Avec frontières: exploring the boundaries of postcolonial management in humanitarian assistance organizations

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In 1859, a Swiss businessman traveling in Italy happened upon the aftermath of a battle between Austrian and French soldiers. Shocked by the terrible conditions of the wounded on both sides of the battle, Henri Dunant marshaled the resources available to him and set about ameliorating their suffering. Soon after, as the story goes, Dunant wrote about his experiences in “A Memory of Solferino”, a book that became widely read throughout Europe and eventually fomented the creation of what is now known as the Red Cross. With over a century of experience in conflict and natural disasters, the Red Cross developed principles of engagement to guide its involvement: neutrality and impartiality being the most pervasive and influential. The Red Cross now extends its reach to every nation as arguably the most globalized humanitarian organization in the world and its principles have, in turn, become the template for the conduct of humanitarian organizations internationally.

In a similar formative narrative, a young French doctor, Bernard Kouchner, working for the Red Cross during the Biafran civil war of 1968 (Redfield, 2005), was moved by the suffering of civilians caught in the triangle of warring factions, western nations, and neutral aid organizations such as the Red Cross (Aeberhard, 1996). He became frustrated with the inability of humanitarian organizations to assist vulnerable people. In the Biafran situation, the template for provision of assistance that had its origins in the decades-old Red Cross approach did not fit with contemporary reality as experienced by Kouchner: under the operating principles of the Red Cross, assistance could only be supplied with the consent of a legitimate government. This was a war where the legitimate government was reluctant to allow external assistance to be supplied to a rebelling population, and Kouchner watched in frustration as mortality rates climbed. In response, Kouchner formed Médecins sans frontières (MSF) in an effort to better match humanitarian assistance with contemporary world politics.

These narratives depict two organizations ostensibly striving for similar goals but created at opposite ends of a colonial timeline and thus provide a ready opportunity for a contrasting study in the existence and persistence of colonial management practices in international humanitarian organizations. This paper undertakes such a study and will examine the extent to which the management practices of these organizations may be informed by colonialism. The ultimate goal of this paper is to contribute to a broader understanding of how colonialism can pervade organizations. Unger (1987) offers a conceptual framework around on this understanding can be built, a necessary component of which is the distinction between the formative context and formed routines as applied to humanitarian organizations. Humanitarianism has become an accepted social force in the 100 plus years since the formation of the Red Cross. Many of its tenets have in fact become enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and this resolves the idea of humanitarianism into an immovable construct, or a structure that has and will always exist. One task, therefore, is to understand the vastly different formation stories of the Red Cross and the MSF. These provide us the unique backdrop
or formative context to ultimately explore the formed routines (Unger, 1987) of these two organizations with the goal of understanding how colonial management practices permeate and persist and contemporary humanitarian organizations. The Red Cross was born on the battlefield in an actively colonizing Europe on the brink of decades of conflict while MSF, also formed on the battlefield, but nearly 100 years later during the heyday of decolonization and African independence struggles. The lineage of the Red Cross is such that it was created with the consent of, and existed alongside, colonial states using state power and sanction to achieve humanitarian goals (Moorehead, 1999). Indeed, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) today holds pseudo-state power through its guardianship of international humanitarian law (ICRC, 2004). MSF was formed as a reaction to a perceived failure of this approach, valuing its independence from state sanctioned humanitarianism above all, and the organization continues to struggle with its desire for vocal opposition to state power without completely isolating itself from state structures that enable it to reach affected populations (Captier, 2005).

A key, but provocative, position of this paper is that development organizations intent on alleviating human suffering have underlying elements of a colonialism that was rooted in racism and oppression (Cooke, 2003). In particular, the disaster management literature (Cooke, 2003; De Waal, 1989; Duffield, 1996; Hendrie, 1997) tends to support the claim that humanitarian organizations exhibit a colonial attitude in their work. In an organizational theory context, Prasad (2003) has suggested that organizations are blind to management practices that have their genesis in colonialism because of the pervasive and universal extent of colonialism; in other words, the colonial period has informed organizational behaviour to such an extent that these practices are accepted without being questioned. Therefore, the second task of this paper is a defamiliarization (Alvesson, 1993) of the organizational behaviour of MSF and the Red Cross. This will be achieved through a hermeneutic analysis of policy documents and annual reports from MSF and the Red Cross in order to situate the epistemology of these organizations and demonstrate the extent to which their management practices exhibit colonial attitudes. Postcolonial scholars note that organizations have a tendency to hang on to colonial practices unawares (Kwek, 2003; Prasad, 2003), and this provides a means by which the West can continue to rule ideologically over former colonies (Said, 1993). It is suggested that the Red Cross and MSF are not immune from this tendency. Therefore, the specific contribution of this paper to postcolonial organizational studies will be to raise awareness through exploring the practices of these two organizations during disasters and humanitarian emergencies. To begin, though, a discussion of postcolonial theory is required to recognize the signposts in organizational texts that demonstrate organizations’ colonial tendencies. This will be followed by an exploration of the formative context of the two humanitarian organizations in question.
POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

