From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism

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For many of us, the ongoing carnage in Syria is a self-evident humanitarian crisis. We do not need to be convinced that the children drowning at sea, the women and men, young and old, begging for entry into any country that will accept them are worthy of our help. But historians have been insisting for years that the desire to aid all human beings, no matter their color, class, country or creed, is not an innate human characteristic: it has a history.

The question, though, is when precisely does that history begin? It is a sign of the historical profession’s atomization that the answers to that question generally break down by country or century, or even decade. Historians of 20th-century Europe and America tend to get the most attention, and for them, the debate centers on the notion of ‘human rights’. Samuel Moyn, in The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History, still perhaps the most prominent and debated work, argued that our contemporary understanding of human rights is so vastly different from not only its pre-Second World War variants, but even its pre-1970 meanings that we might as well not even consider anything that came before then as part of the same history. The novelty of the post-1970 ‘human rights’ concept, he insisted, was to reject the nation-state as the final guarantor of basic human needs, and instead to imagine the world as a single community responsible for protecting all its members.

For scholars of the 19th century, the idea of ‘humanitarianism’ take central stage. That term serves as the direct antecedent to the modern notion of human rights, and its origins lie not outside of the nation-state but are inextricably bound up with it. As European empires expanded and began to incorporate vast numbers of non-Europeans into their political communities, they were forced to broaden their sense of humanity to somehow include them. For 18th-century historians, the story begins with the Enlightenment and its ideal of universal human progress. These ideals crystallize – and one might say, the story of human rights begins – in either the French or American Revolution’s sweeping declarations of universal rights, or, relatedly, the transatlantic campaign to end the slave trade.

Yet even between 18th- and 19th-century historians the debates are many. For those who want to rescue the Enlightenment and abolitionism from their harsher critics, the tendency of late has been to replace the white
reformist elites, who have traditionally been cast as the heroes, with marginalized actors – the enslaved, women, the lower and middle classes. It is they, these historians insist, who grabbed onto the universalizing language of white reformist elites and fought hardest to apply that language to people who did not look like them. Others focus less on individuals or groups and instead underscore the broader social conditions that made empathy for unknown ‘others’ possible. Perhaps it was the rise of a broadly literate public, some argue. Through the proliferation of sentimental novels and poetry, 18th- and early 19th-century readers learned to empathize with fictional ‘others’ they would have never otherwise met. Or maybe it was the rise of capitalism. Expendable incomes and new financial instruments made it possible to circulate charitable money to distant places; as a result, the urge to help strangers intensified.

Amanda Moniz’s *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism* is rooted in the 18th- and early 19th-century literatures, but it has something new and important to say to all historians interested in the history of human rights. Moniz concedes that ‘there is truth’ to these other origin stories (p. 5), but she believes a critical impetus has been overlooked: the war between Britain and its American colonies. She argues that the revolutionary war upended American and British concepts of philanthropy, forcing British and American reformers to rethink who qualified for aid. Before the revolution, British philanthropists and their colonial aides established charitable organizations for the purpose of binding together Britain’s empire. But after the war, the severing of imperial ties forced these same philanthropists to broaden their mission to include foreigners. As she makes clear, however, the expansion of philanthropy’s meaning was never divorced from politics: it was in fact rooted in the need to soothe politics wounds and prevent further bloodshed. ‘Out of the confusion’ of war, she writes, ‘came one of the era’s most astonishing endeavors to extend charity on a universal basis’ (p. 58).

Moniz takes a largely biographical approach. She focuses on a handful of reformed minded elites, all of them white men, and begins not with the revolution or even the impending imperial crisis of the 1760s, but in the early 18th century. Both approaches pay dividends. Starting at the very beginning of the 18th century allows her to push against the tendency of using the revolutionary era itself as the starting point for any discussion of universal rights. The revolutionary period ‘was not a starting point for expansive benevolence,’ she insists, ‘but a turning point’ (p. 4). And while her focus on a cast of ‘almost entirely well-off men’ (p. 6) raises questions, Moniz is correct that, throughout the 18th century, the majority of philanthropic organizations – public hospitals, free schools, Christian charities, anti-slavery societies – were led by elite white men. For better or worse, they set the agenda.

