Introduction

> Prometheus at best was a tragic hero and the source of countless human tragedy. He was guilty of hubris, of an arrogant overstepping of the bounds proper to humanity. And the result of his proffered godlikeness was a doubtful form of progress and advance – if indeed humans and their dreams were not turned back into dust.
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> Conrad Hyers, Prometheus and the Problem of Progress,
> *Theology Today*, 37, 3, 1980, 330.

This book tells the story of American and European humanitarian institutions that provided food, shelter, clothing, and basic medical aid – *a bed for the night*[1] – to distressed civilian populations in the Near East during the interwar years. It reveals the untold tale of their ambition to go beyond relief, to rehabilitate and reconstruct a "new" Near East. Wherever these humanitarian institutions operated, they imagined a prosperous, peaceful future enhanced by their short-term relief actions and improved by their agricultural, educational, public health rehabilitative programs. Yet, like a cloud, humanitarian aid was an intense but ephemeral phenomenon that – despite the ambitions of its protagonists – failed to leave a permanent trace.

The historian Daniel Laqua writes that, much like a cloud, the contours of humanitarianism are often unclear, and at times the humanitarian cloud can obscure other objects and objectives – including self-interest.[2] As a result of external conditions such as conflicts, epidemics, peace treaties, territorial settlements, forced displacements of populations, or genocide, that cloud might shift shape or disappear. Donations and other expressions of support might drip or pour in. Meanwhile, governments and international institutions might find themselves subject to a veritable rainstorm, whipped up by humanitarians who inundate them with requests or accusations. Winds, strong and weak, push the cloud in directions it has no way to control, a reminder of the discrepancy between humanitarians' supposedly perfect plans and the unintended consequences of their actions for recipients of their aid living an ocean away. Large clouds may produce powerful lightning and rumbling thunder but very little rain. Small clouds

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may offer plentiful and much-needed rain. Rain does not necessarily fall where needed; some areas remain untouched by it. In any case, when the rain is over, the cloud vanishes. My objective is to remember the cloud by describing it – its origins, its appearance, and its effects.

The international humanitarian cloud that hovered over the Near East came from the West. This humanitarian engagement grew out of domestic and colonial experiences and ideologies; it took the form of relief and was a product of an ambition to rehabilitate, better, improve, uplift, or, anachronistically, develop.[3] Long before 1918, the concepts and practices associated with scientific charity and self-help had circulated through and between Western Europe and North America.[4] In the United States, both rich northern philanthropic foundations and authorities at federal and state level implemented these ideas on behalf of immigrant, African American, and autochthonous populations. Philanthropic foundations and federal authorities promoted all sorts of paternalist, often racist, supposedly scientific charity/humanitarian programs in domestic and colonial areas they deemed undeveloped, problematic, and in need of modernization.[5]

The idea that humanitarian actions performed abroad have domestic or colonial roots is not new.[6] However, I look here specifically at how ideas that germinated in Western Europe or the United States reached and were adapted in the Near East in the aftermath of the First World War. Central to my historical enquiry is the term "civilization," which connoted the process by which humanity emerged from barbarity and, by extension, the condition of a civilized society.[7] The linguist Jean Starobinski has written of how "civilization" as a value has constituted a political and moral norm. For early-twentieth-century Western international humanitarians, being civilized was the criterion for judgment; that which was barbarous, or uncivilized, was to be condemned. Their version of civilization, in social, political, cultural, aesthetic – and even moral and physical – terms was held to be the optimum condition for all humankind. Civilized humanitarians knew what it was to be civilized. Taxonomies and hierarchies of civilizations structured how humanitarians saw the Near East. As Starobinski, Anthony Padgen, Norbert Elias, and others note, Western civilization was not one among equals; it was held to be superior in the art and ethics of war, in administration and political system, in science and morality.[8] The "good intentions" of Western humanitarians in the Near East during the interwar years, as we shall see, cannot be separated from their views on civilization.

