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Masters of disorder: rituals of communication and monitoring at the International Committee of the Red Cross

The mandate of the ICRC as granted by the Geneva Conventions is to act as a ‘guardian of International Humanitarian Law’ on the frontlines of conflicts. While its humanitarian relief operations have contributed to its international reputation, this monitoring function is rather unknown to the public. In this paper, I pay specific attention to activities carried out by ICRC delegates to protect various categories of victims in times of war. By focusing on the ways in which delegates interpret the principles (‘neutrality’, ‘impartiality’, ‘confidentiality’) that guide their actions, I seek to decipher the organisation’s ethos and worldview. I highlight the hopes as well as the frustrations and disappointments generated by myriad administrative techniques devised to engage parties to a conflict in a ‘confidential dialogue’ on the conduct of hostilities. Finally, I examine how these techniques, built on the hope in the possibility of communication, are changing as a result of external sources of pressure for ‘evidence-based programming’, turning personalised case-based monitoring into a new form of ‘audit culture’ based on statistical evidence. Paradoxically, relying on numbers to realise the utopia of ‘humanising war’ makes the very ‘humans’ who are supposed to benefit from it disappear from view.

Key words bureaucracy, humanitarianism, audit, quantification, technocracy

Introduction

Part of the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva are located in the former neoclassical hotel ‘The Carlton’, donated to the ICRC by the canton de Genève after the Second World War. Annexes have been added to the complex somewhat haphazardly over the years, material testimonies of a world in which wars are unlikely to disappear. With the International Museum of the Red Cross buried under the hill on which The Carlton stands, as a symbol of its commitment to in-depth action, and new buildings exhibiting the sober aesthetic of opaque concrete and transparent glass, the architecture of the ICRC’s headquarters clearly embodies the culture of discretion, which ironically has made the ICRC a world-renowned humanitarian organisation over the past 150 years of its existence. It is only recently that the transparent fishbowl-like architecture of the new cafeteria and reception has marginally softened the fortress appearance of the exterior walls.

These architectural choices bear witness to the organisation’s distinctive orientation and ethos: the ICRC’s long-term objective – to relieve suffering – strives for a world that no longer needs it. The complex of heterogeneous buildings reveals the organisation’s anchorage in emergencies and in the general Swiss – or perhaps

Calvinist – dislike for ostentation. They also symbolise the specific temporality in which the ICRC operates: one of permanent emergencies and crises. Echoing the classic appeal to humanitarianism rooted in war, the ICRC seeks to respond to a moment of suffering that appears exceptional and gratuitous. Its humanitarian operations therefore seek to remain a temporary response, not the basis for a new regime. As in the case of *Médecins Sans Frontières* studied by Peter Redfield, ‘its perspective combines anti-utopian scepticism and pragmatism toward what humanitarian aid can achieve with a near utopian sense of engagement in the cause of “humanizing war”’ (2005: 18).

But what does ‘humanizing war’ concretely entail in practice? This is what I intended to discover when I was hired by the organisation in 2016 as a researcher tasked with studying the ICRC’s ‘diplomatic culture’. After a few months of research, I realised that the relief operations on which the ICRC had built its international reputation were only the tip of the iceberg to a plethora of other, less visible activities, scattered across time and space, but which were nevertheless at the very heart of its international mandate as ‘guardian of the Geneva Conventions’. Regrouped under the label of ‘protection’, these activities were of a legalistic and bureaucratic nature: they involved making lists of prisoners or of disappeared persons, collecting and distributing ‘Red Cross Messages’ to maintain family links between detainees and their relatives or between relatives separated by war, entering ‘cases of violations’ into databases, writing letters and submitting reports to concerned authorities. In other words, ‘protecting’ victims of conflict primarily consisted in monitoring the conduct of hostilities and the conditions of detention, in addition to searching for the dead and the disappeared. Their ultimate aim was not to address the root causes of war but rather to maintain a minimalist notion of ‘humanity’ in the midst of a dystopian present: to master disorder and contain its overflows.

Deliberately formal, repetitive and predictable in order to build and maintain the trust of interlocutors, these standard techniques have been devised over time to nurture a climate favourable to a ‘confidential dialogue’ (the trademark of the Swiss organisation) with parties to a conflict. In this paper, I focus on the principles (neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality) that are supposed to guide ‘protection’ and on the ways in which ICRC delegates interpret them in their everyday work. I argue that delegates’ deployment in the conflict zones functions as an organisational ‘rite of passage’ and ‘confidential dialogue’ as a ritual of communication: both are part of a broader ‘transnational ritual sphere’ (Malkki 2015: 23) where the work of imagination powerfully informs humanitarian logics.

Finally, I highlight how the modalities of ‘confidential dialogue’ and more specifically monitoring techniques have deeply changed over time, due to external pressure for ‘evidence-based programming’. I examine the growing disconnect between the experience-near work of ICRC field protection delegates and the experience-distant translation work they are required to perform in order to turn ‘suffering’ into measurable facts. The moral dilemmas and frustrations ICRC delegates experience are, in my view, a consequence of the logic of ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000), which the organisation is increasingly inclined to follow.