Moniz begins her story with the British Empire’s attempt to secure the allegiance of an increasingly heterogeneous population. In 1707, England incorporated Scotland into its empire through the Act of Union. Meanwhile, imperial officials began to assert more control over its North American and West Indian colonies, realizing how profitable slave-based plantations had become. The question was how to make all these disparate groups – Quakers, Presbyterians, Moravians, Africans, Indians – loyal subjects? The answer, imperial officials realized, was through charity: Christian charity in particular. In 1701, Parliament chartered the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG). Spearheaded by the Anglican reverend Thomas Bray, the organization aimed to spread Anglicanism throughout Britain’s Atlantic colonies. Religion conviction was important to the SPG’s creation. But Moniz convincingly argues that the SPG also served as ‘a tool for strengthening the British polity’ (p. 16). A 1718 letter from an SPG clergyman said as much: the SPG’s mission was to secure ‘the dependence of these [American] Colonies ... to the Imperial Crown’ (p. 15).

In the following decades, the SPG spawned a host of philanthropies that went beyond aiding European settlers, or even proselytizing. The Associates of Dr. Bray, founded by Bray in 1723, focused solely on Christianizing enslaved Africans. Members of the SPG and the Associates of Dr. Bray went on to create the Georgia Trust in 1731–2. The organization’s aim, though short-lived, was to create a slave-free colony for impoverished white Britons. By the end of the 1730s, Thomas Coram, a British sailor and merchant involved in all these organizations, founded London’s Foundling Hospital. The hospital’s core aim was to provide shelter for orphaned children (‘foundlings’), a growing problem in London’s streets. In no time, American
Colonists helped their British peers establish similar hospitals in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. By tracing the direct links between charitable organizations in America and Britain, as well as the key ‘movers and shakers’ who crisscrossed the Atlantic to make them possible, Moniz vividly proves her point: through philanthropy, ‘a diverse polity’ was made ‘into a community’ (p. 28).

But trouble lay ahead. In the 1760s, American colonists began to feel less like equals and more like subordinate subjects. After helping the British defeat the French and their Native American allies in the Seven Years’ War, American colonists felt Britain’s imposition of taxes to pay for the war was an egregious affront. In this gestating imperial divide, Moniz discerns the beginnings of a shift in the purpose of philanthropy. By the early 1770s, many leading America colonial philanthropists began to reject membership in the British-based philanthropies they once proudly joined. In 1771, Benjamin Rush, the American-born, Edinburgh-educated physician, began to think about founding his own Philadelphia-based ‘Society for the Distribution of pious Books among the poor’ (p. 56). The following year, New York physicians initiated a campaign to build a hospital that would rival similar charity-based hospitals in England and Scotland. This was not a clean break, however. The physician-philanthropists behind the New York hospital, for instance, did not shun the support of their British colleagues. They continued to solicit and receive the aid of British patrons, but they increasingly refused to be treated as ‘junior partners’, Moniz writes (p. 146).

Moniz’s focus on physicians is important. The very nature of their work, she argues, helped foster an expansive view of humanity, much more so than the clergy who spearheaded many of the philanthropies in the early 18th century. American physicians in particular needed to travel abroad to receive their medical degree, usually attending the University of Edinburgh; in the process they forged transatlantic friendships that broadened their sense of community. Physicians on both sides of the Atlantic also began to see themselves not as Scottish, or English or American doctors, but as part of a wider ‘republic of medicine,’ as Rush famously called it (p. 51). The physician’s creed also mattered: they were taught to provide care to all those in need, regardless of their station. But less higher-minded reasons also help explain why physicians led so many philanthropic efforts: unlike clergy, 18th-century physicians faced greater pressure to make money. Without robust religious organizations to prop them up, they needed to tend to anyone, regardless of faith or nationality, who could pay. Travelling widely, to learn and to treat, opened their eyes to a broader, more diverse world, Moniz contends. As men who saw themselves as ‘benefactors of mankind’ (p. 51), it should not be surprising that so many physicians took the lead in expanding the meaning of philanthropy.

