resource centers Bidisha visits upon writing this book reflect, above all, a polysemic quality. Such centers emerge as spaces of flickering but crushed hopes and aspirations for its residents; platforms for exhibiting legal frustrations, initiatives, or apathy toward tenants' social (dis)integration. They also serve as terrains for writing the ability to persist without completely belonging anywhere. Most asylum seekers, refugees, and displaced persons

1. BIDISHA, *ASYLUM AND EXILE: THE HIDDEN VOICES OF LONDON* 2 (2014).

2. *Id* at 1.

3. *Id* at 5.