

Locating a Humanitarian Actor within Humanitarian Spaces: Best Practices Discerned from Frederick Cuny's Career

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Abstract

This article investigates the role, place, and impact of the humanitarian actor within modern and complex humanitarian localities. The protagonist of this analysis is Fred Cuny, a prominent humanitarian who, in the course of an almost thirty year career, employed his managerial and engineering skills to alleviate the suffering of people affected by complex humanitarian emergencies. For these purposes, out of the wide array of his humanitarian missions, this author selected four distinct humanitarian spaces where Fred Cuny implemented his projects and developed new practices: an earthquake in Guatemala in 1976 that is a vivid example of a natural disaster; the refugee emergency in Northern Iraq that put Kurdish refugees in imminent danger; an ominous siege of Sarajevo; and the draught-induced famine within the civil war in Somalia that is a striking example of a hybrid emergency. This article scrutinizes these four humanitarian spaces, indicates various influences that determined the work of the humanitarian, and presents best practices implemented by Fred Cuny through the responses to these emergencies. In the final part of the article, this author highlights a range of ideas that originated in Fred Cuny's practical field work and publications that could assist a new generation of humanitarians.

(Key words: humanitarian space, humanitarian actor, armed conflict, famine, refugees)

Overview:

[Humanitarians'] experience of living others' wars, others' suffering and violence, the frantic activity that uses either aid or violence to conceal the inexpressible, the implementation of technical apparatus that allow one to suppress one's own emotions while acting a perverse and almost ashamed excitement in spatially sharing area where fighting and violence is occurring of being in a place, that when reported by media becomes a planetary space where it is legitimate to narrate life and death.

In this passage, Pandolfi (2010) grasps the deep emotional and spatial dimensions of the humanitarian enterprise where actors have to face challenges, and make tough and sometimes impossible decisions to assist those in need. Hoffman and Weiss (2006) insist that the behavior of humanitarian actors has altered from its humble beginnings of marginal and occasional actors who aid the most visible victims. This fact could be largely explained by the far-reaching changes in the nature of humanitarian space fostered by the transformations within the political, social and economic spheres since the end of World War II.

The Notion of Humanitarian Space:

The notion of a humanitarian space *per se* has a relatively short history. It was conceived by the MSF in the 1990s, when the 'gust of freedom' swept the world. The concept was defined as a space for ethical and humane practices with the unequivocal freedom to act, an ability to access populations, assess their needs, and secure protections against victims as well as aid workers. This brief does not challenge the moral and ethical sides of humanitarian work, but it stresses on the importance of balance between ethics and practice. Sadly, humanitarian crises in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and South Ossetia have chilled down the general Pollyannaish outlook. Safe havens and sanctuaries became idealistic labels unable to reflect the brutish reality produced in the course of the complex humanitarian emergencies. However, this author argues that humanitarian space cannot be evaluated only through a black-and-white lens, but via perceiving it as a complex, imaginary, and multi-layered construct.

Humanitarian space is political by default, but it has a tendency to become politicized. Unfortunately, humanitarian actors often had to operate within the realm of power politics, but it is their responsibility to be aware of geopolitical configurations within conflict zones in order not to be manipulated by various actors in the conflict. 'Politics' clearly serves as a devil-term in the humanitarian vocabulary that perceives humanitarian and political action as counterparts (deChaine, 2002). This author argues that politics constitute an outer umbrella under which the humanitarian space is constructed, and humanitarians need to adopt the principle of awareness but not denial of these processes.

One of the intrinsic features that define space is the ability to access it. Therefore, an issue of humanitarian access becomes crucial in the course of a complex natural or man-made emergency. Furthermore, even after elaborative negotiations, there is no guarantee that access would be permanent and settled after the cease-fire. Thus, the effectiveness of the post-conflict reconstruction and long-term development projects also largely depend on the ability to access the former conflict zone. It could be concluded that a humanitarian should possess enough skills and knowledge to ensure successful access to a given humanitarian space that requires conscientious negotiations with a multiplicity of actors at different stages of a humanitarian emergency.

