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Civil War in El Salvador and the origins of rights-based humanitarianism¹

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Abstract

This article traces the global humanitarian sector’s late twentieth-century embrace of human rights to the brutal civil conflict in El Salvador in the 1980s. Drawing on evidence from NGOs in three Anglophone states (Britain, Canada, and Ireland), it examines the moral and political debates that accompanied the breakthrough for human rights activism in that period, and how they conditioned contemporaneous understandings of ‘aid’. From that foundation, the article makes two claims. First, it argues that the ‘triumph’ of human rights in the late twentieth century was the product of a complex set of diplomatic, intellectual, and ideological factors that were of global, rather than simply of Western, origin. Second, by tracing what could and could not be done in the name of humanitarianism, the article brings us closer to understanding how even the most outwardly progressive vision of intervention was produced within a very specific – hierarchical and paternalistic – imagining of the Global South.

Keywords: Cold War; El Salvador; humanitarianism; human rights; non-governmental organizations

Human rights and humanitarianism have entangled roots. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anti-slavery advocates, solidarity activists, and anti-atrocity campaigners in places such as Congo, South Africa, Bulgaria, and Armenia blurred the lines between humanitarian and rights-based interventions.² That conceptual fluidity continued into the interwar period, most notably in the response of aid workers to the Spanish Civil War and the moral and political contradictions that conditioned their operations.³ Yet for much of the twentieth century, humanitarianism and human rights were thought of, and practised, in separate spheres. The internationalization and accompanying institutionalization of humanitarian responsibility after the Second World War divided their tasks into different agencies: the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1944–47), the UN International Children’s Emergency

¹ I wish to thank Anna Bocking-Welch, Maria Cullen, Matthew Hilton, Heidi Tworek, three anonymous reviewers, and participants at the European Social Science History Conference at Queen’s University, Belfast (April 2018) for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article. All errors and omissions are, of course, my own.

² Daniel Laqua, ‘Inside the Humanitarian Cloud: Causes and Motivations to Help Friends and Strangers’, *Journal of Modern European History* 12, no. 2 (2014): 175–85. See also Amalia Ribi Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism: The Politics of Anti-Slavery Activism, 1880–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Caroline Shaw, *Britannia’s Embrace: Modern Humanitarianism and the Imperial Origins of Refugee Relief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

³ Daniel Maul, ‘The Politics of Neutrality: The American Friends Service Committee and the Spanish Civil War’, *European Review of History* 23, no. 1–2 (2016): 82–100.

Fund, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for humanitarianism; and the UN Commission on Human Rights, later superseded by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. They also developed diverging reputations. Humanitarianism came to be associated with charity; human rights was linked to defending lives in ways that stressed the ‘search for justice and ... human flourishing’.⁴ It took until the late twentieth century for these divisions to be challenged. The emergence of the French NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, founded in 1971), with its emphasis on ‘speaking out’, ‘witnessing’, and thinking ‘beyond the humanitarian/political divide’, came to symbolize those debates.⁵ But it was simply the most prominent example of an often fractious discussion about the boundaries of humanitarian action. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, rights-based advocates had won. What they called ‘new’ humanitarianism was mainstreamed across the NGO sector: politically sensitive interventions that made peace-building and the defence of human rights integral to emergency aid.⁶

Historians and scholars of humanitarian studies have largely described this shift as a product of the post-Cold War period. The changing dynamics of humanitarian intervention in a unipolar world, they argue, rendered it easier for NGOs to speak in terms of rights-based alternatives.⁷ But humanitarians did not simply ‘discover’ human rights after the Cold War ended. Questions about how to protect vulnerable communities have challenged aid workers and officials since at least the nineteenth century.⁸ Those concerns became acute in the humanitarian sector’s rapid expansion in the post-decolonization era. The realities of violent conflict in Biafra (1967–70), Bangladesh (1970–72), and Cambodia (1979–81), debates about global economic justice and the possibility of a new international economic order, and a growing popular embrace of the rhetoric of human rights prompted conversations about how to balance the humanitarian impulse to ‘save’ with a broader desire to ‘protect’ vulnerable communities. These were questions with a global focus, but they came to a head in a specific regional context: the brutal civil war that devastated El Salvador in the 1980s. The displacement of a sizeable proportion of that country’s population drew the humanitarian sector’s attention. Issues of security, protection of civilians, and the link between poverty and political repression that the crisis foregrounded rendered actual what had been nascent conversations within the

⁴ Michael Barnett, ‘Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Practices of Humanity’, *International Theory* 10, no. 3 (2018), 315.

⁵ For an introduction to MSF and ‘activist humanitarianism’, see Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Michal Givoni, ‘Beyond the Humanitarian/Political Divide: Witnessing and the Making of Humanitarian Ethics’, *Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 1 (2011): 55–75; Claire Magone, Michaël Neuman, and Fabrice Weissman, eds., *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011); and Bertrand Taithe, ‘Reinventing (French) Universalism: Religion, Humanitarianism and the “French Doctors”’, *Modern & Contemporary France* 12, no. 2 (2004): 147–58.

⁶ See Michael Barnett, ‘Humanitarianism Transformed’, *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 4 (2005): 723–40; David G. Chandler, ‘The Road to Military Humanitarianism: How Human Rights NGOs Shaped a New Humanitarian Agenda’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2001): 678–700; Fiona Fox, ‘New Humanitarianism: Does It Provide a Moral Banner for the 21st Century?’ *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (2001): 275–89; Stuart Gordon and Antonio Donini, ‘Romancing Principles and Human Rights: Are Humanitarian Principles Salvageable?’, *International Review of the Red Cross* 97, vol. 897–898 (2016): 77–109; and Bronwyn Leebaw, ‘The Politics of Impartial Activism: Humanitarianism and Human Rights’, *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007): 223–39.

⁷ For an overview of this literature, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ‘Human Rights and History’, *Past & Present* 232 (2016): 279–310; and Matthew Hilton, Emily Baughan, Eleanor Davey, Bronwen Everill, Kevin O’Sullivan, and Tehila Sasson, ‘History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation’, *Past & Present* 241 (2018): e1–e38.

⁸ See, for example, Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarianism, War, and Politics: Solferino to Syria and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

sector about human rights. But it was the liberation theology and leftist-derived solidarity that underpinned the Salvadoran opposition's rhetoric, and particularly their convergence under the umbrella of human rights, that made El Salvador so significant for the history of humanitarian intervention. The searching questions that humanitarians had asked of their activities found ready answers in Central America. And those experiences, in turn, precipitated the internalization and normalization of rights-based activism into the everyday practice of 'doing' aid.

This article asks why this turn to rights-based humanitarianism took place and examines its consequences for our understanding of the history of human rights and humanitarian intervention. To do so, it draws on case studies of NGOs from Britain (Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children, War on Want), Canada (Canadian University Service Overseas, Development and Peace, Oxfam-Canada), and Ireland (Concern, Goal, Trócaire), along with wider lessons from the global humanitarian sector. Aid workers and officials from all three countries were at the forefront of the international response to the crisis in Central America and framed their approach within a broadly similar anglophone tradition (Québec excepted). There were, of course, differences in how they approached the conflict. Canada's relatively close geographical proximity to El Salvador, for example, meant that it was more exposed to direct contacts with the region – in terms both of visitors to and from North America, and of the sizeable Latin American population in cities such as Toronto. British NGOs, by contrast, were more focused on the Caribbean (a legacy of colonial connections) and approached El Salvador primarily through their offices in Guatemala and Mexico. In the Irish case, religious connections dominated. Although there were few Irish missionaries based in Central America, the region's vibrant tradition of Catholic social action drew considerable interest from socially conscious clergy and lay activists. The significance of these case studies, however, lies not in their national peculiarities and/or traditions. Rather, it is to be found in the similarity of British, Canadian, and Irish responses to the Salvadoran conflict: the common languages, practices, and understanding of 'humanitarianism' that it generated.

To analyse those experiences, this article is divided into four sections. It begins by drawing out the particular set of circumstances that confronted the NGO sector in Central America: the half-decade of intense conflict between the 1979 coup in El Salvador, the wave of right-wing oppression to which it gave rise, and the election of José Napoleón Duarte as Salvadoran president five years later. The plight of those displaced or otherwise affected by those events had limited impact on public opinion in the West (at least when compared to contemporaneous crises in Cambodia and Ethiopia). For the NGO sector, however, the Salvadoran conflict had considerable consequences. The middle sections of this article explore the searching (and often uncomfortable) questions that it posed of humanitarians and the conditions that framed them. The NGO embrace of rights-based language, this article contends, was intellectual: the product of long-term entanglements between humanitarianism and human rights; how 'humanity' was viewed under both conceptions; and how they understood the principle of 'saving'. But it was also the result of more practical – and pragmatic – factors. Local, regional, and Cold War politicking forced NGOs to take practical steps to defend their staff; the violence meted out against displaced Salvadorans prompted them to find new ways to protect aid recipients.

