HUMANITARIAN AID

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Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

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The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

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As a response both to a social need and the search for meaning that few other types of action are able to fulfil, and as an antidote - or rather a counterpoint - to the sight of suffering, humanitarian action, and indeed the whole humanitarian issue, have now become omnipresent. Humanitarian action has recently been banished to the outskirts of social action and tainted with suspicion; it is currently threatened by its own success, as a result of which it is gradually being reduced to a simple public relations technique or just one among a panoply of diplomatic tools. If the inescapable denaturalization caused by the opportunistic use of humanitarian action is to be curbed and its use as a screen between the people and politics avoided, (in other words if humanitarian action is to become a source of and not a censorship of reflection), we need to go much further than the parable of the Good Samaritan in an attempt to demarcate the scope and content of this unusual form of action. Let us start with a definition: a humanitarian action is one which aims to preserve life while respecting dignity, to restore their capacity to choose to those who have been deprived of it by circumstances. The action is carried out pacifically and without discrimination by organisms acting, to the exclusion of all other considerations, in the name of "principles of humanity, human rights and the requirements of public conscience" ("principes d'humanité, du droit des gens et des exigences de la conscience publique") to use the deliberately vague yet precise terms of the Geneva Convention.

This teleological phraseology consequently implies that the humanitarian project can only be defined by its ends, seen as a whole, and not by the various parts that make up that whole. In accepting this we highlight the importance of intention which, unlike in politics, is put on a level with the results of any action. We recognise that the objective of humanitarian assistance is not to transform a society, as is the case with other forms of international solidarity, but rather to help the members of that society through a critical period marked by the disruption of previous stability. We also take it for granted that there is a universal morality based upon the principle of equal dignity among men. Finally, we assert the special status of independent organisations whose purpose is solely humanitarian, and in doing so we question the ambiguous role of any government intervention.

From Charity to Benevolence

There has been such a boom in humanitarian action over the last twenty years that many see it as a relatively new phenomenon, a product of post totalitarian modernity. The increase in independent associations, the developments in international humanitarian law, the creation of humanitarian military troops by governments and humanitarian departments by international institutions (the European Union and the UN) all bear witness to the scale of a movement which is closely linked to political developments and ideas in the West. Although the feelings and acts of compassion are not the property of any one culture, only in Europe have they been invested with a universal content and vocation in which compassion is based on shared sensitivity and vulnerability, and is extended far beyond the Christian community or even the community of "God's creatures". Although this is a relatively recent evolution of the last two centuries its origins lie in the long history of the Church and the influence of the Enlightenment. In fact there are four main themes which interweave to form the historical backdrop upon which the various forms of mutual aid and benevolence have been sketched out: the power struggle between the Church and the

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princes of Europe, with the former asserting its authority over the latter; the Christian notion of "human nature" as a product of divine creation and as the foundation of an existential equality among men; the development of social interdependence, the strengthening of centralised state power, and the transformations of a driving economy (with its ever-increasing constraints) arising from it; finally, humanism and the Reformation which recognized individual action and judgement, and the Enlightenment which secularized charity in the name of benevolence and fraternity.

Thus everything was in place at the beginning of the 19th century for the dawn of the modern era of humanitarian activity born out of a process which combined both tradition and rupture; charity, respectful of providential order, and rebellion against the fatality of suffering. This modern concept conveyed its contemporary double signification of the ideal of social progress and equality on the one hand, and organized aid activity on the other. State to State humanitarian aid, public opinion campaigns in favour of a cause (particularly for the Christians in the Ottoman Empire), and in the last quarter of the century, the Red Cross (the first private organisation with a specifically humanitarian mandate), all made their first appearance during this period.