'Borders' in the Context of Humanitarian Space:

Borders delineate the physical shape of the space as well as divisions within it. While defining boundaries of the specific humanitarian space, we should be concerned not only with the geopolitical divisions between sovereign states, but also encompass mentally constructed boundaries such as ethnic and religious cleavages and dividing lines between state and non-state actors. These borders are invisible, but they largely define such salient humanitarian issues as the character of refugee movements, the security of innocents within the conflict zone, and the co-operation with military and/or political actors as well as the civilian population. Therefore, such complex and ephemeral

borders, with multiple divisions, require from humanitarians competence to react and adjust their responses to the needs of those captured within the space created by the complex humanitarian emergency.

Ergo, humanitarian space is not like a medieval castle that protects citizens from strangers and enemies. Its borders are fluid and access to them is arbitrary. The space is largely shaped by various exogenous influences (political, social, ethnic) from the outside as well as an intricate matrix of actors operating within a given space. For effective responses, humanitarians need to decide whether to negotiate with warring parties, unrecognized entities and sovereign governments, and if they choose to negotiate, how to conduct it successfully. While operating within a complex, imaginary, and multilayered construct, humanitarian actors should not deny the character of modern humanitarian emergencies, but be fully aware of it in order to assist those in need. Therefore, humanitarian responses should be knowledge-based not quixotic.

Fred Cuny's Life and Career:

Therefore, humanitarian actors have to transcend a conventional and shallow understanding of these new types of localities, and they should not merely be cogs in this system but strive to enrich the enterprise with new practices, approaches, and ideas that will contribute to its evolution. Thus, this article investigates the role, place and impact of the humanitarian actor within modern and complex humanitarian localities.

The protagonist of this analysis is Fred Cuny, a humanitarian whose title should be written with capital "H." As Peter van Arsdale (2006:191) asserted, Fred Cuny worked in a variety of places from Africa to Europe and Asia and brought a maverick style to solving tough logistical problems and confronting complex humanitarian emergencies. There were two vital *alter egos* of Frederick Cuny's personality that shaped his humanitarian identity: first – his profession as a pilot and ever-

lasting dream to serve in military, and second – his well-grounded education in engineering, specializing in problems of developing countries and urban planning.

This article is not a eulogy, biography or detective story of Fred's tragic disappearance in Chechnya in 1995. It is rather an endeavor to comprehend and present his heritage, accumulated in the course of an almost 30-year career within the humanitarian enterprise. For these purposes, out of the wide array of missions, I selected four distinct humanitarian spaces where Cuny implemented his projects and developed new practices. Other humanitarian emergencies, where the humanitarian had participated, had the same level of urgency and impact on people's livelihoods; thus, it is salient to explicate the selection mechanism employed for this article. Determined humanitarian spaces present various types of emergencies (environmental, man-made, or hybrid) that occurred in distinct political and ideological realms; brought striking innovations in the humanitarian field; and served as benchmarks in Cuny's humanitarian career as well as accumulated his previous knowledge. The analysis follows a chronological pattern and starts with an earthquake in Guatemala in 1976 as a vivid example of a natural disaster. While crafting his responses, Fred accumulated all his previous experience in disaster relief operations and became known as the 'Master of Disaster.' Then, we will shift our attention to the three conflicts on two different continents induced by geopolitical changes at the end of the Cold War Era. The refugee emergency in Northern Iraq which put Kurdish refugees in imminent danger and the ominous siege of Sarajevo both of which were the result of man-made calamities. In the course of these emergencies, Cuny employed his managerial and engineering skills to alleviate the suffering of the people affected by the respective conflicts. Finally, the draught-induced famine within the civil war in Somalia is a vivid example of a hybrid emergency where Fred Cuny had a chance to accumulate his vast experience in operating within famine-stricken regions. This author delineates each of these humanitarian spaces indicating various influences that determined the work of Fred Cuny and presents the best practices implemented by the humanitarian

through his responses to these emergencies. In the final part of the article, I elucidate a range of ideas, originated in his practical field work and publications. These ideas drove his work and could assist a new generation of humanitarians.