The process of expansion was not easy. The revolutionary war itself forced physician-philanthropists on both sides of the Atlantic to rethink the ‘boundaries of moral responsibility’ (p. 65). Moniz gets much mileage out of the story of John Murray, a Scottish-born physician living in Norwich, England. Born in 1721, Murray had many close relatives in America, several of whom fought for the patriots. In 1775, he founded a Norwich, England-based charity to help pay for the medical care and basic welfare of Norwich’s Scottish poor. But over the course of the revolutionary war, more and more non-Scotsmen began to show up in Norwich’s streets: a Muslim man named Ismael, originally from Constantinople; Lewis LeFebure, from Germany; at least a dozen Jews. All these men, and their wives and children, had either served in the war or had seen their fortunes lost on account of it. Murray convened a meeting in 1782 to officially change the organization’s name, one that would better reflect the purpose it suddenly found itself serving: it would no longer be called the ‘Scots Society’ but the ‘Society for Universal Good-will’ (pp. 1, 74–5).

The novelty of Murray’s organization was that it made explicit what was clearly becoming obvious for many philanthropists: they could no longer afford to distinguish between ‘compatriots and strangers’ (p. 70). Over the following two decades, a host of new philanthropic societies guided by the same logic took root – to aid the blind and the deaf; to save drowning victims; to abolish the slave trade. But rather than simply provide aid to strangers, they would solicit the aid of strangers – or at least white men who were no longer ‘compatriots’. In the post-war years, Americans and British philanthropists actively sought to enlist each other in the ‘common cause of humanity’ (p. 126). Through building transatlantic philanthropic partnerships, they hoped to forge ‘peaceable relations in the revamped Atlantic,’ she argues (p. 81). While never
discounting genuine altruistic impulses, Moniz emphasizes that this emergent universal humanitarianism also functioned as a ‘new cosmopolitan statecraft’ (p. 96).

One of the great strengths of Moniz’s account is that she refuses to single out any one philanthropic effort. For many historians, the emergence of the abolitionist movement in the 1780s serves as a ‘stand-in’ (p. 3) for all 18th- and early 19th-century humanitarian initiatives. But Moniz demonstrates how intertwined many of these organizations were. Many of the leaders of the first antislavery organizations established in the 1770 and 1780s helped found the seemingly unrelated philanthropic societies that preceded them, for instance. But perhaps more poignantly, she demonstrates how abolitionists mobilized widespread public support for saving drowning victims to win the public’s endorsement of the slave-trade ban.

Drowning was not only a major concern for Britons, but for residents of all Atlantic cities, surrounded as they were by oceans and rivers, their cities snaked with canals. The first ‘Humane Societies’ were dedicated to saving drowning victims, and they proliferated throughout the Atlantic world in the 1770s and 1780s. Abolitionist poetry routinely evoked the ‘watery deaths’ (p. 132) of Africans aboard slave ships to get Britons and Americans to act. The British poet Samuel Jackson Pratt even flipped the script, reminding readers how Africans once saved shipwrecked Christian sailors ‘from the whelming wave, / And snatch[es] the body from the floating grave’ (p. 135); perhaps his readers would now do the same. Moniz’s point is not that the campaign to save drowning victims directly ‘caused’ abolitionism. It’s that the success of anti-drowning campaigns heightened the public’s horror at instances of slave drowning aboard slave ships. In turn, the public ‘demanded moral reckoning with it’ (p. 135).

But transatlantic cooperation, whether against slavery or drowning, would not last long. Moniz does not document a steady march toward greater and greater international cooperation; instead, she sees a sudden burst of transnational cooperation followed by a rapid retreat. By the end of the 1790s, the French and Haitian Revolutions, coupled with the Napoleonic Wars, curdled whatever transnational amity universal humanitarian efforts helped foster. The universal humanitarian impulse hardly died; in fact, it thrived. But it now began to serve separate imperial and national interests.