The geographical focus of this book is the "Near East," a region that for many humanitarians and their contemporaries, including policymakers, diplomats, academics, and cultivated public opinion, extended

from the Caucasus to North Africa, and from the Balkans to Syria and Palestine; it might also include Persia.[9] Humanitarians who operated in the "shatterzones" of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires imagined a thick line running from the Baltic Sea and Poland to the Balkans, beyond which Bolshevik territory lay, and continued further east into Turkey, Syria, and Palestine, forming fault lines for Western civilization.[10] James Barton, chairman of Near East Relief (NEF) and foreign secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) – the two most significant relief institutions operating in the Near East – defined the Near East as "a body of restless states and national groups which have always been scrapping on the side when not engaged in actual warfare."[11]

The mental maps deployed by international humanitarians were based, I argue, upon common assumptions about civilization and the lack thereof. For instance, US humanitarians' actions in France or Austria were intended to be of short duration, because the civilization of Western European states – with the possible exception of Germany, accused of having lost it – was not discussed. In Central and Eastern Europe, in the Balkans, and in the Near East, international humanitarians, both American and European, believed they were on the edges of Western civilization; beyond these limits lived "Mohammedan fanatics" and Bolsheviks, who did not seek Western humanitarian aid. Hence, rescuing the populations that lived in this liminal zone would build up a bulwark for the defense of civilization. Since 1917, bolshevism was an issue seriously considered within Western governments in its Russian and international dimensions and because of its potential consequences at home and in the colonies. Anti-bolshevism and the Red Scare in their multifarious manifestations were tangible attempts to oppose a political system deemed uncivilized because, rather than order, it promoted revolution, chaos, and instability, threatening peace, the imperial order, and the interests of victorious powers.[12]

For Western humanitarians, Central and Eastern Europeans and Near Easterners were above Filipinos and Africans in their hierarchy of races, but they were lower than (white) Americans or Western Europeans. Humanitarians viewed the Near East as a region inhabited by "mixed races" (which was part of the problem) and as an area where "no pure races are left anywhere," thus excluding Kurds, Arabs, and Armenians.[13] International humanitarian organizations' archives are full of racist descriptions and analyses of Near Easterners. Whether young or old at the time of their work in the Near East, whether members of faith-based or secular organizations, these humanitarians articulated similar views.

From 1905, Fred Field Goodsell spent a total of twenty-five years posted at three ABCFM Turkish missions: Western, Central, and Eastern. In 1925 he was made field secretary and in 1930 he moved to Boston, where he served as the first executive vice president of the ABCFM. An excerpt from a lecture he gave in 1945 reads:

One day in 1921 I clipped from a Turkish daily paper in Istanbul a cryptic definition of civilization. It ran in translation something like this: What are the marks of a civilized nation? There are several stages in the process of achieving civilization. The first stage is to be able to use modern tools and machines of many kinds. The second stage is to be able to repair such tools, when necessary. The third stage is to be able to manufacture as well as to use and to repair tools and machines. The fourth stage is reached when a nation produces inventors as well as manufacturers of modern tools and machines. The highest level of civilization is marked by the mastery of the secrets of nature and the achievement of a standard of living in which the needs of man are completely met by an industrialized order of life.[14]

In Godsell's vision of time and progress, the Near East was where the West had been centuries before. During the past hundreds of years, he wrote, the great cities of Europe "were gradually modernizing themselves and developing a Christian civilization," whereas Istanbul "remained essentially a medieval, oriental and Moslem city."

The opposition between modernity – as a marker of Western civilization – and tradition – as evidence of a lack of civilization – is found in many humanitarians' writings, generally accompanied by fear of an uncontrolled, irresponsible introduction of modernization, which explained why the Near East was "in crying need of outside assistance." In concomitance with the Versailles conference, a secular American Red Cross (ARC) worker in Palestine wrote that the concern was not to restrict the Turks; rather, they should be allowed not even a fraction of power. "They do not govern," he wrote. "They do not know what government is. They and the Circassians and the Kurds are crafty human beasts. They wreck and ruin everything, and upon the delicate affections of the home they trample with their rude feet."[15]

In his autobiography, James Barton added his own take on the classic Western trope of murderous Turks, and sultans in particular, who since the beginning of the nineteenth century had slaughtered Christians. His narrative is reinforced by an equally stereotypical narrative of Ottoman Christians as hapless victims belonging to a higher civilization, their "intellectual supremacy imbued with a desire for larger liberty and less tyranny."[16] Barton belongs to a long and well-established tradition of Western writers who declared that Islamic society could not be changed: it was inflexible, unprogressive, and incapable of adapting to new

conditions; at best, Islam was stationary.[17] Barton's Islamo-pessimism was an unoriginal orientalism that encapsulated what many humanitarians wrote in their dispatches and reports from the Near East, for international humanitarians and Western journalists, policymakers and diplomats had shared convictions about the Near East, its people, societies, nations, cultures, and religions.