From these foundations, the article puts forward two arguments about the Salvadoran crisis and the kind of humanitarianism that it helped to generate. The first is to stress that the 'triumph' of human rights in the late twentieth century was the product of a complex set of diplomatic, intellectual, and ideological factors that were of global, rather than simply of Western (or, at a stretch, Global Northern), origin. Steven L. B. Jensen has called this process 'negotiating universality', arguing that the normalization of human rights rhetoric in the 1960s

and 1970s occurred in a variety of political and legal settings, in which actors from the Global South were often prominent.⁹ By viewing the development of human rights through Southern eyes, we gain a very different perspective on the 1970s as a ‘breakthrough’ for rights-based activism and, indeed, the competing assertion that it was only in the 1990s that human rights became an ‘irreplaceable and consequential concept of global politics’.¹⁰ Linking those experiences to the activities of humanitarian NGOs complicates that narrative still further. The turn to rights-based humanitarianism in Central America resulted from the deep entanglement of Salvadoran political and humanitarian agendas with debates about how to accommodate the realities of state-led violence with the NGO sector’s altruistic, needs-driven principles. By shifting our focus away from international organizations and state-led diplomacy, therefore, and on to non-state actors and their links to the Global South, we gain a more nuanced picture of the social and cultural channels through which the concept of rights-based activism was constituted, as well as the practical and pragmatic decisions on which it was based.

There are limits to how far this ‘global’ story of human rights can take us, however. The rise of rights-based campaigning had the effect of generating support for the Salvadoran people and condemnation of an American-dominated global order. But the choice of human rights as a language through which to express those concerns nonetheless identified humanitarian NGOs with a specific vision of global reform. Humanitarianism’s emphasis on ‘saving’ and ‘victims’ privileged a model of activism that favoured individualism rather than solidarity as the basis for the radicalization of aid. As the story of El Salvador makes clear, even the most outwardly progressive vision of intervention was produced within a very specific – hierarchical and paternalistic – imagining of the Global South.

The humanitarianism–security–human rights nexus in Central America

At the beginning of 1983, Oxfam-Canada chairman Meyer Brownstone wrote that ‘For many of us the past year has been one of profound discovery or re-discovery of the most elemental aspect of development – survival.’¹¹ Over the course of the previous twelve months, Brownstone had visited the refugee camps in Honduras, helped to organize meetings and speaking tours for Salvadoran activists, and had numerous conversations with international aid workers, refugees, church leaders, and campaigners. Together, they had convinced him of the

⁹ Steven L. B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 13. On this ‘global’ approach to the history of human rights, see also Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Fabian Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Jessica Stites Mor, ed., *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity in Cold War Latin America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Hoffmann, ‘Human Rights and History’, 282. On the importance of the 1970s, see also Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jan Eckel, ‘The Rebirth of Politics from the Spirit of Morality: Explaining the Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s’, in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, ed. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 226–59; Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On the post-Cold War approach, see Matthew Hilton, ‘International Aid and Development NGOs in Britain and Human Rights since 1945’, *Humanity* 3, no. 3 (2012): 449–72.

¹¹ Meyer Brownstone, ‘1982: A Year of Discovery’, *Inside Oxfam* (Winter 1983).

need for an entirely new concept of ‘aid’. In Central America, he argued, humanitarians were faced with ‘the fact of violent struggle and divided humanity, and the need for sheer survival – survival of life, survival of the minimal elements of human self-expression, survival of human dignity’.¹² NGOs should work in that context not only to administer relief or to highlight oppression; they should also ‘stand with the people ... and insist on their humanity and ours’.¹³

That soul-searching was prompted by the very real inadequacies of humanitarian practices in the face of violent conflict. The story began outside El Salvador, in the repressive measures adopted by authoritarian regimes across Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the transnational campaigns they precipitated.¹⁴ But it accelerated with the overthrow of General Carlos Humberto Romero’s government in October 1979 and the horrific cycle of violence, repression, and outside political interference that those events brought to El Salvador. Lawless ‘death squads’ formed by hard-line members of El Salvador’s ruling oligarchy were abetted by military and diplomatic support from the United States, and opposed by the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), which brought the dominant left-wing revolutionary movements under one umbrella in October 1980.¹⁵ By 1981, El Salvador had ‘fallen into the abyss’ and would remain embroiled in conflict for much of the following decade.¹⁶ Between 1980 and 1985, more than 40,000 civilians were killed, in addition to those who ‘disappeared’ at the hands of the regime.¹⁷ ASESAN, the humanitarian agency run by the Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador, described a people living ‘under a system of exploitation which has reached a critical stage, due to their inability to cope with the most basic needs such as health, food, education, housing, clothing, employment, as well as their democratic rights’.¹⁸ Similar language was used to describe the estimated 500,000 internally displaced peoples and 326,000 Salvadorans who had fled the country by 1983, clustering in refugee camps in Honduras and Mexico, and among expatriate communities across Central America.¹⁹ For Western journalists, they became symbols of the harassment and violence meted out by the Salvadoran regime. The story of 600 refugees massacred as they attempted to cross the Rio Sumpul into Honduras in May 1980, and the case of 200 individuals killed in a similar event on the Rio Lempa less than a year later, were typical of this narrative.²⁰ Those

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For an overview, see Stites Mor, ed., *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity*.

¹⁵ On the conflict in El Salvador, see Brian D’Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979–1992* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017); William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Paul D. Almeida, *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925–2005* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 171.

¹⁷ Mitchell A. Seligson and Vincent McElhinny, ‘Low-Intensity Warfare, High-Intensity Death: The Demographic Impact of the Wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua’, *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 21, no. 42 (1996), 214.

¹⁸ ASESAN, ‘Global Programme of Community Humanitarian Aid in El Salvador: General Background, First Report, January 1st to May 31st, 1981’, Latin American Working Group archive, F463, 2004-016/009, file 63, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University, Toronto (hereafter cited as YUA LAWG).

¹⁹ Figure from an anonymous report titled ‘The Following Document was Prepared by Canadian Development Workers Who Recently Completed a Tour of Central America and Mexico’, April 1983, Canadian Council for International Cooperation archive, MG28, I367, vol. 71, file 19, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC CCIC).

²⁰ For a view of these incidents from within the humanitarian sector, see Latin American Working Group, ‘Central American Refugees: The Crisis and the Context – A Report’, September 1982, YUA LAWG, F463, 2004-016/005, file 19.

who reached the camps at La Virtud and Colomoncagua, just over the border, described similar experiences. Stories abounded of local aid workers being harassed and killed, while refugees faced constant aggression from Honduran armed forces cooperating with their Salvadoran counterparts to root out suspected revolutionaries.²¹

This language was echoed in how El Salvador's popular opposition described the crisis – and in its responses to it. The FMLN leadership identified as Marxist-Leninist, bringing together two traditions in Salvadoran revolutionary politics: the new, revolutionary left, and the old-style communists.²² Its arguments were grounded in the transnational insurgent leftism and anti-American interventionism that dominated political debate in Central America. In practice, however, the revolutionaries' ranks were more eclectic, including Catholics, social democrats, intellectuals, and other activists. The influence of liberation theology, which emerged in Latin America in the late 1960s and attempted to nudge the Christian churches towards a more radical alignment with the poor, was particularly significant in that context.²³ The development of socially and politically aware congregations of Catholics called Christian base communities (CEBs) helped to foster what the theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez termed 'effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors'.²⁴ More than that, the CEBs' emphasis on developing political consciousness (borrowing from the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientization') proved important in the intellectual awakening of many revolutionaries – so much so, indeed, that liberation theologians viewed it as a 'major breakthrough' for their ideas.²⁵ Where these two traditions – leftist and liberationist – converged was on the common oppositional language of human rights. Just as rights had become a central pillar of solidarity and political resistance in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and elsewhere, so too in El Salvador they offered a way of fostering transnational resistance to the regime.²⁶ As a report

²¹ See, for example, the claims in Oxfam-Canada, 'Project Reports from Latin America: Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras', no. 20, September 1981, LAC CCIC, MG28, I367, vol. 90, file 20; and C. J. Sharkey (British Embassy, Tegucigalpa) to M. Webb (FCO), 27 October 1981, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Overseas Development Department 28/452 (hereafter cited as TNA OD).

²² Joaquín M. Chavez, 'AHR Roundtable: How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?', *American Historical Review* 125, no. 5 (2015), 1786.

²³ For an introduction to liberation theology and its origins, see Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Mark Engler, 'Toward the "Rights of the Poor": Human Rights in Liberation Theology', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28, no. 3 (2000): 339–65; Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996); Christopher Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Annegreth Schilling, 'Between Context and Conflict: The "Boom" in Latin American Protestantism in the Ecumenical Movement (1955–75)', *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 2 (2018): 274–93; and Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

²⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 174.

²⁵ Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology*, 227. On conscientization, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Continuum, 1970).