By the start of World War I, a few European nations held huge amounts of foreign land as colonies. Global power on a scale never before seen was concentrated in the hands of Britain and France (Said, 1993). European societies were organized, in part, to administer and extract surplus value from vast tracts of foreign geography and their subjugated distant populations. However, there was more to colonialism than the profit and power bestowed on Europe; postcolonial scholars claim that imperialism and colonization have more interesting and analytically useful properties beneath their surface, and that these are relevant and applicable even today (Prasad, 2005). When combined with the observation that colonialism and imperialism left virtually no aspect of social and economic life untouched, it is further claimed that colonialism’s retreat in the independence struggles following World War II have left a residue of markers of colonial practices in social and political life (Said, 1993). These residues can be used as signposts in the exploration of the current practices of humanitarian organizations. On the surface, domination appears to be the central practice of colonialism. However, domination is not peculiar to the colonial period, so what is it about this particular form of domination that made it so successful? Furthermore, how was consent gained amongst both colonizer and colonized to maintain distant rule? Perhaps part of the answer to these questions lies in colonialism being sold to both colonizer and colonized as being done ‘for a good reason’; that is, to improve the lives of the colonized. In this sense, colonialism affected not only the colonized, but the colonizers: a sense of duty was evident in European society that this domination was in fact a civilizing mission enabled by viewing the colonized as inferior or subordinate (Said, 1993), but redeemable through a process of civilization or development. This conception of the colonized as being at the receiving end of the West’s duty to improve may also have allowed the west the space to imagine itself. In other words, colonialism enabled the West to understand itself in relation to what it was not, to judge itself in relation to what it does not do, and to see possibilities in relation to what others do not have (Said, 1993). However, resistance to colonial rule and authority, and to the conceptualization of the colonized as being inert and objectified was also a defining feature of colonialism (Said, 1993).

What is apparent from all of these practices is that the border between colonizer and colonized, between domination and resistance is an artificial one. Colonialism was not something that was done to the Other without effect on the colonizing society, and resistance did not suddenly appear at an appointed time in history. It is also suggested by postcolonial scholars (Prasad, 2005; Said, 1993) that the border between the colonial era and today is also artificial: if sought after, the residual markers of colonialism can be found today in the routines of organizations. But, an understanding of these organizational routines can best be obtained by first understanding their formative context.

THE ORIGINS OF HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS
The origins of the formal humanitarian organization can be traced back to efforts at the individual level in the 18th and 19th centuries. One was the movement to end the colonial slave trade (Lambert & Lester, 2004); this paper will briefly return to this subject and its relevance to postcolonial management and the formative context of humanitarian organizations. It will begin though by focusing analysis on a formative narrative as written on the battlefield, through the effort to ameliorate the suffering of wounded soldiers that is so often personified by Henri Dunant.

The Red Cross
Henri Dunant was a businessman who happened by the aftermath of the battle of Solferino. This story has become part of the lore of the organization that he helped found: the Red Cross. What is not represented so readily is the fact that Dunant’s travels to Solferino were motivated by his desire to find and curry favour with Napoleon in order to rescue his failing business interests in colonial Algeria (Moorehead, 1999). This is not to imply anything about Dunant’s opinion regarding colonialism, but only to situate the individual in the particular context of the era in question. Despite his best efforts, instead of finding Napoleon and achieving success in business, Dunant found the aftermath of armed conflict and eventually directed his energies towards the creation of societies to aid the wounded in times of war, regardless of their nationality. A call for an approach to aid on the battlefield that would result in the creation of national humanitarian organizations was made in his book, “A Memory of Solferino.” He also suggested that these organizations should have their basis in an international agreement that set out principles and conventions for their operation (Moorehead, 1999). Among these principles was the idea of neutrality, intended to assure either party in a conflict that assistance was being provided without regard to nationality. Another was the suggestion that the aid societies should be made an auxiliary of each government, existing at their pleasure, but not answerable to them. A group of influential Swiss businessman, Dunant included, organized a committee to set about lobbying European governments for their support in making good these proposals.

