Is Humanitarianism a form of Political Commitment ?

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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.

The *Centre de reflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) was created by Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999. Its objective is to encourage debate and critical reflexion on the humanitarian practices of the association.

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.

Is Humanitarianism a form of Political Commitment ?

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Is humanitarianism a form of political commitment? Is the demand for the relief of human distress, now a distinctive feature of western modernity, in itself a political programme? Is the exposure and highlighting of silent suffering and hidden misfortune, a role claimed by humanitarian organisations, in itself the adoption of a political position? Is the determination of humanitarian volunteers to give substance and voice to people who have lost everything, the embryo of a new political ethics? These questions, resulting from the remarkable expansion of this type of action over the last 15 years, have provoked a hasty and positive response. The 'morality of urgency', we are told, has brought about the reinvention of a politics aimed at minimising misfortune, a focus far beyond the inhuman logic of power, lies and vicissitudes of ideology. This new morality rejects the ideological distinction between good and bad victims, combines relief with denunciation and a cry of alarm, and presents itself as an ethical neo-realism, a new method in politics.

A new citizenship?

The advent of the audio-visual era in the 1970s, just as much as the political crisis resulting from the decline of the workers' movement, gradually enabled humanitarian action to emerge from its confinement in the wings and take its place at the forefront of the social stage. As politics lost its appeal as a source of change in a society increasingly devoid of meaning, the scepticism that had marked humanitarian activity gave way to a growing faith; disdain turned to praise. 'Total morality' replaced the 'total politics' of the post-war period; humanitarianism made its entry into international forums, settled itself in the corridors of power and even penetrated the military establishment.

The fall of communism may have created the conditions for a new interventionism with a humanitarian face, and even for the formation of military-humanitarian contingents, but the development of non-governmental aid organisations had begun much earlier. Most of the hundreds of thousands of NGOs that exist today were founded in the 1970s and 80s. There are nearly 300,000 'charities' in Great Britain, representing almost 5% of the nation's GDP. In France, the voluntary sector is rather more loosely knit but dominated, as in other European countries, by a dozen 'heavyweights' accounting for three-quarters of the global volume of resources and initiatives. The same phenomenon is found in the United States, where expansion began in the 1960s. This proliferation is not confined to the industrialised countries: there are 10,000 registered local NGOs in Bangladesh, over 20,000 in the Philippines and nearly 100,000 in Brazil, while it is estimated that 30% of Kenya's capital growth comes from the same type of village based associations. Some of these organisations are mere extensions of state power; some simply act as collection agencies for international development aid funds; others, despite their stated social objective, have no more than a decorative purpose. This does not affect the fundamentals though. Indeed, this global expansion demonstrates the unplanned appearance, on the back of a crisis of the welfare state, of new, non-partisan actor-mediators, the most high profile of which are Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Médecins Sans Frontières. They are as diverse and contradictory as the traditional political and religious bodies from which they derive certain attributes, and readily perceive themselves - although not without disagreements - as the crucible of a new citizenship.

Those holding political power could not remain indifferent to such success. As the Cold War drew to a close, new entities were set up: a ministry of humanitarian action in France, a European Commission Office of Humanitarian Action (ECHO), a United Nations Department of Humanitarian Action (DHA) and humanitarian departments in many European governments. These

organisations are intended to extend the movement's extraordinary international ascendancy within an institutional framework.

Historically, Protestant democracies paved the way at a time when Europe, emboldened by its scientific and technical advances, considered itself master of a world that had been spatially reduced by the telegraph and the steam engine. Most of the organisations that exist today originated directly or indirectly from 19th century movements in Britain, Switzerland and the United States. Currents of Quaker thought, English then American, formed the matrix from which emerged, over the following two centuries, most of the great philanthropic organisations. These ranged from anti-slavery societies to solidarity movements, their mandate, actions and activities extending from the claim for universal civil rights to initiatives designed to promote solidarity. The Swiss, inspired by the ardent Calvinist Henri Dunant, founded the Red Cross, which still dominates the humanitarian movement throughout the world.

The French perspective

Although France under Napoleon III played a leading role in the diplomatic conferences that would give birth to humanitarian law of which the Red Cross is the international representative, its own international humanitarian pedigree is very short. Unlike the other founder democracies, it has only developed an autonomous humanitarian movement in the last 30 years. The ancient and conflicting divide of public welfare between the Catholic Church and the state, which ensured that the duties of civil society were mediated by centralising institutions, may explain this apparent 'delay'.

The 1793 Constitution states that 'public assistance is a sacred debt. Society must support unfortunate citizens, either by procuring work for them or by ensuring that those who cannot work are provided with the means to live.' The Enlightenment secularised charity work under the auspices of good deeds and fraternity and thus articulated the principle of the welfare state that was to emerge and develop over the course of the following century. When the word humanitarian appeared at the beginning of the 19th century in France, it denoted an intellectual disposition inspired by philanthropic socialism rather than a form of action. A humanitarian was someone who professed his benevolence toward humanity in general, his confidence in the ability of the human race to improve itself. Until decolonisation, initiatives continued to be launched for the most part by the state and the Church. Whereas other countries had developed a wider infrastructure of humanitarian assistance, responsibility for such action in France and its empire lay with the Sisters of Charity and welfare workers at first, with missionaries and military doctors later on.