The first "information revolution" based on the rotary-press - telegraph - railway triptych was one of the most prominent features of the contemporary context, marked as it was by a revival in European expansion which had been considerably reduced since the Vienna congress in 1815. During the second half of the century nearly forty million Europeans set out for new lands as part of a movement which was not only convinced of the cultural superiority of Europe and its mission to bring civilisation to those territories, but was also in search of raw materials and protected markets that would reinforce the home country's position as a world power. Humanitarian feeling flourished in a shrunken world where technological progress had brought the far-flung adventures that were being carried out in its name to the avid attention of "public opinion". Florence Nightingale has gone down in history for having organised the British Army's first aid services for Her Majesty's soldiers during the Crimean War (1853-56), a particularly bloody and barbaric campaign which was strongly criticized in the British press. At the same time, the Grand Duchess of Russia organised nursing support in the Russian camp, whilst the "soeurs de la charité" looked after the French troops.

However, the real modern innovation was the invention of the Red Cross. In June 1859 Henri Dunant, a Swiss citizen and ardent philanthropist witnessed the carnage of the battle of Solferino and the agony of tens of thousands of soldiers who were abandoned to their suffering on the battlefield. The "International committee of first aid for wounded soldiers" ("Comité international de secours aux militaires blessés") that he imagined came into being in 1863 and the first Geneva Convention for the improvement of the fate of wounded soldiers in campaigning armies was signed by 16 governments in 1864. Until then first aid for the wounded had been left up to the discretion of the belligerents who reached ad hoc agreements on the respect of any health care installations. The Geneva Convention represented the first permanent intergovernmental agreement of a humanitarian nature to be adopted during peacetime which was open to all states and created an inviolable circle around any system of first aid by giving it neutral status. From then on the preservation of an area of humanity at the heart of the torment of war became a legal obligation applicable at all times in all places.

From European Wars to Third World Conflicts

War law was immediately confronted with an insurmountable contradiction. The "oases of humanity and reconciliation" that it is supposed to define are areas of reconstitution of the combating forces, resources at the disposition of the warring spirit. The notion that the cruelty of any conflict is proportional to its duration was not lacking in support in the military circles of the

turn of the century. Hence, so they said, a short and violent war that sets aside humanitarian principles is better than a conflict which is dragged out in the name of the respect of humanitarian duties. This observation, which is still pertinent, has been raised once more nearly a century later in relation to humanitarian intervention in both Somalia and Bosnia. Sadly this fundamental contradiction in humanitarian aid is generally ignored because of the intellectual dilemma and moral conflict it engenders when on the contrary it would be better to take its existence and the unfortunate consequences into account in an effort to reduce their impact, without being lulled into the thinking that they can be eliminated.

This observation, which refer to the economics of conflicts, is accompanied by another one linked to their political evolution. Humanitarian conventions originate from two essential principles put forward by Grotius (the father of international public law - *Concerning the Law of War and Peace*, 1625) and Rousseau: the limitation of war strictly to military necessity and the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. These principles, which were appropriate during the time of duel-wars that set two armies at odds at an agreed time and place have now been demolished by the appearance of total warfare.

If the First World War gave the Red Cross the opportunity to prove the effectiveness of humanitarian aid which had enlarged its field of activity to include the protection of prisoners and civilians, it also tolled the bell for an epoch which was the brief golden age of humanitarian action. The rise of Hitler's and Stalin's totalitarianism confronted humanitarian organisations with a tragic dilemma that was to last until after the Second World War: were they to try and carry out their mission and risk becoming the instrument of a tyrannical power, or refuse to accept all compromise thus condemning themselves to inaction? Having reached its high point during this period - remember the Red Cross's guided tour of the Theresienstadt ghetto - the dilemma continues to pose a problem at the end of the 20th century not only in numerous internal conflicts where the distinction between civilians and combatants is no longer clear simply because the combatants are armed civilians, but also, and moreover, in those conflicts where the civilian population represents the main prize at stake, as in both Rwanda and Bosnia.

