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Teaching Critique of Humanitarianism: A Syllabus for Comparative Study

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By Chris Garces

This post was contributed by Chris Garces (Cornell University)

[Garces Comparative Humanitarianism](#)

“Comparative Humanitarianism,” viewable and available for download above, expands upon my lower-division undergraduate seminar, **“Love™, Ltd.: Charity, Philanthropy, & Humanitarianism,”** which I taught at Cornell and Sarah Lawrence College successively over the last two years (2008 and 2009). To my surprise, this latter course attracted the largest number of registrants out of any seminar taught at SLC in Fall 2008, which no doubt speaks more to undergraduate curiosity about the unfamiliar worlds of humanitarian action than to the quality of my early curriculum. The reason for its success, in my opinion? The course was, as far as I could tell, the first time any SLC seminar was dedicated to studying the NGO third sector and global forms of volunteerism—two front-running career choices for many students contemplating their own graduation and “the great beyond.”

“Love™, Ltd.” was cobbled together with an eye to educating my students in the full range of aid work that one could voluntarily engage in during one’s college years and perhaps turn into a full-time, professional and/or personal vocation afterwards. But more specifically, my course critically surveyed charitable, philanthropic, and humanitarian work as a strong political force in today’s world—i.e. as global interventions, the cross-cultural significance of which can rarely if ever be immediately understood, with both positive and negative long-term consequences on local communities and individual lives (depending on who you ask on the ground, or the typically unsolicited opinions of populations targeted for a beneficent intervention from afar).

Teaching the course yet again at Cornell in 2009, this time to first-year students, I wrote a short appraisal of my own curriculum which can be read as a disciplinary plea for incorporating the anthropology of global humanitarianism in departmental course offerings, and published it in the

Winter 2010 issue of *Voices Magazine*, a student-run CU political and literary magazine. It was published along with a variety of Op-Ed style works from students taking my class. You can access my introductory essay [here](#).

The syllabus embedded above is intended for the more experienced student with a stronger critical background: the upper-division level or graduate student looking for theoretical approaches to charity, philanthropy, or humanitarianism. The curriculum for “Comparative Humanitarianism,” for better or worse, attempts to provide a critical taxonomy of the humanitarian age. Each week sets up a major theme in this field along with a variety of sub-thematic interests and hermeneutical possibilities. Its content is entirely provisional—intended mainly as a provocation for thinking about volunteerism and beneficent intervention in as many cross-cultural varieties and global permutations as possible—hence the title “comparative humanitarianism,” always tracing the edges of a field rather than trying, once and for all, to identify the whole. For this reason, I prioritize the reading of articles and shorter opinion-pieces over any single book that would encapsulate debate about the meanings and directions of the humanitarian age. I would be grateful to any Somatosphere reader who might care to offer a suggestion or two on alternative readings or particular global issues that were not (yet available) in this curriculum. I can be reached at ceg97@cornell.edu

Here is an overview of the weekly agenda:

“Comparative Humanitarianism”: Thematic Sections from the Syllabus

Theme 1: The Question of Humanitarianism

Theme 2: Humanitarian Discourse as Secular Religion

Theme 3: The Biopolitical Age

Theme 4: Medical Humanitarianism

Theme 5: Aid? Postcolonial Legacies and Imperial Resemblances

Theme 6: Armed Interventions & Peacekeeping

Theme 7: The Human Rights Crucible

Theme 8: The Gender(ing) of Aid Work

Theme 9: Humanitarian Exceptions & Humanitarian Immunity

Theme 10: Non-Governmental Organizations & the Politics of Aid

Theme 11: The Private-Public Alliance as Antipolitics?

Theme 12: The Hurricane Katrina Case

Chris Garces taught for three years at Sarah Lawrence College before moving to Cornell, where he currently holds a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship. His article on the global rise of preventive imprisonment, and religious protests to denounce the security state inside Ecuador's largest federal prison, was just published with Cultural Anthropology—it can be accessed [here](#).

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