While most anthropologists of humanitarianism emphasise the disciplinary nature of humanitarian governance (Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Fassin 2007; Redfield 2013), my research at the ICRC brings nuance to these analyses by highlighting a mode of government that is fundamentally fragmented and partial and which systematically

challenges the moral sentiments on which humanitarianism is grounded. The current conflation between the imperatives of protection and accountability has further reinforced this pattern by creating systems of bureaucratic management relying on ‘governance at a distance’ (Beerli 2017; Hansen and Mühlen-Schulte 2012) and the partial transfer of control responsibilities to the concerned local authorities. Far from producing hegemonic or coercive forms of power, such techniques tend to maintain already precarious systems of care, thus producing and preserving conditions of ‘ungovernable life’ (Dewachi 2017) instead of offering solutions to it.

Reformers vs guardians of vision

I worked at the ICRC for two years, between 2016 and 2018, as a resident researcher in charge of studying its diplomatic culture. My study, commissioned by the organisation, was carried out at its headquarters in Geneva as well as in various field operations, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia/Abkhazia, Colombia, Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland. I entered the organisation at a moment of prolonged crisis when two groups of staff confronted each other with regard to the future of the organisation. On the one hand were the ones I call the ‘reformers’, a group mostly composed of top managers, who believed the ICRC needed to adapt to the transformation of humanitarianism by becoming more flexible, more transparent toward the public and more accountable toward its donors and beneficiaries. To an extent, my research was part of the organisation’s broader effort at opening itself up to external scrutiny by providing a scientific account of its inner working. These efforts reflected an attempt to respond to critiques that had already been made in the mid-1970s, following the ICRC’s controversial involvement in the Biafra war. A commissioned report released in 1975 criticised the ICRC’s lack of transparency and professionalism. Its author, Donald Tansley, a Canadian civil servant, spoke rather bluntly about the ICRC’s excessive opacity:

The ICRC operates ... as a closed system: it is not open about what it is doing and why. It is not open to ideas and information from outside. While there are some signs of change in the right direction, there is still a great need for the ICRC to ‘open the windows’. On the whole, the ICRC seems to have blurred the differences between the discretion, which their work requires, and an obsession with needless secrecy. (1975: 114)

If most of the Report’s proposals were implemented in the following decades, requests for ‘opening the doors’ were slow to materialise. However, a major move over the past decade has been the strengthening of communication efforts, the establishment of external audit mechanisms and the standardisation of procedures designed to measure ‘impact’ (ICRC 2009), implement ‘result-based programming’ (ICRC 2008) and ensure ‘accountability to affected populations’ (ICRC 2019).

The growing importance of communication manifested itself most significantly in 2010, when Yves Daccord, a former broadcast journalist of Radio Television Suisse (RTS), ICRC delegate and Director of Communications, was appointed General-Director. In addition to measures taken to improve the ICRC’s public image, the reformers also shared the view that the ICRC needed to become more polyvalent. They thought it had to intensify its partnerships with the private sector (best embodied

in the recent establishment of ‘humanitarian impact bounds’¹), break away from its rigid legalistic orientation and enlarge the scope of its operations by venturing in new fields of humanitarian relief such as migration and education.

These reforms triggered heated internal debates, especially among those I qualify as the ‘keepers of the vision’ who were mocked by the reformers as the ‘old dinosaurs’ resistant to change. For this last group, mostly composed of ‘ICRC veterans’, by engaging in areas for which it had no ‘know-how’, the ICRC was at risk of ‘losing its DNA’ – a metaphor that was commonly used by ICRC staff to express their anxiety toward what they perceived as a loss of organisational identity. They believed that the ICRC would preserve its relevance if it returned to what it knew best: i.e. a case-based mode of protection rooted in legal reasoning. They feared that the intensification of communication and public–private partnerships would challenge the neutrality of the organisation and its ability to engage in an effective ‘confidential dialogue’ with parties to a conflict. Finally, they viewed the bureaucratisation of humanitarian work, notably via the deployment of burdensome management exercises such as yearly PfRs (‘Planning for Results’), as a threat to the organisation’s capacity to maintain a strong field presence and remain in tune with the pace of emergencies.

Of course, most ICRC staff did not hold such polarising views and many maintained an intermediate position, acknowledging the need for greater transparency while being equally fearful of bureaucratic measures that could create a distance with beneficiaries. In any case, these tensions and the various ways in which they affected my research – notably as a result of my posting within the Office of the President and my perceived association with the ‘reformers’ – enabled me to gain insights into the organisation’s changing ethos and worldview. As I started to explore these struggles further, I realised that many of these concerns resonated with the ones of my colleagues hired in universities. In the same way as ICRC staff made the painful experience of having to work under increasing administrative pressures, my University colleagues complained about the transformed nature of their work resulting from their institutions’ involvement in the Research Excellence Framework, a system of audit for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education (Strathern 2000; Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2015).

