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The Business of Being Good: How it Pays to Be a Humanitarian State

Taylor Benjamin-Britton
Lehigh University, mtb416@lehigh.edu

Danielle Scherer
Temple University, danielle.scherer@temple.edu

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

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Research Panel: The State and the Refugee Regime

Presenters: Taylor Benjamin-Britton, Lehigh University; Danielle Scherer, Temple University

Title: The Business of Being Good: How It Pays to Be a Humanitarian State

Abstract:

In an era where human rights increasingly take a position of primacy in international relations, certain states have donned the mantle of the humanitarian, prioritizing human rights over nearly every other item on the foreign policy agenda and mainstreaming humanitarianism in other areas of foreign policy.

Existing arguments find that states that advance humanitarian policies are coerced, socialized, or mimicking, but they fail to seriously consider that states may choose and benefit from humanitarianism in several ways. We do not focus on explaining or theorizing why states have chosen to engage in humanitarianism; rather, we offer an analysis of the potential benefits of doing so that make it a viable policy choice.

Humanitarian national policy certainly strengthens reputation, but that reputation also has the potential to create access to economic and security benefits not available to other states. Additionally, states and state leaders gain domestic political benefits from advancing humanitarian goals.

In this paper, we explore the case of Norway and how its position as humanitarian state in the international community has afforded it a leadership position in international relations with the capacity to shun the interests of even the most powerful states in favor of its humanitarian aims.

About the presenters:

Taylor Benjamin-Britton is a visiting assistant professor at Lehigh University.

Danielle Scherer is assistant director of global studies at Temple University.