This call was answered by state authority: at international conferences attended by European monarchs it was agreed to establish national societies dedicated to caring for battlefield casualties, and to enshrine the principles and conventions of these societies in international law. The emblem used to identify the neutral volunteers on the battlefield was a red cross on a white background, the reverse colours of the Swiss flag; eventually the organization came to be uniquely known by this symbol, and the committee formed by Dunant eventually became today’s International Committee of the Red Cross. The power of state sanction gave the Red Cross standing to intervene in conflict, obliged armed forces to respect the neutrality of its volunteers and compelled nations to accept the establishment of Red Cross national societies. However, the particular geographic context surrounding the formation of the Red Cross was decidedly European. It was not until the American Red Cross was formed and demonstrated an interest and aptitude for responding to natural disasters both nationally and
internationally that the organization began to expand beyond its European boundaries, and to diversify outside of conflict (Moorehead, 1999).

The Red Cross and the origins of the humanitarian discourse. Before moving on to explore the formative context of MSF, it is necessary to understand a puzzle that emerges from the story of the Red Cross: is it simply independent and individual reaction to distant stories of suffering and injustice or the collective shock over a compelling narrative of a brutal war that can result in the formation of humanitarian organizations? It may be tempting to say that a global humanitarian organization is the result of an individual’s particularly compelling story, as is the case of the Red Cross. But Dunant was not the first to write about war, so perhaps there is a particular combination of circumstances during the era when the Red Cross was formed that better explains the birth of humanitarianism. A more nuanced and powerful explanation can be found by examining the linkages between capitalism and the economic and social changes that resulted.

Haskell (1985a) considers the case of the starving stranger to illustrate the proposed linkages between humanitarianism and capitalism. When faced with the knowledge of strangers facing certain death as a result of starvation in a distant land, an individual may feel passing sympathy, and may have the means to forestall or prevent the death of at least one of the distant strangers, but not feel compelled to take any action. The explanation for this behaviour resides in the inability of the individual to act without taking extraordinary and complex steps that are outside of daily routine. This would involve, for example, leaving work and family, raising enough money to travel to the distant land, finding the strangers in question, feeding them and then returning home. While the individual has the potential in theory to perform these tasks, more often than not she does not do so. But the feeling of guilt for non-action is not as strong (or perhaps it is even non-existent) as it would be in the case of passing a dying stranger on the street of her native city.

Haskell (1985a) suggests that the reason for this behaviour is the lack of appropriate recipes or techniques in the mind of the individual that enables them to perform complex tasks to achieve distant action. Haskell (1985a) also proposes four preconditions flowing from this analysis that herald the birth of humanitarianism, and in turn, of the humanitarian organization: the shared belief that helping strangers is the right thing to do; the feeling that one is somehow involved in the suffering of strangers; that the individual has the ability to somehow stop the suffering through a recipe for intervention and; that these recipes are sufficiently accessible and easy to use such that not using them would be so out of the ordinary that psychological stress would cause the individual to feel somehow complicit in the suffering condition of the stranger (Haskell, 1985a). Therefore, under this analysis, the births of organizations such as the Red Cross or the movement to abolish slavery were not spontaneous events spearheaded by one or two individuals. Rather, their creation is indicative of an expansion in the boundaries of moral responsibility brought about by specific historical changes that
result in individuals developing larger and more ambitious recipes for action; the suggested candidate for this historical change is the rise of capitalism and the market economy (Haskell, 1985a; 1985b).