²⁶ On the broader Latin American context, see Alison J. Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty: Grassroots Activism and Human Rights in Pinochet's Chile* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018); James N. Green, 'Clerics, Exiles, and Academics: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States, 1969–1974', *Latin American Politics and Society* 45, no. 1 (2003): 87–117; Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies*; Vania Markarian, 'Uruguayan Exiles and Human Rights: From Transnational Activism to Transnational Politics, 1981–1984', *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 64, no. 1 (2007): 111–40; and Jessica Stites Mor, 'Introduction: Situating Transnational Solidarity Within Critical Human Rights Studies of Cold War Latin America', in *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity*, ed. Stites Mor, 3–20. On El Salvador, see Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Creating Transnational Solidarity: The Use of Narrative in the US–Central America Peace Movement', *Mobilization: An*

by ASESAH put it in 1981: ‘Our people live under a system of exploitation which has reached a critical stage, due to their inability to cope with the most basic needs such as health, food, education, housing, clothing, employment, as well as their democratic rights.’²⁷

The impact of this narrative was felt differently in Britain, Canada, and Ireland. In Britain, the earthquakes that hit Nicaragua (1972) and Guatemala (1976) had drawn attention to the region among NGOs such as Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children, and War on Want. By the late 1970s, however, that involvement had been pared down and replaced by a growing set of geopolitical and security concerns. In early 1979, Oxfam field staff warned of a grim future in which state oppression was expected to become more violent, more people were likely to be dislocated, and emergency relief would be necessary for those most vulnerable to the impact of these upheavals.²⁸ That summary proved remarkably prescient given what followed. The situation in El Salvador effectively left only two options open to humanitarian NGOs: to provide ‘immediate’ relief for those impacted by violence; and to supply ‘survival’ relief to refugees and the internally displaced.²⁹ NGOs channelled funding through local agencies in El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico, targeted at basic medical, nutritional, and accommodation needs. The choice of partner and project said much about how each organization viewed the crisis. For example, driven by a fear of becoming ‘politically involved’ in Central America, Save the Children limited its funding for El Salvador to a small donation to support ambulance crews operated by the local Green Cross, while in 1982 it sent a team of nurses and health workers to Honduras to work with Nicaraguans fleeing the left-wing Sandinista regime.

Other British NGOs were less circumspect. ASESAH was the main beneficiary in El Salvador, providing a conduit for several organizations – including Oxfam, Christian Aid, and War on Want – to reach the internally displaced. In Honduras, those organizations worked through the local Caritas agency, and directed funding through similar partners in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico. Not that the British public paid too much notice. In March 1982, efforts by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC, an umbrella NGO campaigning group) to organize a carefully named ‘Central America Emergency Appeal’ were hindered by fears that the campaign was ‘all too likely to develop ... into an anti-American campaign’.³⁰ When it ultimately went ahead, its impact was limited – and ultimately eclipsed in the public eye by the conflict in the Falklands later that spring.

The Irish route to El Salvador was slightly different. Although Central America was off the beaten track for Irish missionaries – there were relatively few of them in the region, even when compared with other non-English speaking countries such as Brazil – the Catholic Church nonetheless provided NGOs with an introduction to the crisis. Trócaire, the official aid agency of the Irish Catholic hierarchy, was the main conduit. Its first involvement in the region came in 1976, when it provided relief to Guatemala in the aftermath of the earthquake. From

International Journal 61 (2001): 21–36; Héctor Perla Jr, ‘Si Nicaragua venció, El Salvador vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the US–Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement’, *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 136–58; and Héctor Perla and Susan Bibler Coutin, ‘Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US–Central American Sanctuary Movement’, *Refuge* 26, no. 1 (2009): 7–19.

²⁷ ASESAH, ‘Global Programme of Community Humanitarian Aid in El Salvador’.

²⁸ ‘Oxfam: Field Committee for Latin America – [meeting on] Friday, 27th April, 1979, at 11.00am’, Oxfam Archive, PRG/1/5/5, fol. 1, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (hereafter cited as Oxfam Archive).

²⁹ Memo from Alonso Roberts to Kenneth Slack, ‘Possible DEC Appeal, El Salvador/Salvadoran Refugees’, 8 December 1981, Christian Aid Archive, CA4/G/4/1, Special Collections, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (hereafter cited as Christian Aid Archive).

³⁰ J. B. (John) Ure (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), ‘Lord Hunt’s Enquiry on El Salvador’, 12 February 1982, TNA, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 99/1234 (hereafter cited as FCO).

there, the organization's interests expanded across Central America. A visit to Ireland by Higinio Alas, an exiled Salvadoran priest, in July 1977, inspired the organization to donate to programmes run by the Salvadoran Catholic Church. In 1979, Trócaire's chairman, Bishop Eamonn Casey, and its head of projects, Sally O'Neill, visited San Salvador, where they met with local clergy and had 'a close brush with death' in an encounter at a roadblock manned by right-wing security forces.³¹ This marked the beginning of a close relationship between Trócaire and the charismatic Archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero, with ASESAN, and with other Salvadoran faith-based groups. In the early 1980s, Trócaire provided funding for refugees and the internally displaced, organized 'fact-finding' missions to the region, and facilitated lectures and speaking tours by Salvadoran activists. Those connections had a considerable impact on the tenor of the Irish response: 'The sector suffering most is the poor and the ordinary country people', ran a typical Trócaire press release in September 1981. 'A government which allows its servants to behave thus towards its own people has lost all right to rule, and raises very serious doubts as to the possibilities of it being reformed.'³²

Canadian NGOs engaged with the crisis on broadly similar terms. The strength of local campaigning organizations – led by the Latin American Working Group (LAWG, formed in the aftermath of the US invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965) and the ecumenical Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA, founded as a response to the 1973 military coup in Chile) – meant that questions of human rights were never far from the agenda. Latin American exiles played a prominent role too. The presence of thousands of expatriates in Toronto and other major cities, as well as those who arrived with the help of the sanctuary movement, influenced the terms and tenor of debate.³³ Their attention turned to Central America following the Salvadoran coup and the Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua in 1979. The response was strikingly collaborative. Representatives from LAWG, ICCHRLA, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the United Church of Canada sat alongside, and shared information with, their counterparts in humanitarian NGOs such as Oxfam-Canada, InterPares, Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), CARE Canada, the Canadian Catholic Agency for Development and Peace, and the umbrella Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC). These discussions, in turn, laid the basis for NGOs to organize public events, letters of protest, and delegations to government, with colleagues in groups such as the Committee of Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. In keeping with their British and Irish counterparts, Canadian NGOs also provided funding to Salvadoran organizations like ASESAN, as well as working with Salvadoran refugees in Honduras and elsewhere. In 1983 and 1984, these strands came together to make Central America the focus of the annual (and influential) 'Ten Days for World Development' campaign run by the Canadian Inter-Church Committee for World Development Education. The relationship between poverty and human rights was made clear by Robert Gardner, the campaign's coordinator. 'Ten Days', he wrote, was focusing its attention on the region because

³¹ Brian Maye, *The Search for Justice: Trócaire, a History* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), 115.

³² Trócaire press release, 2 September 1981, National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2011/39/1681 (hereafter cited as NAIDFA).

³³ For a history of the North American sanctuary movement, see Susan Bibler Coutin, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the US Sanctuary Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Van Gosse, "'The North American Front': Central American Solidarity in the Reagan Era', in *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s*, ed. Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1988), 11–50; and Perla and Coutin, 'Legacies and Origins'.

development ‘in any country is dependent upon its citizens having some assurance of basic rights to their very lives, to their making a living and to their human growth’.³⁴

What were the consequences of this discursive shift? Campaigns like ‘Ten Days’ were rooted mainly in national – and, in the Canadian case, sometimes provincial – connections and concerns. Taken together, however, the study of how British, Canadian, and Irish NGOs responded to the Salvadoran crisis reveals striking consistencies in how it was understood in the West. Those organizations enjoyed relatively low levels of public engagement with their operations in Central America – certainly in contrast with contemporaneous crises in Cambodia (1979–81) and Ethiopia (1984–85). This created problems for NGOs trying to generate enough funding to operate their aid programmes. But being out of the public eye also had its benefits: it gave room for NGOs to reflect on the challenges posed by the Salvadoran crisis and the implications for their global aid programmes. How could – and should – they talk about and respond to situations of this nature? The language they adopted, of course, was human rights. Rights-based rhetoric was visible in the individual and organizational connections that NGOs fostered, in their shared understanding of the politics of the Salvadoran conflict, and in the faith-based networks through which they approached it. Human rights, in turn, became the primary framework through which they responded to the humanitarian crisis. By the mid 1980s, each of the major British, Canadian, and Irish NGOs (except Concern and Save the Children) had foregrounded policies that linked poverty and emergency relief in the region with the protection of individual rights.