Take, for instance, the report prepared for the US government and the Allies on the situation in the Ottoman territories (completed on August 28, 1919, but published in 1922) by Henry King and Charles Crane, as part of what was known as the King–Crane Commission.[18] Commission members were persuaded that the modernization of the region's economy had to begin via improvements to land and agriculture, including the reclamation of wastelands and scientific irrigation, as in the American South or in the Philippines. These changes were to create the conditions for a capitalist, agrarian economy based on the latest agricultural techniques. Good government meant a trustworthy, representative government that protected the rights of minorities and women, and a code of inviolable laws with a strong police force to implement and enforce these laws. An undefined period under the trusteeship of an "enlightened" mandatory power, such as the United States, might be necessary for various Near Eastern communities to reach national sovereignty. Fully concurring with the King–Crane Commission's view, humanitarians did not envision a different future for these regions and some actively supported the political and diplomatic implementation of this solution. For them, history was progressive and ineluctable. All societies were moving toward a single future represented, in its highest form, by the United States.

Transnational Humanitarianism or International Humanitarianism?

Interwar Western humanitarianism can be studied in very different ways. While I look here at its supply side; the demand side of humanitarianism also merits attention. Indeed, the perspective of the suffering population should be prioritized. Such analysis entails, however, knowledge of several languages and an exploration of archives that are not easily accessed – or simply do not exist. This book offers a limited perspective: on the activities, policies, and politics of international humanitarian actors. Some of these actors openly defined themselves as humanitarians; others rarely mentioned the humanitarian nature of their work. This approach, based upon selected and subjective sources, also privileges American humanitarian organizations over European ones, for the largest and most

influential humanitarian organizations hailed from the United States and markedly influenced nearly every dimension of relief and reconstruction.

I use a transnational history approach based on multiarchival research.[19] All my sources derive from European or American organizations or Western state archives. While this allows me to examine these institutions' plans and actions, I am unable to offer an informed view on local opinion or to give voice to indigenous communities. The book is not a history from the margins or a bottom-up history. It does acknowledge the many silences in humanitarian organizations' archives – most especially concerning local populations. While I do not view locals (natives/subalterns) as mere objects or their societies as mere laboratories for humanitarian actions and ideologies, it is important to note that some humanitarians did. Subalterns in need talked too; they appropriated aid or resisted it. Nonetheless, humanitarian institutions did not necessarily care to listen. Other natives – such as children in orphanages – could not talk. I believe that assessing the silence of the archives is an additional, modest but not inconsequential, contribution to the history of Western humanitarianism.

The book is not intended as an institutional history; rather, it contrasts the *Weltanschauungen*, cultures, politics, and practices of a number of Western actors. I am interested in how individuals and institutions introduced and tested ideas and/or humanitarian practices in new contexts, carrying along former experiences in their luggage, thus producing a complex set of echoes, interactions, and "*circulations*" (in French) at each of the places where they operated. Although I adopt a critical stance, I wish to avoid a cynical stance *contra* humanitarianism. This book is not about hypocrisy or the mendacity of power in its manipulation of humanitarianism for invasion and domination. Others have written extensively and persuasively on this topic.[20]

The protagonists of my story are a heterogeneous group of actors. Some of the players had a strong national identity, such as Save the Children, or even a local identity, like the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Save the Children had an international branch closely connected with the ICRC, called the *Union Internationale de Secours aux Enfants*. The Quakers was an Anglo-British joint venture and a faith-based organization, whereas the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) were US associations that offered non-American women and men the possibility of working for them. Near East Relief (NER) was a "chartered" US organization, which meant that it was accountable to the US Congress, which in turn legitimized the organization for the American public. Other organizations like the American

Relief Administration (ARA) and the American Red Cross were hybrid organizations; although they did not represent the American government, they did depend on it. The American Women's Hospitals was an all-women private association of American doctors that operated in the Near East, and the Rockefeller Foundation was a philanthropic foundation that either conspicuously funded some of the abovementioned institutions or intervened directly with specific health programs in the Near East. The League of Nations is yet another kind of actor: an intergovernmental organization that undertook, coordinated, or supported humanitarian work or international legislation. I qualify the varied protagonists of this book as "international" and their activities as "international" humanitarian actions or programs because they referred to themselves as "international" associations or organizations.