Linking the market, capitalism and humanitarianism seems difficult because of the popular impression of the aggressiveness and self-serving interests of those involved in capitalist enterprise. However, Haskell (1985b) notes that the brutality of life before the market is easily forgotten, and refers to Weber’s “The Protestant Work Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism” when he suggests that capitalism has more to do with restraint and rationality than aggression and greed. There are two key and inter-related lessons taught by the market that lend support to the expansion of individual recipes for action: the importance of promise-keeping and the need to be mindful of the distant consequences of individual action (Haskell, 1985b). The first of these was associated with the rise of contract law and the associated legal and ethical mandates to fulfill what has been promised between strangers in business. Contracts also resulted in increasingly complicated transactions, often times between individuals and groups operating at some distance (Haskell, 1985b). Related to this idea is the forestalling of profit and immediate reward for some future and remote benefit; the market provided a stabilizing mechanism whereby this idea could be realized (Haskell, 1985b). It is argued that those individuals who took note of these lessons were imbued with a broader sense of the impact of their actions, together with a greater ability to develop complex techniques or recipes (Haskell, 1985b). It is this argument that ties back to the preconditions for humanitarianism, and ultimately to the appearance of humanitarian organizations. Rather than relying upon the happenstance occurrence of charity at the level of the individual, Haskell (1985a; 1985b) is suggesting that an evolution in perception spanning many decades established the preconditions for the development of humanitarianism. Indeed, this conceptualization of the suffering stranger in a distant land was to find reification at the hands of the Red Cross. In a particularly relevant example, the American Red Cross organized an expedition to Italy in 1908 to provide assistance to the victims of an earthquake (Moorehead, 1999). In this, we see the normalization of complex recipes for action. Further evidence is found in the decades that followed the creation of the Red Cross, especially after the World Wars, as many organizations were formed that were concerned with suffering outside of their home nation (Cohen, 2001), and developed recipes for action that were increasingly accessible and complex: Save the Children and OXFAM being two prominent examples.

As for the Red Cross, a much abbreviated summary of the organization after its creation in 1864 sees it diversify outside of conflict, with the formation of the League of Red Cross Societies in a drive by the American Red Cross that was somewhat parallel to the sentiment of the time as that era also witnessed the formation of the League of Nations (the precursor to the United Nations). The League is today known as the Federation, and has focused its attention on natural disasters and the development of individual national societies while the ICRC has the guardianship of international humanitarian law
and concerns itself almost exclusively with conflict and issues surrounding conflict. Humanitarian law was further expanded after the World Wars, and further articles were added to the Geneva Conventions that dealt with the protection of civilians and prisoners of war, among other issues. With two Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to the organization for its efforts in the World Wars, and another during its centennial year in 1963, the Red Cross secured its reputation as the preeminent humanitarian organization in the world. However, the experience of the Red Cross in the Biafran civil war in Nigeria from 1968-1971 fundamentally challenged the organization and fomented an evolution in humanitarianism as personified by MSF.

Medecins sans frontières

The Red Cross had not much experience of Africa in the hundred years prior to the Biafran conflict (Moorehead, 1999), but as one of its few experiences, the civil war in Nigeria was a challenge to the conceptual foundations of humanitarianism and consequently of the Red Cross; in particular, the principles of neutrality and impartiality upon which the Red Cross operated, its decidedly European and western formative context, and its reliance upon the existence and rationality of states to respect laws and shared moral codes. Recall Haskell’s (1985a; 1985b) thesis that the availability and normalization of complex recipes for action will result in a feeling of being causally connected to distant suffering; in Biafra, the recipes are made abundantly available and simple through the presence of globalized, televised images of the suffering and the ready availability of multiple humanitarian organizations enabling individuals to easily donate money. This resulted in direct action for the suffering stranger. Perhaps this normalization of recipes, the resultant expectation that individual action could result in significant positive outcomes for the suffering of others and the continuation of suffering despite these elements being in place produced the sense of humanitarian failure in Biafra. The response to this sense of failure was the creation of a new organization: Médecins sans frontières (MSF). Whereas the Red Cross had its birth in European wars, a post-colonial Africa played a key role in the establishment of MSF (Aeberhard, 1996; Moorehead, 1999; Redfield, 2006).

The aftermath of Nigerian independence from Britain in 1960 demonstrated the tenuous and often arbitrary borders drawn for African nations by former colonial powers. Pre-independence borders created artificial nations that advanced the economic or political interests of colonial powers, but outside of the imperial context in which they operated, they represented states that were either economically unfeasible or politically tenuous. Post-independence, the borders largely remained the same and often became ill-fitting containers for multiple languages and cultures, frequently heightening power differentials between groups, and in some cases providing little economic base for nationhood (Meredith, 2005). In post-independence Nigeria, many of these factors contributed to coups as the power balances shifted uncomfortably within the borders of the nation. One of these schisms resulted in the secession of the eastern part of the country, and the formation of the Republic of Biafra (Meredith, 2005). The Nigerian state responded through blockades and the use of far superior military power, while Biafra
utilized the services of western public relations firms (Meredith, 2005) to partly fight its cause in the media. The effect of the war on the civilian population was devastating, and millions died (Meredith, 2005). As this was a conflict situation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had delegates in the country utilizing its mandate under international law to protect the victims of armed conflict. One of those involved in the humanitarian effort was Bernard Kouchner.