The intellectual bases for rights-based humanitarianism

This turn to rights-based humanitarianism may have found its voice in Central America, but it had much deeper roots. In the broadest sense, it was the product of a radically changed environment for non-governmental aid. The size and character of the international NGO sector changed significantly between the late 1960s and the mid 1980s. New organizations emerged, while older NGOs were rejuvenated by the massive influx of funding that followed crises in places such as Biafra, Bangladesh, the Sahel, and Cambodia.³⁵ The sector’s operational focus expanded to match. First-hand experience of the human costs of conflict prompted a renewed discussion about the political consequences of providing aid. So too did the NGO sector’s interventions in a growing global debate about economic and social justice.³⁶ Taken together, these discussions created an environment in which aid workers could – and did – challenge the boundaries of ‘humanitarianism’. In that context, it became increasingly possible to think of alternative ways of ‘doing’ aid.

³⁴ Robert Gardner (National Co-ordinator, Inter-Church Committee for World Development Education), circular letter to all Members of the Canadian Parliament, 27 October 1982, LAC CCIC, MG28, I367, vol. 71, file 19.

³⁵ See Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Kevin O’Sullivan, Matthew Hilton, and Juliano Fiori, ‘Humanitarianisms in Context’, *European Review of History* 23, no. 1–2 (2016): 1–15; Johannes Paulmann, ‘Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid During the Twentieth Century’, *Humanity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 215–38; and Silvia Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism, 1755–1989: In the Name of Others* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

³⁶ See, for example, Peter van Dam, ‘Moralizing Postcolonial Consumer Society: Fair Trade in the Netherlands, 1964–1997’, *International Review of Social History* 61, no. 2 (2017), 223–50; Kevin O’Sullivan, ‘The Search for Justice: NGOs in Britain and Ireland and the New International Economic Order, 1968–82’, *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (2015): 173–87; and Tehila Sasson, ‘Milking the Third World? Humanitarianism, Capitalism, and the Moral Economy of the Nestlé Boycott’, *American Historical Review* 121, no. 4 (2016): 1196–1224.

In many ways, however, this reflexivity merely accelerated a process that had long been integral to humanitarian aid. The birth of the Red Cross in the mid nineteenth century nudged the international community towards codified concern for those affected by conflict, and established neutrality, impartiality, and independence as the dominant principles of humanitarianism.³⁷ Yet those ideals were not applied, or indeed understood, with anything approaching the uniformity that we assume of them in the early twenty-first century. Most obviously, the question of who belonged to ‘humanity’ – and therefore deserved help – was answered with reference to hierarchical understandings of ‘civilization’ and belonging.³⁸ Humanitarianism, like imperialism, became a means of conditioning ‘better’ citizens and a way of stemming ‘barbaric’ violence through the spread of more ‘civic’ (European) ideals of conduct in war.³⁹ Neutrality and impartiality were bent in similar ways to suit the outlooks of humanitarians – most notably in changing attitudes and obligations towards ‘refugees’ across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁰ The boundaries of what was meant by ‘humanitarianism’ were also tested by those who defined ‘humanity’ in more inclusive terms. Nineteenth-century anti-slavery activists, for example, proved more than adept at using the political economy of cotton to their advantage, by organizing boycott and ethical-buying campaigns.⁴¹

On its own, this openness to new ideas might eventually have led NGOs to the language of human rights. What made El Salvador so significant, however, was the purchase of two intellectual pillars on which the humanitarian response to the crisis was based: liberation theology and a leftist-derived commitment to solidarity. These were not evenly shared – some aid workers drew more from a commitment to social justice than the more radical ideas of Marxist revolution, and vice versa – but together they help to explain the NGO sector’s ultimate embrace of human rights. The first pillar, liberationism, was particularly instrumental in shaping the attitudes of faith-based agencies. Óscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, became a global symbol of this radical critique of power.⁴² In addition to publicly condemning

³⁷ See David P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁸ See Fabian Klose and Mijam Thulin, eds., *Humanity: A History of European Concepts in Practice from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016); and Bruce Mazlish, *The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁹ Gerald Steinacher, *Humanitarians at War: The Red Cross in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11. On the relationship between humanitarianism and empire, see also Emily Baughan, ‘Rehabilitating an Empire: Humanitarian Collusion with the Colonial State During the Kenyan Emergency, ca. 1954–1960’, *Journal of British Studies* 59, no. 1 (2020): 57–79; Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism*; Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines Across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Benedetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Rob Skinner and Alan Lester, ‘Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012): 729–47.

⁴⁰ See Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War’s Wake: Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Post-War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gill, *Calculating Compassion*; Jessica Reinisch, ed., ‘Relief in the Aftermath of War’, special issue of *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 3 (2008): 371–551; and Shaw, *Britannia’s Embrace*.

⁴¹ See, for example, Stacey M. Robertson, ‘Marketing Social Justice: Lessons from Our Abolitionist Predecessors’, *Moving the Social* 57 (2017): 21–36.

⁴² On Romero, his career, and his death, see Matt Eisenbrandt, *Assassination of a Saint: The Plot to Murder Óscar Romero and the Quest to Bring His Killers to Justice* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

the country's unjust social structures, institutionalized violence, and class conflict (all terms borrowed from liberation theology), Romero helped to build the physical infrastructure that supported those affected by oppression. His diocese supported development projects, a radio station, and the transformation of the Socorro Jurídico from a small legal aid clinic into an outspoken human rights organization. Romero's assassination on 24 March 1980 – killed on the altar while he celebrated Mass – proved a transformational moment in the global campaign for solidarity with El Salvador. The dozens of foreign clergy and other observers who attended his funeral later that month bore witness to the deaths caused by security forces shooting into the 50,000-strong crowd and the panic it precipitated. To them, Romero became 'a real prophet of our times, he spoke out for justice in his country'.⁴³ Far from silencing Romero's critique, indeed, his death made El Salvador a centre point for a global campaign against injustice, oppression, and state brutality.

This language of Christian opposition gave Western NGOs a way of thinking beyond the hierarchical donor–recipient relationship towards something approximating solidarity with the people among whom they worked: 'To be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor', as Gustavo Gutiérrez put it.⁴⁴ Trócaire was one of the organizations most obviously influenced by these arguments. At its tenth anniversary celebrations in 1983, for example, its members reflected on their experience of campaigning on El Salvador as one of the catalysts for a fundamental change in the organization's priorities. The reality of giving aid in those contexts, they concluded, led Trócaire to the belief that 'one of the first and major obstacles to be faced in developing the abilities of the poor and oppressed is to persuade those with a vested interest in maintaining a given, unjust power arrangement that the poor have a right to make their own decisions, to organise themselves to achieve a better life'.⁴⁵ This language was replicated by faith-based agencies elsewhere in the West. In Britain, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development and the Catholic Institute for International Relations were criticized for the overtly political 'left wing attitudes' that their representatives displayed on visits to Central America.⁴⁶ Development and Peace developed a similarly forthright response in Canada.⁴⁷ And those attitudes were not limited to those of the Catholic faith. Representatives from a variety of Canadian churches toured Central America and gave explicit support to the humanitarian effort through LAWG and ICCHRLA. Christian Aid (the aid and development arm of the Protestant British Council of Churches) drew similar inspiration from liberationist rhetoric in shaping its approach to the region.

This liberationist language and the promise of radical social and political reform overlapped significantly with the second intellectual pillar of the humanitarian response: left-wing political activism. The Sandinistas' victory in Nicaragua in 1979, ousting the US-backed President Anastasio Somoza, marked an important moment in how the humanitarian community viewed the potential impact of its actions. As one Canadian activist put it, Nicaragua gave them 'hope' that the same outcome could be reached in El Salvador.⁴⁸ That

⁴³ Paul Reding, Catholic Bishop of Hamilton, Ontario, quoted in Jack Panozzo, 'El Salvador: A Prophet Is Silenced but not His Witness to Justice', *Global Village Voice* 4, no. 5 (May/June 1980).

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 173.

⁴⁵ 'Mindful of Our Absent Friends', *One World*, July 1983.

⁴⁶ David Joy, 'Activities of British Charities in Central America', 20 June 1985, TNA FCO, 99/2013.

⁴⁷ See Peter Earnest Baltutis, 'Forging the Link Between Faith and Development: The History of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, 1967–1982' (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2012), chap. 4.

⁴⁸ 'Interview with Louise Casselman in Toronto by Janice Acton, June 29, 1993', John Foster Papers, box 1, Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, York University, Toronto.

optimism, in turn, conditioned how they viewed their role in the humanitarian response. The Oxfam-Canada chairman, Meyer Brownstone, who cut his political teeth as a member of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation-led administration that brought democratic socialism to Saskatchewan in the 1940s and 1950s, was just one of those who viewed this as an opportunity to reimagine humanitarianism. Luis Silva of War on Want described his organization's activities in similarly explicit terms: 'After all, we call ourselves a radical charity, and there is nothing more radical for a charity than to support a very radical process of economic, social, and political change.'⁴⁹ In this way, the crisis in El Salvador became a lightning rod for several different currents circulating within the sector. Humanitarian assistance was as a protest against American attempts to destabilize Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala; a weapon in a global anti-imperialist campaign; and a method of linking the story of poverty in the West to its experience in the developing world. This support was not always made explicit. For example, a review of Oxfam UK's aid programme undertaken in the early 1990s noted its 'sympathy' with the revolutionaries' aims: by providing relief, Oxfam was 'giving its backing (directly and indirectly) to groups which were campaigning for social justice and reform'.⁵⁰ But it was vital in linking the process of political change with the delivery of 'aid'.