The emergence of the Third World brought new life to humanitarian activity. The Biafran War (1968-70), which was both the first large scale relief operation and first famine to gain extensive media coverage, vividly illustrated the strengths and the limits of contemporary humanitarian action. With enormous difficulty and thanks to great acts of courage, hundreds of thousands of people were given months of relief by voluntary workers organized in "expeditionary relief corps" that brought together a variety of relief agencies, both religious and secular. By setting the Nigerian federal army and the Biafran independence forces; two political forces whose alliances shattered the naive ideological blue prints of the cold war period, at odds with one another, the Biafran War defied all conventional description. As the anti-imperialist rhetoric, the political Esperanto of the post-colonial years, was unable to account for this war, the only bridge between the conflict and the rest of the world was the pity inspired and maintained by the images from the bush. The Biafran leaders understood this only too well, and tried to milk the sole means of international mobilisation at their disposal; the famine, by deliberately exaggerating the consequences of the military blockade of their territory. If they were unable to draw international sympathy for their cause, at least they could inspire pity for their martyrs. The French government meanwhile was anxious not to miss out on a windfall opportunity to weaken the English-speaking regional giant and encouraged the intransigence of the separatists by providing them with both diplomatic assistance and a certain amount of equipment in the name of humanitarian action.

If the programme of relief for the sufferings of the human condition is one of the main themes of modernity, this last quarter of a century has been marked by an ever-increasing dilation of the sentiment of pity. The combination during the seventies of the decline of political utopias and the upsurge in television opened up a whole new field for the type of engagement in the name of

public good that humanitarian action represents. That was when Africa erupted into western households in the image of an emaciated child and the figure of the humanitarian hero as agent and witness, as mediator of public emotion and spokesman for the silent masses made his first appearance.

The Politics of Pity

Of course political use of distress is not exclusively linked to the existence of images. The boarding and sinking of slave trade ships by the British navy, French troops coming to the aid of those Christians who had survived the Druse pogroms in the Lebanon, and French colonization in general already combined the defence of a humanitarian ideal with the assertion of will to power as early as the 19th century. Similarly, during the 1921 famine in the Soviet Union, which was a direct consequence of "war communism", Lenin used international aid to ensure the survival and hasten the recognition of the young Bolshevik regime. For better or for worse, it is true that the advent of television, and the real-time, visual era initiated by the rapidly hegemonic reign of this emotive medium has enormously extended the political lever that images of misfortune represent.

The sight of suffering, i.e. the observation of distress by those that are untouched by it on the one hand, and the distinction between fortunate and unfortunate people, or those that are suffering and those that are not, on the other hand are the basis of what Hannah Arendt sees as the politics of pity (*On Revolution*, 1963). In this respect, a fundamental distinction needs to be made between pity and compassion. Compassion expresses itself in the singular towards suffering beings, it "only speaks when we have to directly respond to the expressive sounds and gestures through which suffering makes itself seen and heard by the world", which is why it is not "loquacious". The emotion at its root has little room for manoeuvre, and does not make itself heard. Pity, on the contrary, moves out of the private sphere, makes generalizations and publicly declares itself "as an emotion, as a sentiment" against which acts are to be weighed up.

In this movement that exposes the sentiment in its raw state sensibility becomes sentimentality, and emotion becomes sentimentalism (Anne-Marie Roviello, *Sens commun et modernité chez Hannah Arendt*, Ed. Ousia, Brussels, 1987). Transposed as it is into the public domain, this "law of the heart" ignores the diversity of real human beings and the ensuing necessity for political institutions. It cuts out mediations and reduces society into an undifferentiated mass of rightful claimants, of suffering beings defined by their deficiencies. Paradoxically, we find this same excess of sentiment, this devouring philanthropy as an element of goodness (A.M. Roviello, ibid.) in which Arendt sees the origins of both Robespierre's cruelty and the Terror, in the new configuration made up of the ebb in politics, the televisualization of the world and the politics of pity which finds its public expression in victim rhetoric. This rhetoric simply points at suffering, detaches it from its political and social roots and hence gives all types of distress equal significance: famines, exclusion, ethnic cleansing, floods, pogroms, epidemics, political aggression, are all grouped under the metaphysical heading of the misfortunes of our times, and thus appear to be part of nature. Hence the curious expression - typical of victim rhetoric - "humanitarian crisis", a term which appeared during the nineties to designate the replacement of political intervention by the activities of professional fix-it men on the site of any upheaval, whatever its nature.