Kouchner was a doctor with the ICRC working in Biafra during the war. As the conflict progressed, Kouchner witnessed the impact of applying a template of rational, positivistic organizational principles formulated in Europe by colonial powers onto a post-colonial, African civil war. The expectation was that the parties at conflict would behave rationally, and that principles tested in over 100 years of European war and civil war would also apply in the context of Biafra; this war, however, was also fought in the media and, in effect, both sides utilized civilians to convince the world of the rightness of their cause. While the ICRC did provide assistance and save lives (Moorehead, 1999), Kouchner was frustrated with the bureaucracy and more importantly the silence of the Red Cross when it came to speaking out about abuses against civilians (Moorehead, 1999; Redfield, 2005). Upon his return to France, Kouchner and others developed principles that would differentiate an evolved form of humanitarianism from the established order.

Not surprisingly, MSF sought to avoid the organizational bureaucracy that Kouchner felt so hampered the Red Cross in Biafra (Redfield, 2005). As such, its organizational structure began and remains in a somewhat fractured state with operational cells existing in various European countries, each functioning somewhat separately, often times at odds with each other, but held together by certain common principles (Redfield, 2005). Among these is the concept of témoignage or active witnessing and advocacy (Bibberson & Jean, 1999; Redfield, 2005). Témoignage seems to be a reaction to the observation in Biafra that the discreet and quiet pressure on national governments so favoured by the Red Cross was not producing the intended results. Another strand underlying the development of témoignage is the argument by Moorehead (1999) that the quiet diplomacy of the Red Cross lead to a certain complicity in the Red Cross’ refusal to denounce Nazi extermination camps during World War II. The memory of this earlier failure, combined with the experience of Biafra, motivated MSF’s founders to consider a new approach (Aeberhard, 1996). Part of this new approach also includes the duty to interfere, or ingérence (Aeberhard, 1996). While the Red Cross does have leave to be present during conflict because of its position under international law, MSF has no such legal sanction, and so ingérence distinguishes itself from the Red Cross approach through vocal advocacy. Its medium for action is western medicine practiced on individuals, but its method is agitation, disruption and the encouragement of others to change conditions under which suffering can occur (Redfield, 2005). However, the environment in which MSF operates reflects an evolving discourse of emergency and a change in the roles of state and non-state actors in a post-colonial period.
The post-colonial world has witnessed a weakening of the ability of the state to look after citizens (Agamben, 1998; Ophir, 2003; Redfield, 2005). Examples of this can be found in sub-Saharan Africa where nations have widely varying abilities to provide services to citizens. At one extreme are countries such as Somalia, with an almost complete absence of state structures, or Zimbabwe where state services are rapidly disappearing. This weakening is broadly referred to as the failure of states (Hendrie, 1997; Ophir, 2003), but may more properly be attributed to the precarious ability of many nations to manage the multiple pressures of economic decline, conflict and disasters under conditions of a limited economic base. This state of permanent emergency challenges the established emergency discourse, and makes space for what appear to be novel approaches to humanitarianism (Alexander, 2006; Bello, 2006).

This established discourse wishes to view disasters as sudden shocks that temporarily divert a society from a deterministic movement forward. It views disasters as knowable, controllable and surmountable through the application of rational thought and scientific activity (Alexander, 2006; Stefanovic, 2003). However, this discourse is challenged through observations that fully predictable events are not avoided, and that the impact of disasters varies depending upon the social and economic condition of the survivors. Hurricane Katrina provides an excellent example of the challenge to the dominant discourse. Elsewhere, long-standing crises in countries such as Sudan or Somalia demonstrate the fragility of viewing disasters as one-time events.

As a result, international organizations take on the responsibility for those displaced by conflict and disaster, and the refugee camp has become a symbol of the post-colonial world (Bello, 2006; Redfield, 2005). It is also a physical manifestation of the impact of an emergency or disaster, and has been created under the assumption these events are temporary abnormalities requiring brief periods of extraordinary intervention enabling the affected population to eventually return to normal life (Alexander, 2006; Ophir, 2003). This philosophy extends back to the creation of humanitarian organizations and the supposed cycle of disaster-relief-recovery-reconstruction that continues to permeate these organizations, despite evidence to the contrary that disorder and disruption is the norm rather than the exception (Alexander, 2006; Benjamin, 1986; Redfield, 2005). As Redfield (2005) observes, working without borders, in the style developed by MSF, responds to the failure of the nation state, and clearly sets out the constituency of MSF as the organization that takes on state-like functions for those without states, or those within states who have no entitlement (Gupta & Ferguson, 2002). It also leaves room for states to ignore suffering (Bello, 2005; Redfield, 2005).