But as much as I could empathise with the guardians of vision’s concern for neutrality and proximity, I also felt there was something mythical about their perception of operational effectiveness. Indeed, from its inception, the ICRC had primarily relied on the power of international law and diplomacy (rather than direct relief) to come to the rescue of war victims. Henri Dunant, the organisation’s founding father, had initially conceived the Committee to serve one purpose: to act as a ‘neutral’ observer empowered with the responsibility to remind warring parties of the rules of war. The role of the ICRC was therefore historically envisioned as one of a ‘neutral intermediary’ (to use the organisation’s internal jargon), a ‘go-between’ in charge of ensuring that combats would be fought within the limits granted by the law (Ignatieff 1998). Practical assistance was not originally conceived as being part of its mission; rather, until the First World War when the ICRC started to channel aid to war prisoners via its

¹ On the issue of humanitarian impact bounds, see: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/worlds-first-humanitarian-impact-bond-launched-transform-financing-aid-conflict-hit> (accessed December 2019).

Agence Internationale des Prisonniers de Guerre, monitoring the conduct of hostilities via diplomatic representation was the sole activity delegates carried out.

Even though the organisation nowadays takes pride in its multidisciplinary approach to relief and emphasises the complementarity between ‘protection’ (i.e. diplomatic and monitoring activities aiming at preventing violations) and ‘assistance’ (relief operations), ‘for a long time there has been a tacit hierarchy among the different roles allocated to delegates, and hence a sort of occult segregation between those who regard themselves as performing ‘noble tasks’ – and who therefore feel they alone may bear the title of ‘delegate’ – and all the others who are assigned the “dirty work”’ (Troyon and Palmieri 2007: 101). Even today, the title of ‘protection delegate’ keeps an aura of prestige within the organisation and the tasks such a delegate performs are in many ways similar to the one of the first ICRC delegates: visiting prisoners of war and civilian detainees, searching for missing persons, passing messages between family members separated by conflict, spreading the knowledge of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and negotiating for humanitarian purposes.

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In the section that follows, I further explore the tensions triggered by institutional concerns over transparency and proximity by describing the changing nature of protection work. To illustrate these dynamics, I take the example of the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where I shadowed ICRC protection teams over a two-week period in 2016.

I focus on ICRC operations in the DRC because those are internally perceived as best representing the organisation’s mode of action. According to the Deputy Head of Operations for Africa in office during my research, the DRC represents a ‘classic ICRC mission’. The first reason he gave me for such a qualification was that the organisation had been in the country for over 20 years and had therefore been able to develop a strong network of interlocutors with whom it had established a sustained dialogue. Second, the context was clearly a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC), hence providing the ICRC with a clear legal mandate for its operations.² Third, in the DRC the ICRC was able to periodically deploy its teams in conflict-affected areas. This contrasted with Syria or Yemen, where poor security conditions have sometimes forced the organisation to manage its operations remotely.

Even though ICRC protection does not necessarily involve deep fieldwork or close interactions as the ones I describe below, I perceive these practices as embodying a form of professional excellence from which ICRC delegates take pride. This sense of distinction was equated with the experience-near and people-centred forms of reporting it involved. Results-based management, which requires a less personalised form of monitoring, is gradually challenging such an approach by increasingly making use of experience-distant, systematic and holistic reporting methods.

Selective proximity, periodic presence

The ICRC manifests its field presence primarily through the deployment of international staff on the frontlines of conflicts. These delegates are the concrete embodiment

² Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions provides that ‘an impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict’.

of the ‘international’: acting as the ears, the eyes and the mouth of the organisation, they epitomise the moral consciousness of humanity. In the archives of the ICRC, a draft foreword to a revised version of *le Manuel du Délégué*, dated 1972, presents the role of a delegate in the following emphatic terms:

The ICRC delegate sometimes provides *only his presence for any assistance*. It is therefore useful and essential that this presence remains an inexhaustible *source of warmth and light*. But this mission, apparently clear, is subject before it is completed to such a complex multitude of political speculations that the will to help is not enough. The delegate must add a *clear-sighted combativeness*, as finely honed as that of his interlocutors. He holds, in front of them, this inestimable privilege – which makes this profession one of the most beautiful in the world – to fight, not for the advancement of the wealthiest, but for the protection of the most dispossessed. By doing so, he performs *a humanitarian act in the true sense of the word*. (ICRC Archives – ACICR-B AG 022-249. My own translation, emphasis added)

According to the author Daniel Marti (the future first director of the Red Cross Museum), the Christ-like figure of the ICRC delegate is the paradigmatic incarnation of the humanitarian mission. A merciful character endowed with foresight and determination, the delegate’s comforting presence on the side of the disenfranchised serves to re-establish humanity where it is threatened to disappear. Humanitarianism is therefore conceived here as an act of salvation, grounded in the hope of establishing direct communication with belligerents.