In the following pages I expand on the centrality of the nation, of state sovereignty, and of contemporary imperial dimensions in illustrating the mindset of Western international humanitarians as co-constructors of this system or as its actors. I concur with the suggestion by historian Heather Jones that, as regards aid provision and delivery, the First World War and its aftermath produced transnational learning curves and processes for nation-states and also for international and national organizations. As a result, national charities evolved similarly across wartime Europe and North America, which permits the interchangeable use of "Western" humanitarianism and "international" humanitarianism.[21] The aftermath of the First World War saw a convergence of humanitarians' visions, with a certain amount of mimicking of organizations in their practices and in the selection of the deserving and undeserving sufferers.[22] Jones' point is well-made, although I also maintain (and I do not see here a contradiction) that Western international humanitarianism of the first half of the twentieth century was strictly related to understandings of sovereignty, including its denial, and to self-appointed, allegedly benevolent imperialism, intended for the protection and improvement of societies declared unfit to govern themselves.[23]

In the early twentieth century, sovereignty, independence, and international law were matters of civilization, even for non-European thinkers who appropriated the language of "stadial evolution and civilizational hierarchies."[24] Recent historiography has reassessed the political weight and centrality of the right of self-determination in 1919 and what Erez Manela famously defined as "the Wilsonian moment."[25] Eric Weitz notes that none of the six post–First World War treaties included the term "self-determination."[26] The 1923 Lausanne Treaty that established Turkey as an independent, sovereign state also legitimized the forced deportations of Christians from Anatolia to Greece and Muslims from

Greece to Turkey. If anything, this so-called population exchange, Weitz
argues, exposed the nether-side of self-determination.

The principles that funded the 1919 Peace of Versailles and the
1923 Peace of Lausanne drew from a nation-state-based model, with
the ethnically homogeneous nation-state allegedly more stable and hence
integral to chances for a lasting peace.[27] International law after the First
World War did not accept any kind of interference in the internal affairs
of sovereign states, but made conspicuous racial and civilizational
exceptions that allowed Europeans and the United States to invade and
dominate territories overseas.[28] Western international law defined the
problem of global community in terms of the nature of the relationship
between a civilized Christendom and the uncivilized but potentially
civilizable non-European world.[29] Interference was allowed because,
from the point of view of more powerful Western states, some national
communities or societies were not sufficiently civilized and therefore
needed the oversight, tutelage, and trusteeship of allegedly fully civilized
protectors. International law and the system of rights and duties it
constructed before the First World War and in the interwar period was
thus no more than a mechanism for justifying differential policies toward
the sovereignty of different types of states.[30]

The nation was a central element of the way early twentieth-century
humanitarians envisioned and experienced their actions. As indeed was
nationalism: contemporary Western humanitarians were not against
nationalism; they were nationalists. One could think about national
Red Cross societies' wartime aid or these societies' militarization during
the war as examples of nationalist forms of humanitarianism. Western
humanitarians believed in the model of the nation-state and of (their)
empires: civilized, racist, and capitalist. They were not championing
democracy or democratic principles; they were championing their kind
of humanitarianism beyond national borders. Frontiers per se con-
structed distance in relation to sufferers, set the geographic and geopol-
itical parameters of humanitarian action, and triggered mental, cultural,
and anthropological maps. Frontiers were essential elements of Western
humanitarians' *imaginaire*, of their images, representations, and narra-
tives of reality, alongside race, religion, and civilization.[31] I do not claim
that all international humanitarians produced and shared identical
imaginaires, but their respective *Weltanschauungen* clearly overlapped.