The cumulative effect of these liberationist and left-leaning attitudes was to widen the discursive space for what humanitarianism could mean in the late twentieth century. When human rights emerged as a common language of protest among Salvadoran activists and their political supporters in the West, NGOs followed suit. As Christian Aid described it, humanitarianism became a way of picking up the pieces where human rights were violated – 'human pieces: those who have fled as refugees; those who emerge broken from torture and imprisonment without trial; the dependents of those who are denied work or are removed from their families'.⁵¹ That shift made sense in a Central American context. NGOs intervened on the basis of providing for those made refugees or harmed in other ways by the conflict. When local and international human rights campaigners made an appeal to something similar, it provided aid workers with another tool through which to articulate their grievances. It was a short step from there to the use of human rights as what Samuel Moyn called a 'coalitional moral language of opposition' to critique the excesses of the Salvadoran regime.⁵²

To fully understand this change, however, we need to return to the global context, and to the broader ethical question of how NGOs should respond to repressive violence. A growing public discourse about domestic and international rights changed the tenor of Western compassion for suffering others in the 1970s. The use of rights-based language by organizations such as Amnesty International, the British National Council for Civil Liberties, and a growing number of women's, gay, and aboriginal rights movements conditioned campaigners to speak about the protection of humanity in similar terms.⁵³ For NGOs, this language also offered a bridge between the radicalism of ideas like liberation theology and left-

⁴⁹ Luis Silva, 'FENASTRAS [National Federation of Salvadoran Workers] Project', May 1980, War on Want Papers, box 78, Special Collections, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

⁵⁰ James Darcy, 'Review of Oxfam's Emergency and Conflict-Related Work in Mexico/Central America, 1979–1991', Oxfam Archive, PRG/5/5/9, fol. 2.

⁵¹ Christian Aid, *What a Year! Report on Financial Year 1st April 1979 to 31st March 1980* (London: Riverside Press, n.d. [1980?]), 9.

⁵² Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 145.

⁵³ Bradley, *World Reimagined*; Dominique Clément, *Human Rights in Canada: A History* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016); Eckel, 'Rebirth of Politics'; Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*; Chris Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Moyn, *Last Utopia*.

wing solidarity and a more ‘traditional’ (often conservative) model of intervention in the Global South. Human rights thereby became a framework through which a wider range of individuals could engage in criticism of oppressive regimes abroad. Changes in Vatican rhetoric – particularly Pope John Paul II’s emphasis on individual rights when framing Catholic opposition to communism – energized those concerned at events in Central America but suspicious of liberation theology. Likewise, among the Protestant churches, arguments in favour of supporting liberation movements (in southern Africa, for example) were redirected towards human rights as a route to support the poor.⁵⁴ Transferring those principles to the humanitarian sphere, it became possible for humanitarians and human rights campaigners to put to one side their disagreements on what forms of suffering deserved their attention and instead focus on their common goal: ‘saving’ the lives of distant others.⁵⁵ The effect of this rhetorical shift was subtle but significant. The basic humanitarian impulse to provide for those impacted by the conflict was transformed into a discussion which linked emergency medicine, food, shelter, and educational provision with the critique of a repressive regime that denied its citizens access to those basic needs.

Pragmatism, practicalities and the turn to human rights

We should be careful, however, not to focus our attention too narrowly on the intellectual origins of rights-based humanitarianism. The NGO sector’s openness to new ideas and the malleability of ‘saving’ as a concept created a rhetorical framework that facilitated humanitarianism’s embrace of human rights. Yet those debates did not take place in a vacuum. Rather, in the same way that geopolitical, postcolonial, and ideological concerns helped precipitate the broader ‘triumph’ of human rights in the 1970s, so too the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the crisis in Central America played a significant role in shaping the rise of rights-based humanitarianism. This process of ‘negotiating universalism’ took place on three levels. First, the recourse to human rights reflected the influence of Southern activists in setting the terms of global debate. Second, rights-based activism was a response to the political – and fundraising – environments in which NGOs operated. And, third, the decision to adopt human rights language was also the result of more prosaic, operational concerns – not least of which was the simple question of how to defend the security of NGO staff and those whom they worked to help.

The first of those factors – Southern influence on the human rights agenda – was a reminder that the turn to rights-based humanitarianism was influenced by political currents that stretched far beyond the West. Efforts to influence the global narrative of anti-authoritarian campaigning were common in Latin America. Activists in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Nicaragua, and elsewhere used personal testimonies to develop a narrative of oppression and establish the defence of human rights as the basis for transnational solidarity.⁵⁶ Exile networks and information-exchange hubs in places such as Mexico City also became important centres

⁵⁴ John Witte Jr and Frank S. Alexander, eds., *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵⁵ Barnett, ‘Human Rights, Humanitarianism’, 318; Miriam Ticktin, ‘Where Ethics and Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France’, *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006), 39.

⁵⁶ See Alison J. Bruey, ‘Transnational Concepts, Local Contexts: Solidarity at the Grassroots in Pinochet’s Chile’, in *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity*, ed. Stites Mor, 120–42; Kim Christiaens, ‘Between Diplomacy and Solidarity: Western European Support Networks for Sandinista Nicaragua’, *European Review of History* 21, no. 4 (2014): 617–34; Green, ‘Clerics, Exiles, and Academics’; Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies*; and Markarian, ‘Uruguayan Exiles and Human Rights’.

of discursive change.⁵⁷ In El Salvador, the FMLN, the Salvadoran Catholic Church, and other activist groups were more than aware of these tactics – and their potential impact. Together, they adopted what Héctor Perla called a ‘signal flare strategy’. NGO officials, politicians, and trade unionists were brought to Central America to witness conditions, while ‘victims’ were sent in the other direction to the West – all in the hope that their message would be ‘amplified’ by international actors and, in the process, help to mobilize opposition to American intervention in the region.⁵⁸

The effect of this strategy was considerable. Within a short time of initiating their relief programmes in the region, NGOs were absorbed into a conversation about human rights that was shaped largely by voices from the Global South. That process was most visible in Canada, where tours by Southern activists became particularly important in driving a narrative that directed attention to abuses of individual rights. In July 1980, for example, ICCHRLA and LAWG co-sponsored a visit to Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto by three representatives of the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR, a coalition group closely associated with the FMLN).⁵⁹ Others followed, from a variety of Salvadoran groups. In 1981, Oxfam-Canada introduced officials from FMLN-FDR’s ‘humanitarian assistance arm’ to other Canadian NGOs to discuss possible collaborations.⁶⁰ In November 1982, two Salvadoran activists from the Committee for Political Prisoners of El Salvador spoke to a variety of different groups in Ontario, on a tour organized by ICCHRLA, Oxfam-Canada, and the CCIC. Their aim was ‘to publicize conditions in the prisons and the human rights situation in El Salvador today’.⁶¹ In 1983, the CCIC gave further impetus to this framing of the crisis by promoting a series of events across Canada for members of the Salvadoran Mothers of the Disappeared and Political Prisoners Committee.⁶² And this was just a small sample of the Salvadoran voices heard in North America in the early 1980s. LAWG, ICCHRLA, local solidarity groups, and faith-based institutions such as the Jesuit Centre in Toronto, as well as Latin American exiles living in Canada, all facilitated visits by Salvadoran activists. The same pattern was also visible in Europe. Trócaire used its Catholic Church connections to facilitate public talks and private meetings with government officials for visiting Salvadorans. In Britain, War on Want became engaged in a campaign on women’s rights that focused attention on the gendered dimensions of the violence, while Oxfam and Christian Aid provided similar platforms for Salvadoran activists.

That process was reinforced by the narratives that aid workers collected from refugees and displaced peoples in Central America. Salvadoran *campesinos* (peasant farmers) who fled to Honduras proved particularly adept at using international aid networks – what they called *los internacionales* – to their advantage. In the refugee camps, they studied the viewpoints and political persuasions of aid workers and the agencies they represented, viewing them as channels of information and an opportunity to give voice to their testimonies on a global

⁵⁷ Vanessa Freije, ‘The “Emancipation of Media”: Latin American Advocacy for a New International Information Order in the 1970s’, *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (2019): 301–20.

⁵⁸ Perla, ‘Si Nicaragua venció, 142–3; and Héctor Perla Jr, ‘Central American Counterpublic Mobilization: Transnational Social Movement Opposition to Reagan’s Foreign Policy Toward Central America’, *Latino Studies* 11, no. 2 (2013), 184.

⁵⁹ See YUA LAWG, F463, 2004-016/009, file 32.

⁶⁰ Cynthia Thomson, ‘Trip Report: Toronto – June 25, 1981’, LAC CCIC, MG28, I367, vol. 78, file 17.

⁶¹ ‘Visit to Canada of Two Salvadorans with the Committee for Political Prisoners of El Salvador (COPPEs), November 18 to 30 [1982]’, CCIC press release, LAC CCIC, MG28, I367, vol. 76, file 4.