Laura (pseudonym), a protection delegate I shadowed in the DRC, explained her work in similar (even though more pragmatic) terms. At the end of a long day of travelling in a convoy of motorbikes on sludge paths in the tropical forest that formed the dominant landscape of South Kivu, she explained:

We try to see a little more clearly into this desperate chaos that is the daily life of the inhabitants of the Kivus, to have an idea of the *number of displaced persons*, to understand the *displacement routes* in an area for which there is not even a map, to *put figures on human tragedies* that are difficult to grasp. We are also looking for ways to get in touch with Raia Mutomboki [‘outraged citizen’, a self-defence group formed in 2011] leaders who are not yet in our directory. In a country where distances are measured in walking days, where 60 kilometres take us from a tropical forest to an icy high plateau at an altitude of more than 3000 metres, where the telephone network does not cover more than 30% of the territory, we should not expect the Grand Chief to have much control over his troops. We therefore need to establish direct contact with the ‘elements’ in the area, those who commit the abuses we hear about. The problem is that the group is splitting up all the time. ... In any case, at this level of fragmentation of a failed armed group, it is unlikely that we can go very far with them in the ‘Protection’ dialogue – inculcating weapons bearers with the rudiments of IHL, and thus hoping to prevent some violations. The work that takes much more time and energy than the field is the one that consists in *translating human tragedies into decipherable and exploitable data* to try to produce an operational response that makes sense. This part is for me much more painful than a motorcycle ride, a shower with a bucket of water, a stinking latrine. The men and women we have seen and listened to will become IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). Their *‘vulnerability thresholds’ will be calculated* based on the food diversity rates that were found

by questioning them. We will *assess the security risk*, we will talk about *costs*, we will question our *strategic anchoring* in the area, we will tear our hair out to solve the nightmarish logistics equation. *We will write reports, we will hold meetings*, we will argue with the Big ICRC Bosses of Kinshasa who hold the key to the cash box. And once we agree among ourselves, we will still have to talk with the other organisations. We'll have to agree on who does what. Everyone will want to plant their flag while sparing themselves sweat and trouble. And after all this, we can go back to the field. We will try to respond to the crisis in the least bad way possible. It will not be perfect. *And then it won't change anything*. But we're not here to change things. We are here just to ensure that *there's a tomorrow for at least some people*. (My own translation – emphasis added)

In a situation where war and violence had become endemic, ICRC delegates like Laura did not hold the utopian belief that justice could be brought to war victims but rather grounded their action in the more realistic one of preventing violations of the law. Laura's narrative highlighted a mode of intervention that primarily consisted of trying to bring order to a chaotic situation via the use of quantitative data ('number of displaced persons'), indicators ('vulnerability threshold'), maps ('displacement routes') as well as legal education ('inculcating weapons bearers with the rudiments of IHL'). These technical tools were used to establish communication with warring parties. The technical language of numbers, indicators and the law were essentially conceived as a method devised to maintain 'neutrality' by projecting an image of impartial objectivity. Indeed, far from taking such 'facts' for granted, Laura was aware of the intense negotiations that the production of statistical evidence entailed. One could sense in her speech a certain level of frustration with the categories ('vulnerability', 'IDPs') mobilised in strategic planning as well as a certain ironic distance from the organisation's managerial mode of operating ('We will hold meetings. We will write reports').

Following her in her daily activities in this desolate and cut-off part of the world only accessible by private planes – although the informal coltan mining business that fed the conflict also made it a strategic landmark of global capitalism – I was curious to understand what kept her going in spite of all the frustrations she expressed. Laura was in her early forties and had worked as a corporate journalist for eight years in different parts of the world, prior to joining the ICRC as a delegate. In spite of her long experience which made her a strong candidate for higher managerial positions, she had chosen to remain on the lower rung of the hierarchical ladder so as to preserve her 'access to the field', where she felt the most 'at home'. As a white European woman with no personal connection to the conflict, Laura embodied the ICRC's local anchorage on the frontlines. Her mere presence 'out there' as an international expatriate in charge of recording violations was institutionally envisaged as a guarantee of protection.

But the local presence of the ICRC also manifested itself more materially through the geographic distribution of administrative infrastructures. It was ensured via the setting-up of a pyramidal structure for its operations, geographically deployed as delegations, sub-delegations and field offices in 'responsibility zones' sub-divided into 'priority zones'. These zones were determined according to factors such as the level of conflict-related vulnerability of populations, the humanitarian consequences incurred by the conflict and the impact of the ICRC's actions. Field offices served as ICRC outposts where international staff would occasionally stay for a few nights during their field visits. According to the evolution of combat zones, and the ICRC's internal

assessment of risks and populations' level of vulnerability, field offices could be relocated elsewhere.

Curiously, the ICRC shares many similarities with the military culture it shadows and tries to control. Like an army, the ICRC respects order, discipline, honour and hierarchy. As in military operations, the selection of zones of intervention relies on the systematic gathering of information related to the presence of armed groups, military forces, NGOs, infrastructures (roads, health posts, footpaths), natural resources and movements of populations. This information, gathered not only by protection teams and ICRC's broad network of informants but also by satellite images, as well as open-source software and occasionally by crowd-sourcing methods,³ is then compiled in quarterly reports and listed on maps regularly updated by experts in Geographic Information Systems. Gathering intelligence and mapping are central strategic activities, which require both technologies and expertise to optimise accuracy.