The Guatemalan Earthquake of 1976: Disaster in the Context of Development

On February 4th 1976, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.5 on the Richter scale killed 23,000 people, left more than a million homeless and caused extensive land-sliding along the highway that leads from Guatemala City to the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (Espinoza, 1976). For a humanitarian, however, it is vital to perceive not only the physical impact on the terrain but also the impact on the societal structure. As Olson (1977) emphasized, the earthquake brought into focus one of the most dramatic divisions in Guatemala between the Spanish-speaking *ladinos* and the indigenous traditional *indios*, the majority of whom were illiterate. Also, the disaster intensified an urban/rural cleavage, where the city dominated the countryside politically, socially, and economically. Furthermore, the direct physical effect of the earthquake on major cities and capital was relatively slight because the government and International Relief Agencies' headquarters were located there and were able to craft fast responses to the emergency. In addition, landslides also blocked railroads and destroyed communication routes in the highlands of Guatemala (Olson, 1977). The infrastructure to the remote areas was disrupted. Fred Cuny had arrived to the rural Guatemalan area, where the poverty level was high, the literacy level low, and the infrastructure merely existed. He emphasized (1981) that most cataclysms are results of natural phenomena which, in themselves, would not constitute disasters, were human settlements and structures properly planned and designed so that the phenomena would not have an effect on them. Therefore, Cuny generated development-focused responses within this humanitarian space created by the earthquake:

- *The key to success in relief aid is involving local people directly*

Fred Cuny asserted that the local population possessed a better understanding of their situation and that the response mechanisms had to be developed on local skills and knowledge. As Cuny (1981) stated, “post-disaster housing must be based on a clear understanding of the pre-disaster normal building process. Contributions must be compatible with and complementary to local resources and local technical capacity.” He organized the Guatemalans and taught them construction techniques for earthquake-resistant housing which, in case of disaster, would collapse inward. He tried to demonstrate to tribal councils of Guatemalan Indians how to rebuild the houses in their villages by using cross braces to prevent roofs from crashing down in the event of another earthquake. Also, Cuny organized salvage crews to find reusable materials amid the ruins and showed how to recycle materials from their shattered houses rather than rely entirely on new materials (Shawcross, 1995). The humanitarian tried to shift conventional thinking to ensure that all program activities meet the needs of the victims, not those of the donors.

- Fred Cuny *was never afraid to cross disciplinary boundaries*, and his engineering skills had never hindered him in developing culturally sensitive responses. In Guatemala, he employed and improved a novel design of refugee camps that he devised after the Nicaraguan earthquake. Previously, refugee camps were designed in the square grid pattern lined up in neat rows (more convenient for laying water lines and cutting drainage ditches but providing residents with no sense of community and little open space). So, Cuny used single-family tents and arranged them in a cross-axis plan, clustering dozens of tents around a common open area to form a communal unit (Anderson, 1999: 78). It resembled the layout of a medieval city with a market place in the center rather than a range of military barracks. Moreover, in Guatemala, Fred Cuny was working within a space where the majority of the population was illiterate. So to overcome the obstacle of teaching better construction techniques, Cuny designed a system of pictographs, simple diagrams printed on coffee sacks (Shawcross, 1995).

- For Fred, poverty was the primary root cause of the vulnerability of people, and sending food, blankets, and *traditional forms of assistance could not be done in a vacuum*, but had to be seen as impacting the economics, politics and development of the region. Therefore, as Weschehr (1999) pointed out, Cuny vehemently opposed sending blankets by airlifts because it would negatively impact local blanket makers.

While crafting his responses to environmental emergencies, Fred Cuny's crucial message was that disasters could not be regarded as separate and distinct events, and the cause-and-effect relationships of disasters to the development of a country had to be taken into account. Previously presented practices serve as an embodiment of this leitmotif. The nature-induced disaster creates a complex humanitarian space and exacerbates structural discrepancies within a society. The man-induced calamities, however, sometimes could compete with forces of nature in its brutality and impact on the population.

Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) in Northern Iraq: Carving out the Humanitarian Space

The defeat of the Iraqi army at the end of February 1991 at the hands of the coalition forces led by the United States was followed by widespread uprisings in Iraq against Saddam Hussein. One of them occurred in a northern Kurdish province. By the end of March, the Iraqi armed forces were able to recapture a number of towns from the Kurds without allied interference. It forced vast numbers of Kurdish refugees to flee from the advancing Iraqi military towards the borders of Turkey and Iran (Malanczuk, 1991).

The Kurds' historical destiny was to inhabit geopolitical intricate regions where they waged a perpetual series of wars for independence and autonomy. They have always lost. As stated by Anderson (1999:45), they were perceived either as enemies to be eliminated or as useful pawns for fermenting troubles. Moreover, they rarely have relied on international assistance. When Saddam Hussein launched his notorious Anfal campaign against the Kurds (just 3 years earlier in 1988), a

brutal pogrom in which hundreds of villages were demolished and thousands of civilians murdered, the Reagan administration just offered a feeble protest.

Thus, no humanitarian space existed when a population of 400,000 displaced Kurds reached the mountains along the Turkish border. The population existed in limbo because legally their welfare depended on the Iraqi government which, with cruel irony, forced them to abandon their homes. So the Kurds conceived of building their own *ad hoc* refugee camps in the mountains with no access to water, little food and no medical assistance. They began dying en masse from dysentery, cold, and starvation (Anderson, 1999:48). Moreover, the UN and its refugee agency abstained from an active role in the highly politicized emergency and the void of humanitarian assistance had to be fulfilled to bestow protection on the displaced Kurds (Helton, 2003).

Fred Cuny came to the region as the head of Disaster Assistance Response Team with a mission to conduct a joint operation with the US military and to guarantee Kurdish survival and return home. From the inception of the campaign, Cuny assumed a *de facto* leadership role and had to develop a plan in order to basically carve out a humanitarian space in a relatively short period of time. The operation had to be orchestrated in two phases (Anderson, 1999:55): 1) A massive air-drop of basic relief supplies to alleviate the loss of life then get medical and construction units up to the camps to establish some basic level of coordination and infrastructure; and 2) A process of building transit camps for Kurds to descend the mountains and assist them in returning to their villages. Such an endeavor required a grand vision and an elaborated network of partnerships and collaborations with exogenous actors (e.g. governments of various countries and diplomats) to guarantee political consent on the mission; military actors to establish a high security level within the humanitarian space; and Kurdish representatives to ensure their cooperation with the other actors.

- In his negotiations with external actors Cuny insisted that, wherever possible, the Kurds must

be returned to their deserted houses, rather than placed in big tent cities, as some aid agencies were advocating. As Ambassador Abramowitz asserted (Shawcross, 1995), Fred wanted to *save not just lives but the local way of life*—and encourage people to begin farming and trading again. Cuny was explicitly aware of two possible outcomes in case of failure. First, the status of the temporarily displaced could easily be altered into permanent one; second, if the mission was not executed within 2-3 months, the Kurds would miss the opportunity to harvest their crops which could have imposed an imminent danger of famine.

- Under the name 'Operation Provide Comfort' the allied intervention force established a small triangle zone at the border in Northern Iraq between Zahko, Amadiya and Dohuk (Malanczuk, 1991). This was declared to be a security zone under the protection of the allied troops and was non-accessible to Iraqi forces. These actions allowed Kurdish refugees to descend the mountain slopes into this area where they were supplied with food and tents.

- Identifying Kurdish elders who had the most authority over refugees, Cuny began shuttling them throughout the region so they could judge the security situation. It ensured the fast and well-organized descent of refugees into the lowlands where they could receive assistance and be offered transportation back to their towns and villages.

Peter Van Arsdale (2006:177) defined this operation as a benchmark in civil-military humanitarianism, which occurs when an intervention turns into a new kind of cooperation that involves the use of external military personnel. For Cuny (1993), the aftermath of the Gulf War nurtured his belief that the international community would be able to issue stern warnings to belligerents that would be obeyed. However, the two following crises in Somalia and Bosnia would bring a great amount of pessimism within the humanitarian enterprise as well as influence Fred Cuny's perception in the field.