⁶² See YUA LAWG F463, 2004-016/004, file 47.

stage.⁶³ Their influence was openly visible in the interpretation of the crisis that was subsequently adopted by Western NGOs. On their return from an Oxfam-Canada-sponsored tour of the refugee camps in January 1982, for example, the Canadian members of parliament Warren Allmand, Dan Heap, and Joseph Reid concluded that the refugee situation was ‘coloured significantly by the general situation regarding human rights ... Insecurity and fear induced by acts of brutality, harassment and threats pervades the situation.’⁶⁴ All of which was true, of course. Central America was a particularly violent place. But its ultimate effect was to blur the lines between the humanitarian and social justice aspirations of the NGOs who facilitated these visits, and the human rights, solidarity, and political agendas of Salvadoran activists. Visitors to El Salvador, like the Trócaire delegation that arrived in August 1981, drew an even more explicit link between humanitarian aid and the impact of violent repression. During their stay, Trócaire’s representatives were brought by the local Human Rights Commission to rubbish heaps on the edge of San Salvador, where they found eleven bodies ‘buried by local people who had tired of waiting for officials to arrive’.⁶⁵ Their report, delivered to the media and Irish government officials on their return home, was designed to elicit shock and sympathy for the Salvadoran cause. It described corpses showing

marks of torture and having been partially eaten by dogs ... A few yards further on, we discovered the mutilated body of a man in his early twenties who had been killed some hours previously. His blood was still fresh on the ground and the cord which had bound his thumbs behind his back lay nearby. The tying of thumbs behind the back is practised by the Security Forces and is recognised as a trade-mark.⁶⁶

The use of such images fed directly into the second practical factor that governed the humanitarian sector’s attitude to human rights: the desire to be cognizant of the political implications of their activities. This approach was bound up in a general unwillingness to stray too far from humanitarianism’s core principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.⁶⁷ But British, Canadian, and Irish NGOs were also careful to protect their ‘brands’, lest being seen to be ‘political’ might affect their support base – and, with it, reduce their income from public donations. The spectre of Cold War politics was ever-present in defining how those organizations described their role in Central America. When, for example, Oxfam officials spoke of balancing ‘our reputation for integrity and a non-partisan position’ with condemnation of authoritarian regimes, they simultaneously emphasized the need for ‘full consultation ... before Oxfam’s name is used in conjunction with any information issued in respect of human rights and political issues’.⁶⁸ They were not alone in taking this position. Most NGOs worried

⁶³ Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 116–17.

⁶⁴ ‘Delegation to Honduras, January 18–24, 1982’, Oxfam-Canada press statement, Meyer Brownstone/Oxfam International Papers, box 3, file 9, Carleton University Special Collections, Ottawa.

⁶⁵ Trócaire, ‘Report on Trócaire delegation visit to El Salvador’, undated (Aug. 1981), NAI DFA 2012/59/1312.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015).

⁶⁸ ‘Field Committee for Latin America, Charney Manor, Thursday, 7th July 1983, at 12.00 noon, to Friday, 8th July – Item 4, part v: Oxfam and human rights’, Oxfam Archive, PRG/1/5/7, fol. 1.

that being politically ‘involved’ would risk losing the ‘moral authority’ associated with their commitment to the impartial delivery of aid.⁶⁹

More than that, the idea that ‘solidarity’ might bring with it the further risk of being too closely associated with the FMLN and the Sandinistas’ (Cuban-inspired) rhetoric of international revolution made many NGO officials concerned that a potential loss of financial support might follow. There was anecdotal evidence to suggest that it would. The British DEC’s ‘Central America Emergency Appeal’, launched in March 1982, received only limited support from public and private bodies. Oxfam’s Bill Yates complained that the public found the issue ‘difficult ... complicated by propaganda and by press attention to the political and military aspects of the crisis’.⁷⁰ Similar concerns were repeated elsewhere in the West. For example, protesters who took to the streets during the US President Ronald Reagan’s visit to Ottawa in March 1981 were described variously as ‘brainless’, a ‘lunatic fringe’, ‘unruly’, and ‘Marxist radicals’.⁷¹ When Reagan visited Ireland three years later, campaigners (including 200 nuns who fronted a march in Dublin) faced similar criticisms.⁷² One Trócaire staff member interviewed in the early 1990s admitted that his organization’s supporters were ‘very conservative people, so much so that they would be horrified if they knew the full extent of Trócaire’s work’.⁷³

For humanitarians, part of the appeal of rights-based language was its recourse to universal human values over the vagaries of partisan power struggles. Human rights historians have dubbed this approach the ‘non-politics’ of rights-based activism. By emphasizing ‘ideological impartiality, lack of hostility, and concern about purely “humanitarian” matters, [human rights activists] helped to find repressive regimes more receptive to their actual demands or, respectively, tried to protect themselves from reprisals for unauthorised political activism’.⁷⁴ This way of thinking proved particularly attractive to NGOs looking to criticize the Salvadoran status quo. Support for human rights allowed them to articulate their revulsion at the causes of suffering without publicly aligning their supporters with a political movement. They could claim to be impartial by attending to all victims of human rights violations, while their commitment to ‘witnessing’ those acts of violence linked support for human rights with a moral and ethical commitment to the integrity of humanity rather than support for Marxism or Third Worldism.

The crisis in El Salvador reminds us, however, that there was a third, more practical, set of reasons why NGOs proved so enamoured of the rights-based approach. While scholars of humanitarianism tend to focus on ethics and morality as key areas of decision-making, the practicalities and operational details of providing relief are, in fact, the ‘main preoccupation’ of humanitarian agencies.⁷⁵ Such day-to-day decision-making was certainly important in deciding how Western aid workers could operate and the terms on which they could relate to local communities in Central America. The security situation was foremost in their thoughts.

⁶⁹ Daniel A. Bell and Joseph H. Carens, ‘The Ethical Dilemmas of International Human Rights and Humanitarian NGOs: Reflections on a Dialogue Between Practitioners and Theorists’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2004), 319.

⁷⁰ Bill Yates, ‘Central America Emergency’, memorandum to all Oxfam area directors, regional organizers, divisional heads, and departmental heads, 2 April 1982, Oxfam Archive, COM/2/5/11, fol. 3.

⁷¹ Letters to the Editor, *Toronto Star*, 18 March 1981.

⁷² See, for example, ‘The Reagan Visit’, *Sunday Independent* (Ireland), 27 May 1984.

⁷³ Quoted in Paula Rodgers, *The Charity Box Speaks Back: Profile of an Irish Aid Agency* (Maynooth: Sociological Association of Ireland, 1996), 20.

⁷⁴ Eckel, ‘Rebirth of Politics’, 258.

⁷⁵ Tom Scott-Smith, ‘The Fetishism of Humanitarian Objects and the Management of Malnutrition in Emergencies’, *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013), 914.

In the months after Archbishop Romero's death, the archdiocesan offices in San Salvador were bombed, the Catholic University was attacked, convents at Guazapa and San Antonio were ransacked, the rector of the National University was murdered, and two prominent members of the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission and four female American missionaries were killed in separate incidents.⁷⁶ Those circumstances made it extremely difficult for NGOs to function on anything approximating the terms that they had become used to in the Global South. Faced with the reality not only of providing aid, therefore, but also of defending those who delivered it, those organizations adapted their policies to fit. In some cases that involved protecting the identity of recipient institutions or individuals. In others it meant diverting funding through agencies in Mexico, Honduras, or Guatemala. The constant harassment of aid workers underlined the precarity of their position in the region. In the twelve months to March 1981, for example, seventeen local staff who worked on Oxfam-supported projects in El Salvador were killed.⁷⁷ Long-term programming virtually ground to a halt as a result.

In that context, it made sense for NGOs to mobilize human rights as what Clifford Bob termed 'offensive weapons of conflict'.⁷⁸ Those working in and visiting the camps in Honduras quickly realized that the simple act of providing a foreign presence discouraged some of the more repressive acts of the local security forces. Sandra Pentland, director of Montreal YMCA, who visited Honduras in late 1981, described a situation where 'security provided by the foreigners, though not always complete, comes through their ability to take news of kidnappings and harassment to the outside world'.⁷⁹ In effect, this led NGOs to an approach that bridged the Médecins Sans Frontières principle of witnessing (*témoignage*) and the 'motivated truths' used by human rights campaigners in the West.⁸⁰ For example, following his first visit to Central America in 1979, the Trócaire chairman, Bishop Eamonn Casey, returned to the region in August 1981 (El Salvador and Nicaragua), August 1983 (Guatemala and Nicaragua), and November 1985 (Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua). British public figures were also regular visitors, often on tours sponsored or facilitated by humanitarian NGOs. Across the Atlantic, representatives from Oxfam-Canada and Development and Peace used their relative geographic proximity to Central America to organize regular visits to Honduras for delegates from the main Canadian political parties, Canadian churches and solidarity groups, and celebrities, including, in February 1983 and September 1985, the folk singer Bruce Cockburn.