The ICRC had made the district of Shabunda, where Laura and her Congolese colleague Hippolyte (pseudonym) were periodically deployed, a 'responsibility zone' because the numerous frontlines that separated the Congolese army and the various armed groups that populated the region were major sources of vulnerability for the local inhabitants. The ICRC's physical presence in the zone was made concrete via the ability of protection teams to regularly move along 'axes' whose control was disputed by warring parties. The deployment of protection teams in the field was made tangible via the use of highly visible signposts (flags, vests, stickers with ICRC logo etc.). While other assistance-oriented organisations such as MSF were primarily preoccupied with 'saving lives' in the biological sense (by providing health services or distributing food), the ICRC by contrast sought to prevent death by recording cases of violation and reporting to the concerned authorities in the hope that these warnings would encourage them to use force in a more moderate manner.

The identification of beneficiaries was therefore the result of practices of selection and 'triage' (Nguyen 2010), involving intense reflections on 'lives to be saved and lives to be risked' (Fassin 2007: 500). Over the past three decades, these decisions have been increasingly informed by methods of data collection that have shifted from face-to-face interactions to face-to-screen methods (Donini and Maxwell 2013). The introduction of GIS and new technologies of information and communication (NTIC) together with growing concerns for staff security (Beerli 2018) have made delegates like Laura the exception rather than the rule. The collection of information is no longer the sole responsibility of ICRC field delegates and increasingly relies on the technical expertise of NTIC specialists. As the work of delegates has become more bureaucratic, the responsibility for field presence is more prominently ensured by local staff. In this sense, the recent creation of the new human resource category of 'field delegate' is significant, as it establishes a distinction between delegates holding managerial positions and other delegates with more operational responsibilities.

Technocratisation, together with a feeling of losing sight of the 'field', made many delegates I met during my research wonder about the meaning of their work. As one delegate posted in Medellin told me: 'I spend more time behind my computer entering

³ The ICRC sometimes uses the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap community of volunteers (openstreetmap.org) to digitise the location of buildings and roads in order to draw up accurate maps (<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/interview/2012/mapping-interview-2012-04-05.htm>) Accessed December 2019.

information in the database than in the responsibility zones I am supposed to oversee'. Deep-field postings are generally assigned to new delegates during their first years of work as a means to train them and test their resilience. After this rite of passage, they generally move higher up in the hierarchy and hold positions that no longer require intense periods of fieldwork.

To conclude, presence does not necessarily entail the continuous physical presence of international delegates in war zones and proximity remains selective. Monitoring the conduct of hostilities implies identifying beneficiaries via a process of 'triage' informed by specific methods of data production, legal reasoning as well as strategic priorities. Informed by the humanitarian framework of emergency, the ICRC prioritises relief operations in conflict zones with wounded combatants, prisoners, separated relatives and displaced persons as primary targets. In the DRC, women victims of sexual violence and child soldiers have been added to this list in response to the current priorities of international donors. In other words, the objective of 'saving life' follows the selective logic of categories established by IHL and transnational governance. Because 'humanitarianism is founded on an inequality of lives and hierarchies of humanity' (Fassin 2010: 239), to qualify as a 'victim' for the ICRC requires 'the right to have rights', to use Hannah Arendt's expression (Arendt 1951), that is to say the existence of a legal status enshrined in IHL. In the section that follows, I continue to unpack the principle of proximity, looking in greater detail at various rituals of communication the ICRC initiates with weapon bearers and prison authorities. I discuss how the current trend toward remote control impacts the ICRC's main instrument of protection: confidential dialogue.

From personalised to systemic dialogue

Dialogue as conceived by the ICRC is aimed at reducing the threat to civilians from organised violence. In contexts where IHL is applicable, the ICRC sees threat-reduction as broadly equivalent to increasing compliance with the law. This objective of threat-reduction is mainly achieved through the confidential documentation of violations of IHL and the bilateral presentation of those allegations to the relevant armed groups in order to persuade them to investigate the issue and punish individual violators. Confidential dialogue with the alleged perpetrators of IHL violations is in many contexts the main protection activity. The practice of confidential dialogue derives from the institutional interpretation of neutrality, which entails a commitment to confidentiality and discretion as means to generate access (Bradley 2016).

In their responsibility zone in South Kivu, Laura and Hippolyte could walk for several hours into the deep forest to meet the leader of an armed group. These excursions enabled them not only to evaluate the situation of civilians caught in the crossfire by collecting 'cases of violations', but also to escort the wounded and the sick to the nearest health post. In such cases, ICRC delegates acted as 'human shields' protected by the image of neutrality that the Red Cross symbolised. Their physical presence served to open up a 'humanitarian space' (Acuto 2014) where the core principles of humanitarian action and IHL had to be respected. Cases of violations gathered on the frontline were later used as evidence in the protection dialogue with the military authorities. Even though the ICRC avoided making direct accusations, being able to refer to specific cases reinforced its persuasion power.