The recent boom in humanitarian action that began with the Biafran war should also be interpreted as the reappearance of the politics of pity. Not as the beginning of a new bloody tyranny of virtue, but as an alternative to the politics of justice whose interests it helps to disguise. Indeed, as Luc Boltanski (*La souffrance à distance*, Métailié, Paris, 1993) reminds us; "in the politics of pity, the urgency of the action needed to put an end to the suffering in question always holds sway over

considerations of justice" ("Pour une politique de la pitié l'urgence de l'action à mener pour faire cesser les souffrances invoquées l'emporte toujours sur la considération de la justice"). Of course, the feeling of pity and the requirements of justice cannot be placed on methodically opposing registers if we do not want to give way to other ideological simplifications. "With all their morals, men would never have been anything more than monsters, if nature had not given them pity to reinforce reason" ("Avec toute leur morale, les hommes n'eussent jamais été que des monstres, si la nature ne leur eût donné la pitié à l'appui de la raison") as Rousseau rightly pointed out (*Discourse on the Inequalities of Men*, Part One, 1754), and we can no longer ignore the convergence of the workers movement and the philanthropic movement that were at the roots of the welfare state in Europe. But in this case an important parameter comes into play: proximity, which introduces the sharing of a common ground in understanding and action between those that are giving and those that are receiving. This parameter does not exist in international humanitarian aid which is characterised by the "often radical difference [...] between the social characteristics" (l' "altérité souvent radicale [...] entre les propriétés sociales") of the two sides (Boltanski, ibid), which is why one cannot treat the links between the politics of pity and the politics of justice in the same manner within the institutional framework of the nation and in the chaotic world of international relations.

The Ethics of Refusal

One fundamental point remains true; any process of political intervention through which pity could lead to justice set aside, the duty to assist a person in danger must not be revoked in the name of a promise of future justice. The far-reaching measures that need to be taken - supposing that these are accessible - in order to eliminate the causes of the threat should not obliterate its reality. The very nature of humanitarian action, both its main strength and its structural limitation, is that it can only be deployed in the present to take care of suffering bodies. Aid workers have a pressing moral obligation to be circumspect about this premise, to be aware of the risk that a programme be turned against those it is designed to help. But this moral duty is generally ignored because the humanitarian movement seems fairly closed to the ethical side of refusal. "Oh, Why didn't we ever say no!" Solzhenitsyn wonders throughout *The Gulag Archipelago*, reminding us that assent can contain abnegation, and refusal, courage, and moreover underlining, as did Hannah Arendt in "*Report on the Banality of Evil*" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963) that mechanical obedience is simply a form of unavowed support, a suspension of judgement and as such it is one of the necessary conditions of horror. When refusal to be resigned to the fatality of misfortune is transformed into subservience to the demands of pity, humanitarian action is reduced to an operational routine, a technique which is blind because it is disassociated from the "ethics of solicitude" ("éthique de la sollicitude") (Paul Ricœur). By becoming an end in itself, it lends itself to all forms of political instrumentalization.

The genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda (1994) and the famine in Ethiopia (1984) provide a terrible illustration of the blindness and cynicism that victim rhetoric contains.

