

Antonio De Lauri (editor), *Humanitarianism. Keywords*, Leiden: Brill, 2020, ISBN 978-90-04-43113-3

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The field of humanitarianism is characterized by ‘profound uncertainty, by a constant need to respond to the unpredictable, and by concepts and practices that often defy simple or straightforward explanation’(Allen, T.). Humanitarians often find themselves not just engaged in the pursuit of effective action, but also in a quest for meaning. The humanitarian sector has changed in its size, scale, and focus but also in its imagery, its jargon, and its jobs, from its initial goal, that of alleviating human suffering. Emerging forms of humanitarianism such as mutual aid and the work of diaspora communities or any other aspect of humanitarianism is currently open to question as never before, being at the core of contemporary humanitarian debates

Antonio De Lauri’s *Humanitarianism. Keywords* [Dictionary] provides the reader with a thorough insight into the origins and development of humanitarianism in an original way, in the form of a dictionary, offering a genuine way of exploring and understanding “one of the major political and moral phenomena of the contemporary world.” It is aimed at observing contemporary humanitarianism while offering potential future explorations. The genuine piece of work consists in 107 entries thoroughly selected, standing as a very useful, reference guide for those interested in the field. Contributors are all leading scholars spanning continents and having expertise in varied related areas from political science and international relations, to law and philosophy, to mention but a few), the contributions of whom to the *Keywords* being both concise and at the same time detailed enough in order to provide an overview of the concepts of humanitarianism, be them critical, or controversial. According to De Lauri, humanitarianism “is manifested in a plurality of actions, movements and ethics, different in their form of implementation and

expression, while being coherent in their idealistic intentions”. The author is of opinion that humanitarianism is a way of intervention in the world the purpose of which is to improve it, being all the same a consistent feature of modernity. The author is of opinion that in spite of the vast literature on humanitarianism, what is missing is particularly this ‘toolkit’ –as the author names it - that both students and researchers could avail themselves of in order to pinpoint the complex world of humanitarianism. What is to be remarked indeed is that this highly successful endeavour aimed at exploring and encompassing the multifaceted ‘conceptual universe of humanitarianism’ as the author names it as being a ‘modality of intervention in the world’ the purpose of which is to better it. Another important feature of the present approach is that it spans the history of humanitarianism and its continuing transformation.

The relevance of humanitarianism in the present time is highlighted by its use and usefulness in international politics or within the academia. The author does mention the fact that the list of words contained within the dictionary is erratic, there being words included that might appear as not belonging necessarily to the field, while others being considered as not having been included. The contributors to the dictionary have approached humanitarianism from various perspectives and points of view, which shows the wide range of knowledge in the field and this in turn reflects the elusive character of the term itself, as the author considers it, while having an impact upon aspects in all walks of life. Yet, despite the variety of approach, the interdependence of keywords is to be noted, providing the conceptual framework that offers various paths to explore, from medical humanitarianism, for instance, to human rights, with a host of terms associated to each one.

As previously stated by the author in the description of *Keywords*, the reader will find that some dictionary entries refer more to the academic field, while others are more policy-oriented. Those who would focus more on its pragmatic value or explore the professional side of humanitarianism will also find plenty of terms that are at the “crossroads” of disciplines. The comparison that de Lauri makes, that of considering the dictionary like a “road junction” with multiple directions to serve as a very useful tool for each and every interested reader, be it for consolidating knowledge, or acquiring new dimensions and understanding of the field.

Last but not least, it is relevant to be mentioned that the English language vocabulary has been employed as a factor that contributed to the entire project, despite the varied background, expertise, disciplines of study and working language

of the contributors throughout the globe, be them from Africa or Latin America, or Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, or Lebanon or Groningen, to mention but a few, while it is ascertained that *common parlance* or colloquial speech of humanitarian vocabulary would greatly add value to the specialty literature.

As with any of genuine pieces work of this scope, from an initial selection of approximately 60 entries in the beginning, additions were made, the list was enlarged, while concepts were merged and others rethought, as De Lauri explains. Conceptual limits, external links and challenges alike were not left aside either, which illustrates the fact that all possible aspects were taken into account for the final product to be an interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral illustration of the importance of humanitarianism today offering various paths to explore all this in a single book.

It really is challenging for the reader to find this very interesting approach of humanitarianism reflected in all terms, searching for a word such as for instance “water” (p.233 Keywords) “resilience” (p.178 Keywords) or “photography” (p.158 Keywords) and finding its correspondence with humanitarianism, humanitarian action, activities and politics, being at the same time a challenge for the reader and speaker of a foreign language, to acquire new vocabulary both in the field of the foreign language itself and in the ‘language’ of humanitarianism. For - perhaps – the less acquainted reader, *vernacular humanitarianism* is a term that deserves particular attention, being a ‘bridging concept and an emerging modality or local statecraft’ (A. Thiermann). The same could be considered with regards to the term “grassroots humanitarianism”, which is rather a dynamic conceptualization which is relatively new and not fixed, thus an ‘unstable, overarching category’(Fetcher & Schwittay, 2019).

To conclude, one would say that rethinking humanitarianism has become an urgent priority. As Ryerson, C. notes, critical engagement with humanitarianism has grown, given the ‘expansion of humanitarianism since the ‘90s and its role in mandating and justifying the use of force’(Ryerson Christie, 2015). Criticism, however, has been directed to a great extent at the measures taken in the name of humanitarianism and less on its conceptual frame, since the role of states and security agents are at the forefront of international concerns. The critical interrogation of the purpose, practice and future of humanitarian action has yielded a rich new field of enquiry, humanitarian studies, and many books, articles and reports.



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