A regular interlocutor of Laura in her responsibility zone was Colonel Jack (pseudonym), the commander of a battalion of *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), which patrolled the area. His office was located in a run-down former colonial building made of concrete, the only solid house in the village, beside the ICRC and MSF offices and the hospital. Windowpanes had disappeared. The walls were covered with graffiti. The place looked almost abandoned. Colonel Jack wore civilian clothes and flip-flops: his appearance gave no sign of him being an official of the Congolese army. Courteous and polite, he listened to Laura as she shared with him information related to recent military operations as well as her concerns regarding allegations of violations of IHL committed by his troops she had recently heard of. Badly trained and poorly equipped, the Congolese army presented many similarities with militias: a large part of the troops was composed of former militiamen who had been demobilised and who were involved in arbitrary taxation and arrests. The contrast between Laura's formal language and the state of destitution that surrounded us made me wonder about the meaning of this 'dialogue'. But Colonel Jack took note of her concerns and promised he would investigate the cases she had mentioned, and punish his soldiers if they were found guilty.

At first sight, this discussion appeared to me as a mere performance, a ritual, in which Colonel Jack played the role of the State – an entity which in the DRC largely remained a 'fantasy' (Navaro-Yashin 2002) – and Laura the one of the International Community – which in the aid-scape of the DRC assumed many of the sovereign functions of the state. It is through such interactions that the two categories of the State and the International co-constructed each other and materialised. In other words, 'confidential dialogue' was a major feature of what Liisa Malkki calls 'the transnational ritual sphere', i.e. a space where imaginative practices widespread across the world – such as the one of the State described here – inform humanitarian logics (Malkki 2015: 23). The ritual derived its power from actors taking their role seriously by acting according to their assigned scripts. This attention to protocol and etiquette was particularly noticeable in the attention delegates paid to the way they looked prior to each meeting they held, even in the remotest areas of the Kivus where sanitary infrastructures were seriously lacking. Laura explained:

We try to create a relationship, a rapport, so we need to understand our interlocutors' constraints and their problems. We try to convey the message: 'we are sure that you want to do good, you are someone decent'.

It is the belief in these human connections, rendered significant through the imaginary of the 'benevolent state' and its international corollary and made possible through regular face-to-face encounters that formed the rationale for confidential dialogue as an instrument of protection. The quality of this dialogue was generally assessed via the frequency of interactions between delegates and perpetrators of violations and the measures taken by the perpetrators and those who supervise them to redress the situation. Confidential dialogue was therefore framed as an effort of persuasion whose effectiveness resulted from an individual delegate's negotiation and interpersonal skills.

However, contrary to the early delegates who enjoyed a high degree of freedom in the conduct of their humanitarian mission, Laura did not have such room for manoeuvre. As an ICRC 'old timer' told me while recollecting his experience of visiting Prisoners of Wars (PoWs) during the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988, in addition to the

official reports they produced for camp authorities, which assessed each article of the Third Geneva Convention dealing with PoWs, delegates also wrote more personal reports which were only shared internally, and which did not have to follow any pre-defined template. 'Now, delegates have to fill in the boxes of PROT6!⁴', he lamented. 'There is no room left for them to give their personal impression'.

Indeed, Laura's witnessing had to follow a strict process of rationalisation, via which 'hard facts' were measured and turned into 'data'. According to my research, this part of the work was the one delegates found the most daunting. As human suffering was translated into statistics in order to provide ICRC management with a holistic representation of a situation, and as donors sought to impose their own priorities on the humanitarian organisations they funded, the kind of intimate knowledge ICRC delegates were able to develop through fieldwork and everyday human interactions was gradually losing its importance in favour of quantifiable information.

This trend was equally noticeable in the ICRC's new approach to prison monitoring, which had gradually moved away from people-centred visits (in which interviews of prisoners without witnesses were a standard modality) to a more systemic scrutiny of places of detentions (internally described as 'prison management') where all aspects of a prison system were reviewed (prison management, design, infrastructures). One approach did not necessarily prevent the other and in many cases the ICRC sought to combine the two. But the increased burden of reporting according to the new standards of the 'prison management' approach was a source of frustration for many delegates I talked to. The Head of the Detention Unit at the headquarters described this new trend in the following terms:

Our work in prisons is a bit like assessing the conformity of a company with the SA 8000 standard (standard of social responsibility). Our method of visit follows a procedure quite similar to the one of an auditing firm. If in the past the ICRC would directly fix a prison's water system, now it seeks to understand why the water system is run down so as to provide recommendations to authorities on how to fix the problem.

