



2007

Humanitarian Aid Work: A Critical Approach. Carlos Martin Beristain.

David K. Androff
University of California, Berkeley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Androff, David K. (2007) "*Humanitarian Aid Work: A Critical Approach.* Carlos Martin Beristain.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 4 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol34/iss4/16>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



writings of contemporary social thinkers will be grateful for the author's ability to summarize and explain their complex ideas in a straightforward way.

Although this book is intended primarily for students of sociology and does not deal explicitly with the policy implications of social thought, it will be a major resource for anyone interested in the theoretical dimensions of social policy. The theorists whose work is described have almost invariably had an effect on the real world of policy and politics, and anyone concerned with social policy issues should be familiar with their ideas. The book's encyclopedic scope is a major strength, as is the author's ability to condense this material into an interesting and readable format. It makes a major contribution to the literature and should be widely consulted.

Carlos Martin Beristain, *Humanitarian Aid Work: A Critical Approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. \$ 59.95 hardcover.

Natural disasters and armed conflict exact an enormous toll on human welfare, disrupting physical and social systems. For this reason, international humanitarian aid provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has become increasingly important. Reconstruction efforts span a spectrum of interventions designed to meet the physical needs of survivors and refugees to the psychological toll of trauma, and the necessity of rebuilding the social fabric by dealing with the past, from criminal trials to truth and reconciliation commissions.

Seeking to bridge the professional, academic and cultural divides between the Global North and South, Beristain marshals an impressive array of data and field experiences from across the world on the topic of humanitarian aid work. In the first five chapters of his book, the author mobilizes a field of psychological and sociological theories elucidating the human response to complex, collective disasters, both natural and human-made. He offers a stage model of human reaction to complex and collective disasters, emphasizing the social

impact of these tragedies. He also makes an excellent cultural critique of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), exploring non-Western reactions to trauma and indigenous modes of healing from traumatic experiences. Beristain's cultural model integrates the cultural grief resulting from the loss of social order, institutions, social structures, social identity and values.

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate the impact of these disasters from the perspective of humanitarian aid workers in NGOs. Beristain details the aspects of aid work, including duties of NGOs and the common problems faced by aid workers, such as stress and issues encountered upon returning home. He offers recommendations for aid-workers, and he outlines guidelines for culturally competent humanitarian aid. The final chapter discusses psychosocial repair, including the importance of dignity, economic compensation, and the need to rebuild collective memory. The author argues that to improve the conditions of survivors, interventions should alleviate the damage through both economic and moral compensation. Beristain highlights the need to restore justice in the process of reconstruction.

Beristain's text is an important contribution to the field of humanitarian aid, which will encourage policymakers and practitioners to attend to cultural competency in aid projects. His attention on how aid impacts victims' social, cultural, legal realities underscores his main point that humanitarian aid is more complex than simple helping. Increased focus to these psychosocial dimensions will improve and change aid-giving. This approach moves psychological practice, theory, and research from an individual clinical focus to a culturally competent community that compliments coping strategies of the affected population. Above all, this text contributes the optimism that aid can be made better to meet the needs of people affected by complex disasters.

David K. Androff, University of California, Berkeley