Moniz powerfully uses the campaign to eradicate smallpox globally as her final case in point. In 1798, the English physician Edward Jenner designed a new method to vaccinate against smallpox; a few years later, he received a government charter to create the Royal Jennerian Society. The society’s goal was to lead a global campaign to vaccinate all men, women and children wherever the empire could reach. Meanwhile, the Baltimore physician James Smith received federal support to initiate his own international smallpox vaccination campaign. Both initiatives were hugely successful: by 1806, hundreds of thousands of men, women, children, enslaved and free, from China and South America, from the West Indies to the American interior, had been vaccinated. But even as physicians in American and Britain swapped information on each other’s techniques, the official societies set up in each country framed their projects in nationalist terms. A New York physician boasted how ‘the physicians here [in the United States] are not behind the rest of their medical brethren in other parts of the world’ (p. 166). Competition, not cooperation, was now driving humanitarianism. Meanwhile, in 1805, the Royal Jennerian Society refused to accept nearly all of the Americans put forth as honorary members. Jefferson, Adams, Benjamin Rush – all were vetoed.

Moniz’s superbly written, thoroughly researched account is a much needed addition to the growing literature on human rights. Like many historians working on the subject, she is keenly attuned to how tightly politics is intertwined with humanitarianism. As the scholar Michael Barnett has argued, it is a ‘myth’ that humanitarian organizations were, or ever can, remove themselves from politics. (2) Even many of the 18th-century philanthropic societies Moniz studies either received official government backing, or consciously filled a void that government would not.

But centering her story on elite ‘well-off’ men comes with limitations. Though Moniz occasionally gestures towards the women and enslaved and free Africans who compelled these elite figures to take their lives into account, they figure almost entirely as recipients of aid, not as central actors who created their own, similar
societies. In the 1790s, the free black Philadelphians Cyrus Bustill and Quomony Clarkson established their own schools for black children; in 1787, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, as Moniz notes, founded the Free African Society to provide religious instruction and basic welfare for the nation’s growing free black population. Black women would establish a host of separate organizations to aid the black community in the following two decades.

On the face of it, that these organizations intended to help fellow people of African descent makes them appear less ‘universal’ than the organizations Moniz studies. But they were in many ways no less ‘universal’ than the elite-led organizations featured in her work. Both the British and American antislavery organizations that formed in the 1770s and 1780s excluded Africans and women from formal membership, for instance; not until the 1830s would the first interracial antislavery organizations be established, and even then women needed to form separate groups. Moniz is fully aware of the paternalist attitudes that marked many of the organizations she studies. But they were not merely paternalistic: they were exclusionary when it came to membership. For some, that will hollow out the meaning of ‘universal’ humanitarianism. Moreover, it could be argued that the African philanthropic organizations forming alongside these white-led organizations were grappling with the same questions – and therefore, generative of the same ‘universal’ impulse. When Absalom Jones and Richard Allen decided to name their organization the Free African Society, no consensus existed about what it meant to be ‘African’. There was only Igbo, Temne, Yoruba. The act of calling it ‘African,’ then, reflected a similar expansion of community that Moniz observes among Anglo-American elites.

But I am wary of seeing a meaningful ‘universal humanitarianism’ emerging during these pivotal years. What I see most strongly is an attempt of people of all different colors, classes, genders and faiths struggling to create identities that more closely aligned with their highly unequal positions. The growth of philanthropic organizations trying to aid ‘foreigners’ that Moniz rightly, wonderfully, charts was only possible because the men who led them had the financial means, and the power, to do so. That so many of the humanitarian organizations from this period were exclusively white, and exclusively male, may have generated the language of ‘universalism’. But what it also did was to force the people largely excluded from membership—Africans, women, Native Americans – to self-consciously fashion their own identities. Out of the revolution, then, perhaps an enlarged humanitarianism did emerge. But so too did a new politics of identity.

Notes


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