

[Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector \[book review\]](#)

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Abstract:

In a world lousy with crises from the spectacular to the mundane, we often glimpse an immense infrastructure of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations seeking to relieve human suffering. But as Shai Dromi reveals in *Above the Fray* – an intricate sociological history of the Red Cross – the organization’s astounding success in the second half of the nineteenth century contains the secret to understanding crucial features of contemporary humanitarianism. Any account of this contemporary humanitarian infrastructure, he argues, must reckon with a cultural logic grounded in the nineteenth-century Swiss Calvinist Réveil (“Awakening”). For it is out of this Réveil that the organizational principles characterizing permanent aid societies emerged – autonomy, impartiality, and neutrality – principles that continue to structure humanitarian work to this day (p. 5).

Keywords: book review | Red Cross | humanitarianism | nongovernmental organizations

Article:

Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector by Shai Dromi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

In a world lousy with crises from the spectacular to the mundane, we often glimpse an immense infrastructure of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations seeking to relieve human suffering. But as Shai Dromi reveals in *Above the Fray* – an intricate sociological history of the Red Cross – the organization’s astounding success in the second half of the nineteenth century contains the secret to understanding crucial features of contemporary humanitarianism. Any account of this contemporary humanitarian infrastructure, he argues, must reckon with a cultural logic grounded in the nineteenth-century Swiss Calvinist Réveil (“Awakening”). For it is out of this Réveil that the organizational principles characterizing permanent aid societies emerged – autonomy, impartiality, and neutrality – principles that continue to structure humanitarian work to this day (p. 5).

The Red Cross arose out of the wreckage of Solferino in 1859, a battle in the Second Italian War of Independence – just one of many violent clashes over nation, empire, and capital in the middle of the nineteenth century. But Henry Dunant, a businessman with a struggling enterprise in colonial Algeria, happened to witness firsthand the immediate aftermath of Solferino. Distressed, he organized local townspeople to provide succor to the many thousands of wounded and maimed soldiers. In 1862, Dunant published a memoir, which tied the senseless suffering and death at Solferino to the insufficiency of medical care for soldiers and a nascent human capacity for charity (p. 33). Yet while the memoir spurred the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1864, Dromi locates the distinct ideals that animated Dunant’s humanitarian project in a broader cultural context. After all, Dunant’s program – of permanent, independent aid societies – was not the only effort to address the horrors of war. Peace activists sought to render war unimaginable while others worried that permanent, independent charitable projects would disincentivize state and military reform efforts.

Several questions thus emerge. First: what gave Dunant’s proposal and the Red Cross its unique ideals and form? Dromi argues that the Calvinist Réveil, centered in nineteenth century Geneva, made possible the Red Cross proposals for a permanent, neutral, and independent humanitarian aid society. This revival promoted “adamant orthodoxy, a sharp critique of modernity...a strong drive for social activism and communal discipline, and a suspicious stance toward the state[.]” (p. 45) Dunant and other early Red Cross founders, Dromi shows, would have taken in such teachings as they attended lectures by Réveil theologians in 1840s Geneva and participated in evangelical relief organizations in the 1850s. Through careful readings of early publications and conference proceedings, Dromi traces the principles underlying the Red Cross back to the Réveil. The demand for an aid society independent of the state, for instance, resonated with the attitude that the state was an impure, corrupted actor. But the Red Cross did not simply transcribe such principles from the Réveil, the project also grappled with the harsh realities of war in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, Dunant and others arrived at a novel formulation – a permanent aid society that would remain aloof from these impure state actors.

Second: how did this novel formulation become an international phenomenon in the late nineteenth century? Dromi reveals that the Red Cross’s decentralized international structure played a decisive role in its global diffusion. The Red Cross encouraged a common organizational identity through international conferences, while simultaneously affirming distinct national initiatives. International leaders celebrated the “primarily national” character of Red Cross societies, each “born under the joint inspiration of charity and patriotism.” (p. 70) This allowed the Red Cross to tap into groundswells of nationalist sentiment toward the end of the nineteenth century. Humanitarian competition between national Red Cross societies from the United States and France to the Ottoman Empire and Japan – all seeking to embody Red Cross principles – actually increased their global prestige. These principles received further ballast as churches, nurses, journalists, and international lawyers recognized and shared them. By the close of the nineteenth century, Red Cross principles and practices anchored an emergent “humanitarian field.” (p. 115)

Third: how did the Red Cross’s role change across the twentieth century? Dromi makes a compelling case that, in spite of a “turbulent” century, the humanitarian logic originating with the Red Cross continues to define the humanitarian field (p. 117). After questionable efforts to

sustain impartiality during the Second World War and the Nigerian Civil War in the late 1960s, “new humanitarians” insisted that aid workers should publicize suffering, not merely treat it. While a direct challenge the Red Cross’s avowed approach to humanitarian aid, Dromi illustrates that this new humanitarianism shares with it “an underlying belief in the virtues of independence, neutrality, and impartiality” (p. 131) – the very terms established by the Red Cross over a century earlier.

It is a testament to the book’s thoughtful construction that even subtle ambiguities invite serious analysis. Take the question of the Red Cross’s cultural novelty and its dissemination. Dromi claims that this “new institutional arrangement caused new actors to emerge and to lay claim to the humanitarian ‘capital’ that the Red Cross espoused.” (p. 60, italics added) How should we understand such a claim? After all, Dromi acknowledges the significance of empire-building around the world and modern state formation (pp. 82-85) to global humanitarianism. Does the precise novelty of Red Cross principles necessarily account for their diffusion? Or should we understand cause, in this instance, as referring only to the particular actors and responses that these novel humanitarian principles made possible? But even so, could one not suggest, just as plausibly, that the emergence of modern nation-states made possible grassroots social activism that sought to create permanent, independent, national aid societies? To be clear, the question is not whether the modern nation-state is or is not cultural. Rather, the question is, how should we ground and demonstrate claims like Dromi’s about the causal role that culture plays in social life? *Above the Fray* offers an indispensable contribution to such inquiries, as well as to our understanding of a world that still stumbles along in the shadow of the Red Cross.