As could be expected, the ostensibly similar goals but decidedly different formative contexts of the Red Cross and MSF should produce organizations that exhibit similarities and differences. Despite its continually troubled conscience (Redfield, 2005) about its principles and actions, MSF shares with the Red Cross global recognition: the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to MSF was an indication of this recognition. Its
creation at the beginning of a post-colonial period that began to show signs of a failure of humanitarianism (Captier, 2005) resulted in an initial resistance to formal organization; even its name implies a refusal to accept boundaries. The Red Cross began in Europe, and has always been concerned with issues surrounding its organization, structure and place in international law; but it has evolved out of Europe, and ostensibly independent national societies exist in virtually every country of the world. The power gatekeepers of the organization still reside in Europe, however, and the European component of the organization still holds tightly to its relationships with international financial donors. In contrast, binary MSF power structures roughly bisect western and non-western countries. Decision-making components of the organization exist exclusively in Europe, with supporting components in the United States, Canada, Japan and Hong Kong; non-western countries form the theatre in which MSF operates, but they do not seem to figure into the organizational structure (Bibberson & Jean, 1999; MSF Holland, 2005). Furthermore, however much MSF wishes to distinguish itself from the Red Cross and other organizations, it still shares a common heritage borne out of the humanitarian discourse roughly depicted as the starving stranger conceptualization of humanitarianism. Both organizations have helped to develop and perpetuate this discourse of humanitarianism, based in the creation of simple recipes for humanitarian action. They have contributed to the globalization of the knowledge of suffering, and mega-responses to distant suffering that were once difficult to imagine have now become familiar; an example of this would be the South Asian tsunami response of 2005. The task now is to de-familiarize these two organizations from a postcolonial perspective to expose an important common thread: the role of colonialism in both of their formative contexts, and the extent to which colonialism informs their organizational practice. This will be accomplished by examining key disaster response texts from the Red Cross and MSF following a hermeneutic method outlined by Prasad (2002). Through a suspension of unproductive prejudices, the analysis should attempt to understand the context in which the documents are written at increasingly higher levels of abstraction (Prasad, 2002). The first level of abstraction is to examine the text itself. The second level is to understand what is not written in the text, while the final level is to relate the text to a larger environment; in this case, the larger environment is the notion of postcolonialism. With these guidelines in mind, and recalling the signpost practices of colonialism set out in the introduction to this paper, the first text to be examined is the disaster response policy of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

POSTCOLONIAL MANAGEMENT IN THE RED CROSS
In the Red Cross organizational structure, the responsibility for the different types of disasters is apportioned off to different parts of the organization, with the Federation and individual national societies taking on natural disaster response, and the ICRC responsible for conflict (ICRC, 2004). This is clearly set out in the disaster response policy as “[t]he International Federation and each National Society shall…[s]eek to assist the most vulnerable people in emergencies” by protecting “the life and health of the individual” (IFRC, 2003). Furthermore, in a statement that should be familiar from
the discussion on the formative context of the Red Cross, the organization positions itself as supplementary to national governments as it will “not replace or undermine state responsibilities” (IFRC, 2003). What is not so familiar is that the text qualifies this principle of working as an auxiliary to the state only “where the potential for appropriate state action exists” (IFRC, 2003). These portions of the text suggest that individuals are not capable of protecting themselves, nor are they able to decide whether to accept the care being offered. Therefore, relationships of power based on relative vulnerability are established with echoes of the perceived colonial duty to look after the less advanced (Hendrie, 1997; Ophir, 2003; Prasad, 2005; Said, 1987). The Red Cross judges the state’s ability to administer to its population, and so the choice of refusing care may not be available. The organization will also continue its response activities “until the acute threat to life and health has abated” (IFRC, 2003). Therefore, the organization decides when they are no longer needed. These passages indicate that the organization positions itself as the provider of humanitarian services to the world. It also suggests power and authority over other humanitarian agencies, by “not normally” (IFRC, 2003) doing work that they do. However, should the potential for advantageous intervention on the part of the Red Cross arise, the text reveals that the organization reserves the right to intervene.