International humanitarian actors were freer to operate – and this is
still the case today – wherever sovereignty was fragile, contested, or
unstable. The relation of international humanitarian institutions with
national borders was also as problematic as it is nowadays. Some insti-
tutions were the precursors of *sans frontièrisme*, but they needed national

frontiers in order to operate; once they trespassed on a frontier, often without invitation, they thrived as long as state authority was weak. A number of interwar Western international humanitarian actors had ambitions to govern, to replace what they saw (and referred to) as chaos – social, political, economic – with order (as they imagined it).[32] None of these institutions was against the international system (or was antisystem); they worked for its restoration. The order they imagined began with restoring or fixing bodies and would then continue by rehabilitating or reconstructing societies or entire nations, by setting up frontiers, and thus territories, populations, and governments.

In the Near East, international humanitarian institutions operated with a greater freedom before 1921–22, when the mandate system became operational and Turkey became independent. From 1918 to 1922, the range and scope of humanitarian organizations' activities had expanded. After 1922, these institutions accepted sovereign states and colonial rulers as natural, and indispensable, interlocutors. Colonial rulers, mandated by the League of Nations, gradually replaced humanitarian institutions; they took up their work, renaming it as social, charitable, or welfare-related. By and large, international humanitarians shared the vision and purposes of the mandatory powers. The mandate regime was a colonial oversight, with an international gloss, embedded in the language of protection to promote self-help and, in a distant future, self-government. The League of Nations' Permanent Mandate Commission was not the guardian but the gatekeeper of a colonial system.[33]

The mandate system and its European offshoot, the minority regime in Central and Eastern Europe, were not designed or based upon humanitarian concerns.[34] They were supposed to defend an imperial-colonial system and an international order favorable to the victorious powers, which humanitarian institutions willingly helped build. If the minority treaties were applied to the new states of Eastern Europe with the specific purpose of marking their subordinate status within a nineteenth-century-style global hierarchy, Laura Robson and Ben White argue, the mandate system did the same, in more overt fashion, for the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. And just as the existence of minorities had constituted a major part of the Allies' argument for continued supervision of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, the League of Nations developed a narrative of ethnic, religious, and national difference in the mandate territories that sought both to legitimize mandate rule over Arab populations and to define the League's supervisory capacity over the British and French mandatory authorities.[35] Before the League of Nations, and largely because the main actors were the same, varied tactics involving demographic manipulation were presented, Robson

writes, as "solutions." The alleged benefits, namely the remaking of the region as a series of identifiably modern and fundamentally controllable ethnonational blocs, justified the human costs.[36] Western humanitarians were not against these solutions; they promoted forced displacement and added their moral weight to support them further. They actively contributed to the "solution" of these problems.

Promethean, Arrogant, and Provincial Humanitarians and Their Redemptive Self-Help

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Prometheus has an interest based on a conception of a right state of affairs, not self-gratification. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the Greek god Prometheus is a human-loving bestower of light. Aeschylus' description of Prometheus' motivation is that it was truly humanitarian and philanthropic. Both authors celebrated the theft of fire, and all the advances it had made possible. Prometheus (literally: thinking ahead), son by Zeus of Metis (literally: wisdom, also intelligence), was the personification of reason and imagination. Prometheus was the tragic, clever, and courageous hero. The gallant and defiant symbol of Prometheus was the inspiration of that spirit, which is always restlessly trying to surpass itself, to extend its boundaries, to enter new frontiers, to defy past limits, to reach for the stars. In my view, Western humanitarians were Promethean because they defined themselves by their rationality and power, and their relentless, heroic impulse to exceed and break through every barrier. The visible signs of progress coincided with their idea of embodying the highest forms of civilization. They were the proud possessors of a certain likeness to the gods; as creators and orderers in their own right, they would spread their benevolence responsibly.[37]

Interwar Western humanitarianism had a certain arrogance, which I view as ingrained and related to certainty and compassion (a term that derives from Latin *cum-patire*, literally to suffer with). Compassion, no matter how selective, was consubstantial with certainty in shaping humanitarians' ingrained arrogance. In *On The Basis of Morality* (1840), Arthur Schopenhauer argues that compassion (*Mitleid*) is the desire for another's well-being. The ultimate incentive for doing something, or leaving it undone, is precisely and exclusively centered in the happiness and misery of someone else who, writes Schopenhauer, plays a passive role. That is to say, the person on the active side, by what they do, or omit to do, has no objective other than to benefit the recipient of their help. This aim alone stamps what is done, or left undone, with moral worth.[38] Compassion is a moral relationship with no possible