Famine Within a Conflict Zone: Failure of Humanitarian Intervention in Somalia (1991 – 1992)

After the end of the Cold War, a lot of countries in the Third World fell into a domino effect when deep political and economic crises sparked brutal civil wars within states. Marfleet (2006) succinctly described the situation faced by Somalia after it had lost its central government in 1991 when the dictator Siad Barre was ousted. Tribal fighting and famine filled the vacuum. The State had lost its geopolitical value, which was the token to bargain with the Superpowers for arms and aid. The economy was already chronically weak, and now it became even weaker as networks associated with pastoralism and the production of grain started to disintegrate and hunger became rampant in rural areas. Clan groups became the focus of mass loyalties because they provided the minimum of security and access to basic resources. Simply put, they were hoarding their money and power from the suffering and deprivation of the Somali population. These political, economic, and social distortions created a multilayered humanitarian space, as several emergencies overlapped and impacted each other with a multitude of actors pursuing distinct agendas.

In 1992, after confronting famines in Ethiopia and Sudan, Fred Cuny arrived to this complex terrain and reported that the situation was “one of the worst that relief agencies have ever faced” (Shawcross, 1995). The humanitarian found himself facing a hybrid humanitarian emergency of famine in the midst of a civil war. Thus, we will perceive the best practices implemented by Fred Cuny to alleviate the effects of this calamity on the local population as well as comprehend lessons learned by the humanitarian from the failure of military intervention in the region.

For Fred Cuny (1999), the famine that struck Somalia (1991-1992) was a result of factional fighting that disrupted the flow of food to people in all parts of the country and led to breakdowns in food distribution that pushed the costs beyond people's means. In his guidebook (co-authored with Richard Hill), Cuny encapsulated his vast experience in confronting famines and advocated for so-called counter-famine assistance, which focused on addressing the root causes of the emergency and was designed to prevent, contain, and control it with a range of economic and market interventions.

The principal goal of these interventions was to sustain local market systems. To develop holistic responses to the emergency in Somalia, as reported by Shawcross (1995), Cuny made his own study of the warring clans, the markets in provincial towns, and analyzed the international response to the food shortages caused by the clan wars. Cuny's strategy was to make the Somalis responsible for the success of the aid distribution by giving them an economic stake in the mission. This was to be implemented through the program of 'monetization' involved selling relief aid at discounted prices to local merchants who would then have an economic incentive to get it to the distressed areas. Traders were able to reach villages that were largely inaccessible for relief agencies and the proceeds were transferred to NGOs working in the area to use in a variety of income-generating projects (Cuny and Hill, 1999: 101). Another hindrance for providing relief was the widespread looting of humanitarian supplies and foodstuffs. Since Somali money was virtually worthless, it was better for insurgents to use foodstuffs as currency. Since the security level of relief agencies was very low, the attacks on relief shipments and stores became rampant. Therefore, agencies had to switch to blended food which Somalis grew, such as sorghum. It had a shorter shelf life (Cuny and Hill, 1999: 121).

Counter-famine efforts that Cuny pursued and advocated for in Somalia could not have a fully beneficial effect without, as he emphasized, structural alterations and a cessation of hostilities that disrupted the implementation of the relief operation. He believed that military intervention might be helpful if limited to protecting the rural distribution of food, so that people in the countryside would not be drawn into the towns. However, his humanitarian vision did not win support from politicians and military, and they ignored Cuny's recommendations not to get involved in what he called 'the concrete snake pit' of Mogadishu clan politics (Anderson, 1999:87). In 1993, 28,000 US troops occupied Somalia as a part of the UN-sanctioned operation Restore Hope, an "imposition by stronger states of means of political authority in a region in which their strategies had made 'stateless'" (Marfleet. 2006: 49). They then took control of the feeding stations: on the one hand, it made them