One could easily have suspected that the famine that was decimating the population of the high Abyssinian plateaus was due more to the "dekulakisation" strategy (according to the term used by the Ethiopian authorities) and to the internal war against Tigrean and Eritrean resistance fighters than to the drought and locusts that the official version blamed. However, the sheer size of the crisis justified the prevalence of the rescue imperative over the denunciation imperative, at least in the immediate future. But this was not the case in 1985 when the government started a huge programme of population resettlement whose violence became the first cause of mortality, over and above the food shortage whose effects had already been more or less resolved. As in the USSR and China earlier, the huge project for the construction of a "new man" was under way, but

this time it was with the active support of humanitarian aid, which was used both as a population trap and a supplier of logistic means. The brutal separation of families, the destruction of villages, and mass abductions from aid centres were common scenes. Far from inciting protest from the community of aid workers, this murderous policy received their albeit passive approval. Over one hundred and fifty thousand people fell victim to this perfect crime, carried out right in the middle of a huge celebration of solidarity.

How can we explain that members of humanitarian associations and diplomats, economists from the World Bank and free-lance journalists were all blinded to the point where they found themselves taking up positions which seemed similar to those of a political power engaged in a totalitarian project? The arguments for the preservation of their institutions and ideological fraternity were certainly partly responsible, but they simply served to reinforce a stronger link, one which united the voluntary worker, the technocrat and the commissioner in a common supportive role; the victim rhetoric.

Humanitarian Newspeak

By cutting out all intermediaries, this rhetoric of pity establishes a direct, exclusive link between a certain number of general causes, which are either sufficiently global to be true or vague enough to be acceptable, and an unlimited number of individual effects: the vulnerability of an under-developed rural region, the absurdity of war, the cruelty of nature, the thirst for justice, history as the progress of reason, the right to life... These all make up a repertoire of truths from which particular explanations and treatments are drawn. How do we explain the extent of the famine? The drought, locusts and international inertia. Where does the absolute need for the transfer of populations come from? Soil erosion and the need to rationalize the offer of services. What are the reasons for the lack of food and blankets, the insufficient means of transport for provisions? The indifference of powerful nations. Each effect has its cause, each problem its solution; such is the credo of social engineering in both its assisting and totalitarian aspects by rights of which a bloody charade was carried out right before the eyes of the whole world, without anyone knowing.

Ten years separate the famine in Ethiopia and the genocide in Rwanda; ten years that saw the breakdown of the communist system. Private humanitarian activity, whose period of rapid development coincided with the decline of the workers movement in the seventies, is now no longer alone. With the new international order born of the fall of the Berlin Wall, state humanitarian activity made its debut. The Ministry for Humanitarian Action in France, the European Community's Humanitarian Office, the Department for Humanitarian Action at the United Nations; new institutions have been created whilst old ones have been transformed and strengthened. Alongside the more traditional operations (Salvador, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Western Sahara among others) a new type of international intervention has appeared which combines the principles of peacekeeping and security with the objectives of urgent relief work (Iraqi-Kurdistan, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda). The end of the cold war, like the aftermath of all previous wars, was hailed with a cry of "Never again!". Our world has apparently become a vast panoptic in which no corner can escape the camera's eye and no national power could ever again play host to huge massacres.

Nevertheless, as in Ethiopia, the inflation of humanitarian rhetoric and the racing motor of the humanitarian machinery took over from the more traditional means of shutting out reality. Which is why, in Rwanda, we were able to sit in live on a genocide carried out by a regime with considerable support from France, and then take part, under the cover of humanitarian aid, in the recovery in the refugee camps of Zaire and Tanzania of what turned out to be a sanctuary for the very armed forces responsible for the massacres. Having been renamed a "humanitarian crisis" by

the UN (Security Council resolution 929, June 22nd 1994) the genocide had *ipso facto* become commonplace; it had been relegated to the ranks of the international equivalent of a sorrowful local-interest news story in which it would be inappropriate to take sides. Once it was perceived as a natural catastrophe the genocide merited emergency services treatment and an ambulance policy: the state crime had become a medical emergency and the logistics of humanitarian aid fell like a curtain before the mass graves.