The argument used for turning to statistics was that numbers strengthened the credibility of the ICRC in its dialogue with authorities. The Head of the Unit for the Protection of Civilian Populations at the time of my research explained that the priority of the organisation was no longer to document cases of IHL violations via detailed individual testimonies of victims. Rather, the ICRC wanted to be able to evaluate the harm and suffering experienced by a civilian population as a whole. In order to produce a reliable representation of a situation, sources of information had to be multiple and include individual testimonies collected by protection delegates (with less details) as well as information collected by other delegates such as FAS (Security and Armed Forces), WEC (Weapon Contamination) and legal officers as well as by GIS and open sources technologies. The objective was to derive trends and patterns that could reveal the causes and circumstances of a specific event. Convinced that a 'dialogue' focused on individual cases was often 'sterile', he held the view that paying attention to 'events' provided a stronger basis for constructive conversation.

⁴ PROT6 is the name of the software used by delegates to store information related to protection issues.

This new form of reporting has transformed the role of protection delegates in significant ways, turning them into data managers able to produce statistics in order to identify trends. If the work of a delegate can be compared with that of an anthropologist, the spontaneous knowledge gained by adopting ‘the native’s point of view’ via experience-near fieldwork methods is necessary to produce generalisable knowledge of a specific context: what Clifford Geertz (1983: 57–58) calls by contrast ‘experience-distant’ knowledge. With the lighter footprint of ICRC protection delegates in the field due to the increased burden of data management tasks, the many unquantifiable human factors through which disorder can be contained are gradually lost from view.

Mastering disorder, maintaining ungovernability

A staff member of the ICRC once compared the war that delegates wage against the chaos of conflict to a form of modern ‘shamanism’.⁵ It was while visiting an exhibition on shamanism entitled ‘Masters of disorder’, showcased at Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in 2012, that he had come to consider delegates in such a manner. Like shamans, delegates could be qualified as ‘Masters of disorder’. Their objective was not to solve disorder, he explained, but rather to manage it so that it would remain a liveable condition. Like shamans, they worked ‘in the dark’, using their own magic knowledge (international law), their own rituals (confidential dialogue) and their own symbol (the red cross) as protective shields against chaos. In his view, while the objective of the United Nations was clearly to establish order, the ICRC operated in the twilight zone of conflict, in the midst of disorder, as ‘a sentinel between the human and the inhuman’ (Ignatieff 1998: 122) with the goal of containing its overflows. By contrast with UN mechanisms where ‘transparency’ was a guiding principle, the cultivation of secrecy by ICRC delegate-shamans was what he believed conferred the audit ritual its ultimate power.

It is out of the scope of this paper to further delve into this metaphor. I nevertheless believe that, in spite of its inadequacy to reflect the exogamous force delegates embody (the shaman being inherently ‘local’), the image of the delegate-shaman captures quite well the minimalistic utopia that the ICRC strives to achieve. Indeed, by contrast to the utopian societies imagined by Plato or Thomas More which share conditions of ‘perpetual peace, guaranteed abundance, and conditioned virtue’ (Georges Kateb quoted in Sarat et al. 2014: 3), the ICRC does not contemplate the implementation of such a holistic form of ‘the good’ (Bear and Mathur 2015). Rather, its actions are informed by the belief that if Evil cannot be eliminated, it can at least be contained. The Geneva Conventions, with their emphasis on the proportional use of force, are a good illustration of this minimalist vision. They reflect the ‘liberalism of fear’ (Schiller 2016) that has guided humanitarianism from its inception, trying to merely stave off terrible evil rather than construct the good life for the world.

Anthropologists of humanitarianism generally conceive humanitarian aid as a distinct mode of governing: a ‘politics of life’ (Fassin 2007), a minimal form of biopolitics (Redfield 2013) or a manifestation of ‘transnational governmentality’ (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) that bears neoliberal and colonial traces. The main argument of these analyses is that humanitarian action represents a form of disciplinary power in Foucault’s

⁵ I thank Claude Bruderlein, adviser to the President of the ICRC, for sharing this metaphor with me.

sense, a form of government that relies on moral sentiments, the defence of a cause ('humanity') and the selection of specific lives to save (refugees, AIDS patients, children) by contrast to other less deserving ones. Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (2010: 6) argue that humanitarian interventions are inherently ambiguous: while establishing 'humanity' as an object of care leads to protective measures, it simultaneously justifies the elaboration of new governing techniques in order to contain the potential threats it represents to the nation-state or global peace. Therefore, scholars of humanitarianism generally apprehend humanitarian governance as a hegemonic and coercive regulatory regime that finds its most emblematic embodiment in the refugee camp: a site of both safety and constraint, in which people once labelled 'refugees' are maintained in a permanent 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005).

While acknowledging some of these disciplinary dynamics, the material presented here slightly departs from such totalising conceptions by highlighting the partial and fragmented nature of humanitarianism as a world-making project. Indeed, the ICRC's mode of action, far from representing a holistic biopolitical enterprise, rather leads to maintaining 'ungovernability' (Dewachi 2017) through minimalistic bureaucratic intervention and communication rituals. The turn to quantification simultaneously makes the moral sentiments which foreground its legitimacy largely impossible to materialise in practice.