There were limits, of course, to how far this practical, political, and Southern-influenced agenda was adopted by the NGO sector. In the early 1980s, Save the Children

⁷⁶ See, for example, the range of grievances listed in Rev. Philip Morgan (British Council of Churches) and Bishop James O'Brian (Catholic Commission for International Justice and Peace) to Lord Carrington (Foreign Secretary), 7 November 1980, Christian Aid Archive, CA3/LA/C/74.

⁷⁷ 'Project staff murdered', *Oxfam News*, June–July 1981.

⁷⁸ Clifford Bob, *Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

⁷⁹ Paraphrased in 'Call for NGO Aid to Refugees in Honduras', *The Newsletter* (CCIC) 5, no. 5, January 1982. This recommendation was repeated in reports from the region: see, for example, 'Report on Trip to Honduras by Suzanne Dudziak, May 3–May 20, 1982', YUA LAWG, F463, 2004-016/005, file 17; 'Central America Refugee Information Liaison Project', n.d. [1982?], LAC CCIC, MG28, I367, vol. 71, file 19; and Oxfam press bulletin, February 1982, Oxfam Archive, CPN/4/4/2, fol. 3.

⁸⁰ Bradley, *World Reimagined*, 145–8, 182–97. On the MSF principle of *témoignage*, see Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*. On MSF's application of these ideals in Honduras, see Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 96–9; and the case study 'Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras 1988', *MSF Speaking Out*, 1 April 2013, <http://speakingout.msf.org/en/salvadoran-refugee-camps-in-honduras-1988>.

viewed the ‘quasi-war situation’ on the Honduras/El Salvador border as ‘a risk to involvement’ in the region.⁸¹ Rather than adopt human rights as a weapon to counter that situation, however, it preferred to focus its attentions elsewhere in Central America. That organization also proved largely immune to the claims of Salvadoran activists and preferred to provide aid solely on ‘humanitarian grounds’.⁸² ‘It was difficult to know who was a refugee and who was a guerrilla’, a meeting of its Overseas Committee was told in May 1981.⁸³ The more common response among humanitarian NGOs, however, was to integrate the language of human rights into the practice of delivering aid. Once the tone of the crisis had been set, it was striking just how far the principles of rights-based activism became embedded in the day-to-day practice of humanitarian aid. As a later review of Oxfam’s activities summarized it, this meant supporting groups that ‘were often working for and representing the poor not in a passive way, but through active campaigning for human rights and generally through social organisation ... and education’.⁸⁴

The limits of rights-based humanitarianism

The question remains, however, how far these changes represented an enduring shift in NGOs’ interpretation of humanitarianism and its relationship to human rights. The degree to which British, Canadian, and Irish humanitarians fell easily into rights-based rhetoric and practices suggests that something fundamental changed in Central America. In that moment, conversations about justice, repression, and security turned into an altogether different conversation about ‘aid’, politics, and poverty. But were those responses simply the product of circumstance? Or did they represent a longer-term reorientation: towards the emergence of ‘new’ humanitarianism? How did the experience of assisting the Salvadoran people affect global humanitarian discourse and practice?

To understand the long-term impact of the Salvadoran crisis, we need only look to the changes in policy it precipitated within the NGO sector. In the early 1980s, Oxfam engaged in a series of robust internal debates about how it should integrate rights-based activities into its broader programme of aid. The crisis in Central America became an important reference point. Field staff based in the region repeatedly claimed that ‘Oxfam at home still did not understand sufficiently that the commitment to stand alongside our partners in situations of injustice and oppression was a central part of Oxfam’s philosophy.’⁸⁵ In turn, the organization’s (Oxford-based) ‘Field Committee for Latin America’ became a central location for thinking out a response to those challenges. Many of the issues that the committee raised with Oxfam’s governing council – protection, funding for ‘victims’ of human rights infractions, and the relationship between humanitarianism and security – were questions directly associated with the organization’s activities in Central America.⁸⁶ Their impact was not insignificant. In the

⁸¹ ‘Minutes of the 380th Meeting of the Overseas Committee held on 11th February 1982 at 10.15 a.m.’, Save the Children Archive, SCF/A/4/1/2, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (hereafter cited as Save the Children Archive).

⁸² ‘Minutes of the 339th Meeting of the Council held in Jebb House at 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 4th March 1982’, Save the Children Archive, SCF/A/1/1/6.

⁸³ ‘Minutes of the 371st Meeting of the Overseas Committee held on 14th May 1981, at 10.15 a.m.’, Save the Children Archive, SCF/A/4/11.

⁸⁴ Darcy, ‘Review of Oxfam’s Emergency and Conflict-Related Work’, .

⁸⁵ ‘Field Committee for Latin America, Oxfam House, Thursday, 28th April, 1983, at 11.00am – Item 5: Report on the Field Staff Conference in Managua’, Oxfam Archive, PRG/1/5/7, fol. 1.

⁸⁶ ‘Field Committee for Latin America, Charney Manor, Thursday, 7th July 1983, at 12.00 noon, to Friday, 8th July – Item 4, part v: Oxfam and Human Rights’, Oxfam Archive, PRG/1/5/7, fol. 1.

short term, the committee's recommendations were a significant advance on a paper adopted by Oxfam in 1979, which set out the organization's ideas about humanitarian neutrality ('need above the political divide').⁸⁷ In the medium term, they also helped kick-start debates that led Oxfam to its 'Together for Rights, Together Against Poverty' campaign in the 1990s.⁸⁸

Similar conversations occurred elsewhere in the West. In Canada, campaigning in support of human rights in Latin America led to considerable soul-searching among Development and Peace and Oxfam-Canada officials, including the Oxfam-Canada chairman Meyer Brownstone, who drew parallels between the situation in Central America and the organization's activities elsewhere in the world: 'many of its characteristics are found wherever Oxfam-Canada works – in southern Africa, the Caribbean, and the Andean region'.⁸⁹ More than parallels, however, it was possible to see direct lessons from Central America applied elsewhere in those organizations' activities. Development and Peace's 'Fall Action Programme' in 1983, for example, used 'human interest stories that people can relate to' as a way of drawing attention to human rights violations in the Philippines.⁹⁰ Likewise, although the majority of Oxfam-Canada's work in Eritrea and Tigray in the mid 1980s addressed the immediate and long-term causes of famine, it was framed in terms of the idea that 'struggles for food in Third World countries frequently become political struggles'.⁹¹ The organization's education programmes in Chile, Nicaragua, and Namibia made this link between humanitarianism and 'solidarity' even more explicit.

In Ireland, Trócaire's activities were similarly increasingly imbued with the language of human rights. In 1982, Bishop Eamon Casey told a press conference of its role in promoting 'an awareness of the human rights situation in El Salvador within Ireland. Our aim now must be to translate this into an immediate concern for human rights worldwide'.⁹² Trócaire's campaigning on rights-related issues in South Africa and the Philippines reflected this change in priorities. It proved an enduring shift: in 1988, Trócaire's Lenten collection boxes – a prominent annual feature in Irish homes and a cornerstone of the organization's fundraising – featured a hand-drawn image of a farmer (quite conceivably a Salvadoran *campesino*) crucified on a cross made of a pitchfork and a shovel, accompanied by the slogan 'Human Rights: Working for Justice'.⁹³ By the 1990s, the organization had firmly elided these two concepts, linking issues such as land ownership, education, and development to the pursuit of social and economic rights.

Reading this story forward into the 1990s also raises questions about what these changes meant for those on the receiving end of aid. The growth of the global humanitarian sector in the late twentieth century was built on historically rooted ideas of charity, imperial and pseudo-imperial understandings of the 'other', and ideologically driven expectations of the poor. The inherent inequality of those transactions made humanitarianism 'a moral sentiment with no possible reciprocity ... the exchange remains profoundly unequal'.⁹⁴ This was not

⁸⁷ Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam, the First 50 Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 247.

⁸⁸ Oxfam/Pat Simmons, *Words Into Action: Basic Rights and the Campaign Against World Poverty* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1995).

⁸⁹ Brownstone, '1982: A Year of Discovery'.

⁹⁰ Fr Luis Hechanova (chairman of the Association of Major Religious Supervisors of Men in the Philippines), quoted in 'Two Views on Life in Philippines, El Salvador', *Global Village Voice* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1984).

⁹¹ 'Question Six: What Can We Do to Help?', *Inside Oxfam*, December 1985.

⁹² Quoted in 'Irish Bishop to Probe Civil Rights in S.A.', *Irish Press*, 24 February 1982.

⁹³ Image available at <http://www.pinterest.ie/pin/30047522486194050>.