The Red Cross defines itself through its global network of national societies. Its disaster response policy directs it to “[w]ork within the competence of the Operating National Society” but to “[r]ely on, but not be limited by, local capabilities and coping mechanisms” (IFRC, 2003). This suggests certain confusion, as it encourages the organization to work within limits, but not be bounded by them. It positions itself as being sympathetic to local culture, but the urgency of responding to a disaster trumps any cultural concerns. The organization has an ethos of building capacity amongst its national societies; this finds its way into the disaster response policy in that “Operating National Societies should take responsibility to actively plan and pursue their capacity building during emergency assistance operations” (IFRC, 2003). In this passage, Operating National Societies refers to those Red Cross countries that are responding to a disaster occurring within their borders. The text indicates that major capacity building ability is to remain with the European component of the organization: “International Appeals are launched by the Federation Secretariat” (IFRC, 2003). What this implies is that the Federation controls access to international donors and financial resources that could be used for disaster response and capacity building. In addition, the Federation is the gatekeeper for human resource management in disaster response; the text notes that “the International Federation must ensure the proper identification, placement, retention, development, support, administration and management of suitably qualified, trained and experienced personnel to work in the service of the most vulnerable” (IFRC, 2003). Staff that may be identified by the national society at the local level may not be appropriate, in contradiction to their goal of working within national society capacity.
Where the Red Cross explicitly states its policy of disaster response, there does not appear to be an organizational document that sets out MSF’s approach to disaster response. This is perhaps not unexpected, given its formative context, organizational structure, and its troubled conscience (Redfield, 2005) surrounding its work. Specific principles guiding its work include the right of access to victims, independent assessment of humanitarian situations, monitoring of effectiveness of interventions (Bibberson & Jean, 1999). Other principles and practices as outlined in MSF documents, such as newsletters, annual reports and websites are loosely organized and do not coalesce around specific organizational functions. Instead, these documents tend to focus on specific crises, issues or countries; for example, the implications of overwhelming funding for the South Asian tsunami of 2005 contrasted with donors’ lack of interest in the Sudanese civil war (Captier, 2005). Furthermore, MSF is a loose federation of European and North American cells, each operating independently and each producing its own annual report. Therefore, to understand how MSF approaches disasters, a range of texts must be examined. To this end, the 2005 International Activity Report was examined, as were the 1999 Nobel Prize acceptance speech and journal articles written by MSF decision-makers.

The 2005 International Activity Report questions the very viability of humanitarianism when it comments that the world is “[f]aced with the almost complete failure of the development-aid system” (Captier, 2005). It critiques the emergence of a global humanitarian system as a drive towards an integration of humanitarianism into a power structure that includes “force, economic development or even justice” (Captier, 2005) that will result in the weakening of humanitarian values. The organization clearly separates these elements from its mandate: “Peace, democracy, economic development and justice are the underlying issues in, or the backdrop to, many dramas with humanitarian consequences. But they are not our fights” (Captier, 2005). It makes clear its choice between cooperation with the global humanitarian system, and working in organized chaos: the management of disaster reduces chaos, but necessitates integration into a system that MSF has from its outset regarded as counter to serving its constituents. The organization wants to resist institutional logic as a matter of principle: this is to avoid being co-opted into an international aid system that can be used by former colonizing nations for political purposes (Bibberson & Jean, 1999). However, the text leads us to believe that the organization still must be part of some system: “Our isolation must not lead to confinement”; the text distinguishes between the two and understanding that difference necessitates “an ever-growing degree of transparency on the part of MSF and increasingly substantial accountability mechanisms” (Captier, 2005). Perhaps one of the signs that the organization still retains some desire to be part of an international system is found in its acceptance of the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize.