safer, but on the other, it made refugees far more unwilling to return to their homes and start a new harvest season. Operation Provide Comfort in Northern Iraq, where Cuny took a leading role, was drastically different from Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. In this case, the intervention became a pure tool of power politics and ignored humanitarian issues in the region as well as did not consider the far-reaching influences on the local population. For Cuny, Somalia was a place to implement his novel strategies to alleviate the effects of famine through tackling structural issues while it was a complex emergency that provided lessons learned for the humanitarian enterprise and its actors. The next humanitarian crisis, where the level of ignorance and selectiveness of policies from the international community reached its climax, was igniting in the Balkans where cities, towns and villages were burnt, ethnically cleansed, razed to the ground and put under a siege. Fred Cuny did not hesitate to dispense his skills and knowledge in a new ominous humanitarian space.

Bringing Life to Sarajevo: Humanitarianism under the Siege

“If the UN had been around 1939, we would all be speaking German.”

– Peter J. Hoffman & Thomas George Weiss

The crisis in the Balkans brought a series of flashbacks from World War II, which had devastated Europe just 50 years ago. Apparently, humankind was unable to learn an old Latin proverb *historiamagistra vitaest*. A dire image of shelled and destroyed Sarajevo where people had to spend 1395 days with little or no access to gas, electricity, heating, scarcity of water and medical supplies, while burying their loved ones on soccer fields and Olympic stadiums. It brought memories that many wished to forget. The Bosnian capital and its residents shared the tragic fate of Leningrad blockaded by Germans for 950 days in the course of World War II.

The words that opened this section were uttered by Fred Cuny, who saw the devastation of Sarajevo in 1993. He became the humanitarian who shared in the destitutions of a besieged life, no commodities, and in imminent threat with residents of Sarajevo. Cuny undertook the mission to bring

aqua vita and heating resources to the blockaded city. Before presenting the character of the humanitarian/engineering project envisioned by Cuny, I have to discern the physical as well as the emotional dimensions of this specific space. The humanitarian has to merge his diplomatic and organizational skills, vast knowledge of culture, and political processes within this locality.

As pointed out by Hunt (2004), war is a flood by many streams and there was no single cause of the Balkan calamity. The combustible fusion of reasons, summarized by Richard Holbrook (1998), included a misreading of Balkan history, the end of the Cold War, the behavior and decision of political leaders, and inadequate responses by the international community to the crisis. However, according to those who lived in this conflict, it was strikingly similar to others, “with greedy politicians exploiting an imbalance of privilege using a media machine to whip fear among citizenry” (Hunt, 2004:18). There was a multitude of humanitarian localities in the course of the Balkan crisis, among them the notorious so-called ‘safe haven’ of Srebrenica, and the besieged city of Sarajevo that is the protagonist of this section.

Cities are fragile organisms subjected to economic stagnation, demographic disintegration and cultural suppression (Bollens, 2010). It is not surprising that besieged cities constitute a unique and bizarre humanitarian space with defined borders and resources, limited points of access and high level of stagnancy because its residents are deprived of an opportunity to leave this condensed space at their own will. Besides the tangible physical struggles, faced by besieged civilians, there is a myriad of emotional challenges. Hunt (2004) presented numerous stories of women who survived the siege. Through this prism, we could discern major emotional difficulties faced by citizens such as feelings of alienation from the rest of the world, suspension of cultural and community life, strain of ethnic tensions, and the need to alter an everyday routine. Sarajevo, once a flourishing multicultural hub of the Balkans, was turned in the enclave of despair where residents had to lead a surreal life in the midst of a harsh wartime reality. The bizarre nature of *life in time of cholera* was noticed by

Holbrook (1998) who was in the city on the New Years Eve and saw people dancing, shouting, drinking and trying to forget the nightmare around.

The diplomat also stated that “two days in that hellhole left impressions for the rest of his life.” Holbrooke delineated physical hardships faced by the residents. Some food aid was reaching Sarajevo, but it was poorly distributed especially on outskirts of the city. The shooting was continuous, and the streets were littered with destroyed vehicles lying on their sides. There was not a single building that was not damaged. Restoring electricity required Serbs to remove mines scattered around electricity pylons leading into Sarajevo and gas was controlled by the giant Russian State-controlled Gazprom, which had no intention of turning on the pipeline to Bosnians. In order to stay warm people burned their books, and sadly, one could easily transpose pictures from a Bradbury novel to the heart of Europe at the end of the 20th century.