⁹⁴ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 3.

always intentional; (most) humanitarians did not set out to deliberately set themselves apart from those whom they assisted in the field. Nonetheless, it had important implications for the way in which NGOs talked about human rights. Interventions were built on the idea that local communities required ‘saving’ and protection by aid workers from the West. The elevation of human rights and humanitarianism as ideals ‘above politics’ merely reinforced this hierarchy, separating the act of saving from the intricate realities of local politics. David Chandler called this ‘ethical misanthropy’, driven by a common (mis)conception that ‘the non-Western state lacks an adequate capacity for self-determination or self-government’.⁹⁵

This ‘misanthropy’ was visible in Central America in three ways. First, the defence of human rights became a way of re-articulating another core principle of humanitarianism: alliance with, and concern for, the ‘victim’.⁹⁶ The trope of innocent communities caught in the firing line (sometimes literally) of an oppressive regime was common in how NGOs described the crisis in El Salvador. On his return from the country in February 1982, for example, Oxfam’s Bill Yates described an incident in which four soldiers burst into a sanctuary for displaced peoples he had been visiting, and the ‘current of fear’ it generated among those present: ‘I was frightened because mothers and tiny children were frightened – terrified of men wearing uniforms, and of the guns they carried.’⁹⁷ Similar rhetoric was employed to emphasize the social, personal, and intergenerational experience of violence – ‘from grandparents to babies’, as Yates put it – and in describing those who fled to Honduras and further afield.⁹⁸ These constructions, as we have seen, were often promoted by the refugees themselves, and by Salvadoran activists, to emphasize the right tone of ‘victimhood’ that would resonate with visiting campaigners from the West.⁹⁹ The presence and role of men in the camps was played down, for example, in favour of an image of children, mothers, and old people, dependent on the international aid community for protection. The impact, nonetheless, was to create a reductivist image of Salvadorans and Salvadoran society in the West. Refugees and the internally displaced were stripped of their agency, portrayed as individuals dislocated from the politics that weighed so heavily on them and too feeble to do anything about it.

Second, the hierarchical relationship between donors and victims also helps to explain why a more radical, solidarity-based humanitarianism proved so difficult to implement – even among those who identified closely with communities in the Global South. Meyer Brownstone’s call for Oxfam-Canada supporters ‘to stand with the people of Central America’ was a direct challenge to this paradigm.¹⁰⁰ It required humanitarians to identify with the suffering of the ‘other’ in a manner that went beyond sympathy towards an emotional identity with the people (in this case, of El Salvador) and their cause. Yet there were clear limits to this globalizing ideal. Quite apart from the cognitive shift it necessitated, the experience of similar transnational solidarity movements suggested that, while solidarity was constructed as a

⁹⁵ Chandler, ‘Road to Military Humanitarianism’, 693.

⁹⁶ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 215–20.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Oxfam press bulletin, February 1982, Oxfam Archive, CPN/4/4/2, fol. 3.

⁹⁸ Bill Yates, paraphrased in Oxfam letter to Members of the British House of Commons, 26 February 1982, Oxfam Archive, CPN/4/4/2, fol. 3.

⁹⁹ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 114, 129–30. On the (mis)uses of the concept of victimhood, see also Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 215–20; and Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Brownstone, ‘1982: A Year of Discovery’. On the concepts of empathy and solidarity, see also Sandra Lee Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Carol C. Gould, ‘Transnational Solidarities’, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2007): 148–64; Hilary Sapire, ed., ‘Liberation Struggles, Exile and International Solidarity’, special issue of *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009); and Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

universal, it frequently came unstuck when faced with the individual experience of the process. Outside the immediacy of the cause, it became difficult to build a lasting connection between communities and individuals, and between the West and the Global South. Håkan Thörn described this in the case of anti-apartheid as activism built on an implied “we” helping “them” – the “objects” of our solidarity.¹⁰¹ Thus, while campaigners in the West made a strong distinction between charity and solidarity in the context of Central America, in practice it remained difficult to bridge the subject–object relation that characterized their link to those communities. Brownstone’s calls for a renewed humanitarianism echoed this division: in asking Canadians to stand with the people of Central America, he nonetheless defined Oxfam-Canada’s role in terms of ‘our responsibilities’, ‘our material aid’, and ‘their communities, their families, their neighbours, their work, their institutions’.¹⁰²

Finally, the embrace of human rights over solidarity-based humanitarianism in Central America also provides us with an important insight into the world that humanitarian NGOs wished to construct. One of the grounding arguments of those who frame rights-based humanitarianism as the product of the post-Cold War era is that the 1990s was the period when humanitarianism became ‘an *ism*, not part of this world but a project designed to transform it’. As Michael Barnett put it, support for democracy, development, and peace-building rendered NGOs ‘carriers of liberal values as they help spin into existence a global liberal order’.¹⁰³ Yet, in tracing the origins of ‘new’ humanitarianism to the 1980s, the evidence presented in this article suggests that the turn to rights-based activism was rooted less in late twentieth-century geopolitics and more in the value system on which the NGO sector was based. Implicit in the use of human rights language as a way of condemning the actions of an overreaching, despotic regime was the assumption that infringements of individual rights were also attacks on the ability of communities to meet their basic needs. What this approach stopped short of, however, was an embrace of more radical – leftist or liberationist – calls for societal transformation. In that sense, rights-based humanitarianism echoed NGO support for the New International Economic Order in the 1970s: it was a project of reform rather than revolution. The liberationists’ critique of human rights as an ‘elitist’ project helped to explain these differences. As they saw it, the emphasis on individual rights – particularly the right to property – created a hierarchy in which social and economic rights were relegated to secondary status. In that context, they argued, the rights that protected basic needs were beyond the majority of the population.¹⁰⁴ While human rights activism should not be equated with a broader (neoliberal) attack on the welfare state, in other words, rights-based humanitarianism nonetheless represented a statement of support for a liberal world order rather than any radical alternative.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Meyer Brownstone wrote in 1983 that:

¹⁰¹ Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid*, 208.

¹⁰² Brownstone, ‘1982: A Year of Discovery’.

¹⁰³ Barnett, ‘Humanitarianism Transformed’, 733.

¹⁰⁴ On the relationship between liberation theology and human rights, see Engler, ‘Toward the “Rights of the Poor”’.

¹⁰⁵ On the link between neoliberalism and human rights, see Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London: Verso, 2019); and Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

The development problem is exposed with unusual depth and complexity in Central America'. We can testify not only about the difficulty of facing a personal and very direct experience with the horrors of human repression and destruction but also about the inspiration of human courage, human determination and, above all, what humanity and human society are and can be and by the unshakeable certainty of ultimate development in its true and full sense.¹⁰⁶

Brownstone's idealism might have led him to a more radical solution than many humanitarians, but he was not alone in thinking beyond emergency relief as a response to violent crisis. The realities of life in El Salvador and in the refugee camps in Honduras accelerated a questioning of humanitarianism's purpose that was underway long before the 1980s. Liberationism and leftist solidarity gave impetus to those discussions. Human rights became their frame. But the mix of idealism, pragmatism, and practicality that shaped this turn to rights-based activism should hardly surprise us. After all, humanitarians are nothing if not adaptable. They share in a sense of urgency that links ethics, morality, and fundraising imperatives to the immediate problem of saving lives. They are also driven by the emotion that these conditions generate. Tony Vaux, writing in defence of emergency aid, argued that compassion 'is not a means to an end but an end in itself, and some of the greatest work of aid agencies is not what they intend, but what their staff do out of their own humanity'.¹⁰⁷ This is obviously highly problematic – such actions often blind humanitarians to the root causes of crisis and can have unintentionally detrimental consequences – and also lays bare the highly interventionist principles on which rights-based humanitarianism was constituted. But, in stressing the need for flexibility in Central America, this approach opened the door to solutions that were formalized in the 'new' humanitarianism of the 1990s.

In building that argument, this article has followed the work of scholars such as Steven L. B. Jensen, Jessica Stites Mor, Alison J. Bruey, Patrick William Kelly, and Héctor Perla Jr in reading the late twentieth-century 'triumph' of human rights not simply in North–South terms but as the manifestation of a complex exchange of ideas and practices that stretched far beyond the West.¹⁰⁸ We still have much to learn, however, about how norms of behaviour flowed from South to North, North to South, and between various centres of activism in the West. The story of how and where rights-based humanitarianism emerged offers us a glimpse into that process of 'negotiating universalisms'. But it also suggests that we need to think more deeply about the boundaries of the 'global', and of where and how 'global' narratives are constructed. By looking beyond states and international organizations to NGOs, churches, and civil society groups – and, indeed, beyond the major powers to the Global South and the experiences of small and middling powers in the West – we can render visible the world system on which ideals such as humanitarianism and human rights rested. In the process, we can better understand how outwardly 'global' ideas were understood, assimilated, rebuffed, and reframed in a variety of social and political contexts.

¹⁰⁶ Brownstone, '1982: A Year of Discovery'.

¹⁰⁷ Tony Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2001), 45.

¹⁰⁸ Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*; Burke, *Decolonization*; Green, 'Clerics, Exiles, and Academics'; Jensen, *Making of International Human Rights*; Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies*; Klose, *Human Rights*; Markarian, 'Uruguayan Exiles and Human Rights'; Stites Mor, ed., *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity*; and Perla, 'Si Nicaragua venció'.