In accepting the 1999 Nobel Prize for Peace, MSF again highlights its troubled conscience (Redfield, 2005) through a mixture of conviction and contradiction. This is best exemplified in the text as it is argued that as a civil society organization, MSF exists “relative to the state, to its institutions and its power” and that it will not “displace
the responsibility of the state” nor will it “allow a humanitarian alibi to mask the state responsibility to ensure justice and security…Only the state has the legitimacy and power to do this” (Orbinski, 1999). However, “[h]umanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis” and “[h]umanitarian responsibility has no frontiers. Wherever in the world there is manifest distress, the humanitarian, by vocation, must respond” (Orbinski, 1999). The context of the word political is ambiguous in the text: it could either mean political action by the former colonizing nations, or political activity by the affected states. Furthermore, these passages indicate that, in a manner similar to the Red Cross, that the organization reserves the right to decide where the state has failed. MSF will thus operate “with a clear intent to assist, to provoke change, or to reveal injustice” (Orbinski, 1999). The text reveals that the ability of the state to decide whether its citizens are in crisis is potentially superseded by a higher authority: practitioners of western medicine as embodied by MSF and encoded in its concept of ingérence. Secret missions conducted by MSF in defiance of state prohibition (Bibberson & Jean, 1999) are further evidence of the organization’s perception of this power. Furthermore, as a positivistic organization, it agrees with the accepted view of disasters and conflict as temporary setbacks to progress (Alexander, 2006) in that MSF’s form of humanitarianism “aims to build spaces of normalcy in the midst of what is profoundly abnormal” (Orbinski, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Through an examination of disaster and emergency management texts, this paper has revealed organizational practices of the Red Cross and MSF that are rooted in colonialism. It was proposed that the different formative contexts of the two organizations would result in practices that vary in their exhibition of colonial tendencies. However, it seems that the differential characteristics of the organizations are overshadowed by what they have in common. Most notably, an underlying discourse of humanitarianism was described that reaches back to the formation of the Red Cross and is still discernible in organizations such as MSF that have been formed in the post-colonial period. Furthermore, while the Red Cross is sanctioned by international law, and operates in parallel with the state, MSF finds itself relying on state authority despite its resistance of this association; in particular, MSF wants the state to take on tasks outside of immediate emergency response. Both organizations offer technical solutions to problems, insist on neutrality and are driven towards solutions that are efficient in a manner reminiscent of traditional management approaches. This claim is strengthened by Redfield’s (2005) observation that a crisis is the best environment for matching problems with technical solutions. However, as suggested by Cooke (2003), describing these practices as neutral conceals the ways in which they help to create and sustain power relationships, and as a result, disasters and humanitarian emergencies afford the opportunity for exporting neocolonialism to affected countries. This is particularly evident in failed states as the weakening of these (almost exclusively) former colonies sees a corresponding weakening of the state’s ability to look after citizens, and creates a space for western nations, through humanitarian organizations, to offer more efficient care (Bello, 2006). Redfield (2005) observes that working without borders ignores the
responsibility of states to look after their citizens, and in effect it recreates colonial landscapes that have no boundaries: the constituency of MSF are those populations defined by the organization as being vulnerable, stateless or disentitled.

A specific contribution of postcolonial theory to management research is to reveal the historical context of management practices that have their genesis in colonialism (Prasad, 2003). Through an analysis of policy documents and annual reports from MSF and the Red Cross, this paper examined the extent to which these organizations perpetuate colonialism by hanging on to colonial practices unawares (Kwek, 2003; Prasad, 2003). The perceived colonial duty to look after the less advanced (Said, 1987; Prasad, 2005) is evident from the texts studied as they reveal that both organizations view disaster-affected individuals as vulnerable people, forming vulnerable populations not capable of protecting themselves, or even of having the ability to decide whether to accept the care being offered. By extension, the state is also judged on its vulnerability and capacity to administer to its population, as evidenced from MSF’s concepts of *ingérence*, and from the Red Cross duty to intervene in conflict as afforded to it by international law. Narayan (1995: 136) argues that the relative capacity or vulnerability of individuals should be regarded as “contested terrain” and are liable to variation depending upon who defines these terms. Ultimately, the analysis proposed by this paper echoes what Lambert and Lester (2004) have noted: that colonial philanthropists did not argue against imperialism and an empire; rather, they sought to curb the excesses of imperialism, and to impart a progressive paragraph or two into the imperial agenda. The texts examined reveal that elements of this still exist in the practices of both MSF and the Red Cross.

However, what is not evident from an examination of the texts is the notion of resistance. There is no place in the humanitarian discourse for states or individuals to resist humanitarianism. The obvious reason for this omission is that resistance seems illogical: if the goal (established by the outside) is to help, then what role would resistance play? But, if the clients of humanitarian organizations are viewed as vulnerable, and if these same organizations make decisions to intervene in contradiction of the wishes of state authority (as does MSF in some cases), or are granted authority to intervene through international law (as does the International Committee of the Red Cross), then it is argued that these organizations are extensions of colonial practice. With this view in mind, it is suggested that a space can now be opened up in the humanitarian discourse for resistance.