These were the major challenges faced by the humanitarian-engineer Fred Cuny when he commenced his work in the Bosnian capital. However, maybe the most important commodity since the Middle Ages was always scarce for besieged cities –water and access to it. As Cuny underlined, a crucial approach to disaster relief is to isolate a part that you can understand to grasp the whole system. In the case of Sarajevo, he asserted, the main problems centered on water. And, the humanitarian was right because there was no running water except a few outside locations, some of which were sniper targets. Thousands of people had to draw water from the river with buckets every day, and were often shot down by Serb snipers (Anderson, 1999: 109). Cuny emphasized that while medical professionals and materials are vital assets within humanitarian space they are not enough to sustain the life of besieged city. Therefore, the need for engineers and engineering supplies was urgent (Shawcross, 1995). To construct the water filtration system, Cuny enlisted residents to dig trenches through the street in the midst of shelling. He also needed pumps and water tanks that had to be specially designed so that they could be shipped into Sarajevo on transport planes.

Here, it is vital to emphasize that Cuny had to implement all his diplomatic skills and connections to ensure that these supplies got into the city. The airport of Sarajevo was the only point of access to the besieged city and was soon turned, by warring parties, into a place to carry out illegal economic transactions. Cuny himself (1993) stressed that Serbs outmaneuvered the U.N. and offered to turn over the airport to UNPROFOR in return for the right to examine cargos passing through the field. As a result, the Serbs demanded a third, and sometimes even a half, of all humanitarian cargos passing through their checkpoints or the airport. Also, to minimize the risk of the plane being hit on the runway, Cuny had devised a system so that each aircraft could be unloaded in only seven minutes.

The result of all this effort was what Shawcross described as a structure of pumps and water tanks “that looked like the engine room of an aircraft carrier.” The clarified water passed through three filters—anthracite, sand, and garnet—and was then chlorinated and pumped up the hill to an old reservoir that had been built in the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had been abandoned for years until Fred had it restored. The project was a remarkable combination of ancient and modern systems. Fred Cuny made an immense contribution in order for Sarajevo to endure this seemingly endless siege. Unfortunately, he was not able to assist residents of Grozny as he wished to and was himself trapped in a warzone in Chechnya.

Fred Cuny’s Contribution to the Humanitarian Philosophy:

Humanitarianism involves “crossing a boundary” to help a person in need. The boundary can be economic, cultural, ethnic, psycho-social, or geopolitical, but a metaphorical “stretch” is mandated.

- Regina Nockerts and Peter Van Arsdale

Modern humanitarians have to operate within the ethnography of disorientation where the knot of urgency, utilitarianism, and compassion must constantly be unfastened (Pandolfi, 2010). Through his practical efforts, Fred Cuny enriched the humanitarian field with ideas on how to operate within multilayered and complex humanitarian spaces, and how to transcend physically and mentally

constructed boundaries. Humanitarian spaces have to be perceived holistically comprised of interconnected parts. For Cuny, who had the mindset of an engineer, humanitarian space resembled a clock that looks simple from the outside but has an elaborated structure comprised of dozens tiny components. If one element is broken or lost, the clock would either go backwards or the arrows would not move at all. As Cuny stated in 1981, agencies repeatedly attempt to simplify such a complex process; and by doing so, they create innumerable problems, not only for themselves, but also for the society in which they are trying to assist.

Conclusion:

Hegel, a German philosopher of the 19th century, argued against what he defined as abstract thinking, that is, to perceive any societal issues disregarding the causes and environments that brought them into life. When humanitarian actors adhere to such types of thinking, they bring more harm than good into the localities where they are eager to assist those in need. Throughout his career, Fred Cuny enriched the humanitarian enterprise with a range of best practices that were the result of his non-abstract way of thinking.

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