Protection as threat reduction implicates the quest for 'matters of fact' that are institutionally certified as objective. This quest results from the jurido-political pursuit of accountability in monitoring practices, which requires predictability of future scenarios. The bureaucratic artefacts that best represent this minimalistic logic are the PoWs index cards now stored at the ICRC Museum. These cards, used during the First World War to record prisoners' names, nationality and military status, as well as information about their possible transfer from one camp to another, were established to protect them from disappearance. Even though such administrative procedures did not lead to major transformations in the sense that power remained in the hands of warring factions, their modest efficacy was the product of their simplicity. As Nayanika Mathur (2015) argues in her study of the Indian developmental state, red tape often leads to underperformance or even outright failure. In the case of the ICRC, paperwork reflects the modest institutional promise of preventing the fall into oblivion.

Indeed, by monitoring the conduct of hostilities, the ICRC does not aim to make life more meaningful for those caught in crossfire but rather to make the war zone a liveable space for categories of people protected by the law. Paradoxically, by doing so, the ICRC indirectly participates in the normalisation of policies that use the narratives of 'ungovernability' and 'resilience' to justify neglect, dispossession and abandonment (Marei et al. 2018).

While this minimalistic approach mirrors broader patterns of transnational politics, the requirements of 'evidence-based programming' imposed by donors have further amplified this trend. Monitoring the frontlines remains the ICRC's main responsibility. However, the organisation is equally responsible for monitoring its own activities and for making itself accountable to its donors and the wider public. This imperative means that increasing resources are devoted to data collection that does not only serve the purpose of 'protection' but equally serves the one of accountability.

The burden of impact measurement has deeply transformed the way protection work is carried out. Indeed, it has led the ICRC to reconfigure its relationship with its own interlocutors in war zones, requiring prison and military personnel to establish

internal procedures of control. By persuading authorities to develop their own indicators, the ICRC can replace its practice of checking their policies and actions with authorities' self-checking. As Sally Engle Merry argues in the context of the increasing use of indicators in human rights monitoring:

the burden of assessment rests on the indicator itself, with its agreed-on standards and means of measurement ... Responsibility for compliance shifts to the monitored organisation, corporation, or country itself, which must not only seek to comply but also monitor and report the success of its efforts. The enforcement body moves away from the role of an authority imposing criticisms to a body that registers performance in terms of already-established indicators. (2011: 88)

Conclusion

The new standards of monitoring the ICRC has established have many similarities to those found in other 'audit cultures' (Strathern 2000), where those audited are increasingly taking responsibility in the audit process. The fact that the ICRC is actively involved in supporting governments in the creation of national IHL committees, commissions of inquiry within armies, prisoners' complaint mechanisms in detention facilities, national commissions for the disappeared and IHL training programmes for armed forces is a good illustration of this logic.

As Marilyn Strathern points out, audits present themselves as a means to uphold values that are impossible to argue with (objectivity, transparency) so that those audited cannot object to it directly without being seen as having something to hide. Yet these 'rituals of verification' (Power 1999) require the introduction of performance indicators according to which only some issues are considered relevant. In a more pernicious way still, repeated assessments tend to create consensus on what counts and what does not count as 'valid knowledge'. In this sense, the tensions experienced by ICRC delegates are symptomatic of a shift in the way the organisation conceives its role as 'guardian of the Geneva Conventions', moving away from its original direct witness status in war zones to embrace a more technocratic approach to 'civilised wars' where 'humanity' is measured according to quantifiable benchmarks.

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Les maîtres du désordre : rituels de communication et de surveillance au sein du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge

La mission confiée au CICR par les Conventions de Genève est d'agir en tant que « gardien du droit humanitaire international » dans les zones de conflit. Alors que ses opérations humanitaires ont contribué à forger la réputation internationale de l'organisation, sa fonction de surveillance est bien moins connue du grand public. Dans cet article, je m'intéresse particulièrement aux activités menées par les délégués du CICR pour protéger diverses catégories de victimes en temps de guerre. En me concentrant sur leurs interprétations des principes de « neutralité », d'« impartialité » et de « confidentialité » qui guident leurs actions, je cherche à décrypter la vision du monde de cette organisation. Je souligne les espoirs, mais aussi les déceptions et les frustrations, générés par la multitude de procédés administratifs élaborés pour encourager les parties prenantes d'un conflit à s'engager dans un « dialogue confidentiel » sur la conduite des hostilités. Enfin, je démontre comment ces procédés, fondés sur l'espoir d'une communication possible, évoluent, sous l'influence de pressions externes, vers une « programmation basée sur des données probantes », transformant la protection personnalisée et au cas par cas en une « culture de l'audit » qui s'appuie sur des données statistiques. Paradoxalement, le recours aux chiffres pour concrétiser l'utopie d'une « guerre humaine » conduit en définitive à reléguer au second plan les « êtres humains » qui devraient en bénéficier.

Mots clés bureaucratie, action humanitaire, audit, quantification, technocratie