

21. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Humanitarian Ethics

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Why “humanitarian ethics?” What does it mean, and what paths toward insights does this approach offer beyond those of the now-established history of human rights?

Why do we care about other people’s problems? That’s not a new question in history, but it’s been asked differently in our globalized world beginning in the 1970s. If, as the historian Lynn Hunt argues in her book *Inventing Human Rights*, human rights first arose thanks largely to feelings of empathy, how do humanitarianism and human rights relate today? Are legal claims transformed back into humanitarian gestures and emotional states, as the anthropologist Didier Fassin has argued in the context of asylum seekers? That makes the separation of humanitarianism and human rights seem outdated to us.

What potential does humanitarianism or humanitarian ethics offer as a field of research for integrative, interdisciplinary perspectives?

The question of the effects of humanitarian ethics bisects existing disciplines and can be answered only if specialists in contemporary history, anthropology, visual studies and philosophy take into account the states of research in each other’s disciplines. To that extent the topic provides opportunities for interdisciplinary discourse, even if the research objectives differ.

If we attempt a cursory sketch of the initial research results, is a different accentuation of contemporary history becoming recognizable?

The new history of human rights does seem to confirm the epochal fracture of the 1970s and 80s. Contemporary history – that is, the history of our own present day – begins, according to this reading, in the final third of the 20th century. Human

rights and the new humanitarianism are as much a part of this new present day as are neoliberalism and globalization. The one side should not be separated from the other. Together they describe the tectonic shifts that may share a common prehistory yet, together, denote something cataclysmically new. In the 1990s these shifts were still being welcomed as a “second modern age,” while the last decade has focused rather on the crises and conflicts they give rise to. In today’s age, with rich and poor drifting apart globally, humanitarian ethics is gaining significance as the moral economy of our frequently inept behavior toward the suffering of others. In that respect our present day resembles the years preceding 1914 – the first age of globalization – more than the decades between 1945 and 1975, the epoch of the Cold War and decolonization.