

WEISS, Thomas G. *Humanitarian Intervention*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016. ISBN 978-1-509-50731-3.

# Humanitarian Intervention

*Reviewed by Ana Maria Albulescu*

The guiding question that Thomas Weiss sets to answer in *Humanitarian Intervention* is related to the tension between norms and practices of intervention to curb human suffering around the globe, a particular focus being placed on whether a new normative era in the protection of civilians, beyond state sovereignty is set to bring with it 'a new dawn or dusk for the practice of humanitarian intervention' (p.2).

In a seminal first chapter that provides the basis for an understanding of humanitarian intervention, the book starts off with a discussion of continuity and change in world politics. It accounts for the evolution of peace operations since the 1990s and the subsequent normative innovations that have witnessed the birth of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Weiss engages in a clear discussion of the various types of peace operations ranging from peace enforcement to coercive protection and war fighting, being concerned with the extent to which the notion of humanitarian intervention can be stretched - considering that various types of action including economic and military measures have often involved wide debates about consent and legitimacy as part of any attempted definition of humanitarian intervention.

The book sets out to explore various cases of humanitarian intervention from the point of view that despite a degree of continuity in the role of states as the core decision-makers in international politics, an essential aspect that has led to various shifts in normative think-

ing on the topic is represented by the changing nature of armed conflict in the post-Cold War era. This has come as a result of weakened norms related to the sanctity of borders as well as evolving approaches to secession that have challenged its illegitimacy. This conceptual discussion represents a strong basis for an overview of different cases of humanitarian intervention. In a fascinating account of cases of intervention from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, the author distinguishes between the various phases through which this practice has come to the forefront of international politics. The period covered by the assessment is thus marked by three important changes, starting with the enforcement of the UN Charter authorizing intervention to confront threats to international peace and security in 1945. Secondly, the collapse of the Soviet Union is viewed as critical for the increase in peacekeeping operations across the world as humanitarian interventions became more legitimate with military force being deployed by multinational coalitions as well as other forms of intervention being undertaken such as economic sanctions and international criminal prosecution. Finally, a discussion of the post 9/11 world recognizes a third change in that, despite existing normative shifts at the level of the UN Security Council, a degree of inconsistency in the practice of intervention can be observed, as indeed exemplified by the Libyan and Syrian crises that saw practical considerations for the potential success of military intervention remaining one of the main aspects underpinning decision-making towards humanitarian intervention.

Thus, whilst the author draws attention to the fact that the R2P in its current form remains a principle rather than a tactic, as the inconsistency of international action shows that in certain cases 'geopolitical calculations trumped the protection of civilians' (p.81) addressing the tensions between norms and practices in the case study analysis of the book would have benefited from further acknowledgments that, whilst driven by the bureaucracies of the UN and other humanitarian agencies and International practices, normative shifts have often proved ineffective in curbing state driven behaviour to the use of military force. This being said, the book is not short of addressing these tensions in its final chapters where it touches upon some of the realpolitik calculations of state-driven policies throughout the various international efforts towards establishing R2P as a norm. This ensures that the book provides an important contribution to the various debates surrounding the practices of humanitarian intervention, leaving

the reader with the sense that whilst all cases of humanitarian intervention undoubtedly constituted watershed moments in the evolution of thinking about the R2P as a norm, the existing track record of its operationalization is still marked by the challenge of 'how to act, not how to build additional normative consensus' (p.201).

*Book  
reviews*