The 1948 United Nations Convention on the repression and the prevention of genocide had given the international community the right to intervene to stay the executioner's hand, and humanitarian moral duty required that this be done. But humanitarian activism, the ultimate ruse of cynical politics, enabled governments to side-step their duty and at the same time hold their heads up high and congratulate themselves on this new demonstration of international solidarity. Bustling relief activity in high publicity crises, which seems to fill the international political horizon, is a response to the deliberate ignoring of other crises which are either too sensitive for the politicians (Chechenia) or too remote for the media exploitation (Sudan, Afghanistan). The "pure, full, round meanings, the perfect intelligibility of reality" (les "significations pures, pleines et rondes, l'intelligibilité parfaite du réel") (R. Barthes, *Mythologies*) that the sight of a humanitarian convoy in a disaster stricken region represents are a lifesaver for political powers threatened by the void left by the post cold-war period. Deprived of their communist foil, they are now confronted with the very same values that they themselves have been flaunting, and have found the symbolic instrument they were lacking on the back of the humanitarian bandwagon.
This is a dismal picture, that consideration of humanitarian treatment of the war in ex-Yugoslavia does nothing to lift. The symmetric embargo placed on the aggressors and the besieged, as well as the humanitarian house-arrest of UN peace troops were a clear indication from the outset of the war of Europe and the United Nations' intention to make no differentiation: on the one hand there are victims, whatever their origin, and on the other there are warmongers, whatever their camp. This sentimentalism, which once more allows political choice to be submerged in a liturgy of calamity, is at the root of two types of particularly worrying consequences. First on the political front, it places UN soldiers in an unreal world, in a diplomatic illusion which is condemned to failure. Secondly, as far as humanitarian principles are concerned, the main stakes are subtly shifted from the duty to protect civilian populations to the problem of humanitarian convoy safety: long live humanitarian action, and let men perish, could be the reaction when we notice that the expansion of humanitarian rhetoric goes hand in hand with a toughening of social relations as if, when it comes down to it, we were dealing with reparation, or its spectacular imitation : collective consolation.

The Humanitarian and the Political

However, if the success of esteem that humanitarian action has gained is the reason why it has been adopted by politics, it also constitutes a breach in cold state reasoning, a chink through which ethical demands are able to infiltrate the domain of the calculation of interests. Thus distinguishing between humanitarian and political is not simply a matter of contrasting the transparency of a virtuous action with the opaqueness of a power strategy, the warm enthusiasm of civil society with the cold calculations of States. Rather, on a another level, we have to take differences in nature into account: the man that humanitarian action addresses is not a political animal, but a being who is negatively defined. In response to the question "What is man?", humanitarian philosophy replies that he was not made in order to suffer. This rules out any balancing out in the form of sacrifices: no victim can be deliberately abandoned in favour of another, any more than a life today can be weighed up against a future one, or the relieving of suffering here allows us to put up with neglect elsewhere. Of course, a limit in resources means that choices have to be made, but the logic and constraints of action do not alter the basis of the

humanitarian vision which by definition ignores the considerations of time and space that politics adheres to.

If these two levels of action are confused, then we court the joint discrediting of both humanitarian action and politics. Politics is moved from the realm of deliberation and responsibility to that of deploration and charity. The demand for justice is submerged in the rhetoric of goodness and humanitarian action is reduced to a public relations tool which is judged according to its media performance. In other words, the aspiration for universality is perverted in the illusion of all-powerfulness, and the other is confined in an extreme otherness whereby the haves and the have-nots, the strong and the weak, those who show their benevolent solicitude and those who receive it are all frozen in their respective, unchanging situations. Of course, the inherent ambiguity of humanitarian activity cannot be overcome, unless the actual problems at its origin have been resolved. But in refusing to distinguish between Antigone's and Creon's two moral philosophies, humanitarian activity risks seeing itself personified by quite another figure; that of Tartuffe.