The independent, French humanitarian movement is therefore a recent, postcolonial phenomenon, triggered by the Biafran war, and like any newcomer, differentiated itself from the traditions of its predecessors, whether famous or anonymous. Going beyond the Sword and the Church, it renewed and rejuvenated the aid landscape through the power of the media and particularly television, which was then in the process of international expansion. The use of the media to mobilise people was certainly nothing new, but using it as a tool for denunciation constituted a break with the tradition of respect for authority and proprieties that had prevailed until that time.

The Red Cross medical staff sent to Nigeria in 1967 found themselves in the thick of a total war waged by the Nigerian army against the Biafrans, who were a mixture of insurgents and civilians. They were reminded of one of the darkest episodes in the history of humanitarian action: the silence of the International Red Cross during the Second World War and its docility when confronted with the manoeuvres and manipulations of the Nazis in the Theresienstadt ghetto and the concentration camps. Convinced they were witnessing yet another genocide, the doctors

refused to conform to a pattern of passive complicity. At the urging of Bernard Kouchner, they took the decision to break the oath of silence observed by the venerable Swiss institution.

The misreading of the situation by the doctors, working in increasingly violent and devastating conditions, matters little here. The Nigerian authorities had in fact no intention of carrying out a policy of extermination and the massacres stopped as soon as the Biafran army agreed to lay down its arms. Rather, it is the fact that, faced with such horror, the doctors abandoned the principle of impartiality engraved in the marble of humanitarian tradition. The essential politico-humanitarian innovation of that moment was the decision to bear public witness to the unacceptable, to reject diplomatic caution, to denounce the executioners and stand - physically and morally - by the side of the victims.

As we have seen, the claim for the right to 'humanitarian free speech', virtually ignored in an era still marked by messianic utopias, would soon be satisfied beyond the hopes of its pioneers. Humanitarian organisations, strengthened by the legitimacy conferred on them as bearers of the ideal of Good and emboldened - indeed driven - by the increasing popularity of their actions, asserted their authority as a social force in their own countries as well as on the international stage. During the 1980s, humanitarianism became a familiar theme in the public sphere, from business foundations to TV variety shows, from UN forums to neighbourhood organisations and from universities to publishing houses, as well as enhancing its presence in the corridors of power.

When the solution becomes the problem

Humanitarianism occupied the space left vacant in industrial societies by the ideological 'low tide'. With the failure of the two universal and modernising ideologies - the total collapse of communism and the partial failure of liberalism - the visible and immediate could take the place of grand projects: urgency became policy. As politics had demonstrated its inability to inspire, the least it could do was seduce. In such a context humanitarianism - the most favoured form of urgent action - provided an ideal opportunity to fill the void created by the loss of meaning or, to put it another way, the death of utopia. Promoted by television, the medium of immediacy and emotion, it brought a visible response to a visible problem in a way that politics could not and established itself as a link with the world. It was at that precise moment that the 'solution' became a problem: poverty and suffering, detached from any identifiable cause by a purely emotional discourse, were reduced to a first-aid issue.

Compassion is a laudable sentiment but its social usage, and particularly its exploitation in the form of a politics of pity, must be challenged. Because humanitarian rhetoric and action are geared to the urgency of a given situation they tend to dissociate misfortune from the ills that cause it. The (provisional) climax of this process occurred in June 1994, when the UN Security Council classified the genocide in Rwanda as a 'humanitarian crisis'. After that, the foulest crime of all was just another tragic news item; causal factors, complicity and responsibility were all forgotten in the clamour for emergency aid relief. The genocide was merely the backdrop of a stage on which we could act out the edifying portrayal of our noble sentiments. The cholera epidemic could not have come at a better time: it was something the world could unite against. The same world that had barely noticed the massacre of the innocent, cut down by the machete and the club, torn apart by grenades and machine guns, could finally slake its thirst for compassion and bathe in the reflected glow of its own generosity. The same 'international community' that knew perfectly well what was being prepared several months before the butchery started, whose first decision was to order the evacuation of the Blue Helmets when the genocide was at its height, and whose cynicism was only equalled by its hypocrisy, had finally found an identifiable adversary - *vibrio cholerae asiatica* - which transformed killers into victims, a planned massacre into a natural disaster and non-

assistance to people in danger into a grand celebration of global solidarity. Humanitarianism became complicit in the falsification of history.

Priority for, and only for, the victims

Such distortion was hardly unique. Throughout the war in Bosnia and up to NATO's 'Operation Deliberate Force' in July 1995, the diplomacy of the ambulance had already been employed to mask a formidable political lie. As the way was to be left open for Serbian hegemony while seeming to keep the promises made in the dazzling euphoria of the Gulf War and the New World Order, it was necessary to mime an intervention and thus demonstrate that the world had well and truly changed. Consequently, humanitarianism served both as the communication strategy and the mode of action by providing a constant stream of stirring images. International aid brought a feeble but precious glimmer of light to the ethnic darkness that, it was claimed, had descended upon the former Yugoslavia. Every day we were treated to the sight of Blue Helmets and volunteers displaying a ferocious determination to preserve the lives that the various militias sought to destroy. It was no longer a matter of aggressors and aggressed, or of justice and legitimate defence. In the pure humanitarian tradition only the victims counted, whatever camp they belonged to. The sanctions imposed in the name of the victims indiscriminately affected all the 'parties to the conflict'.

The Bosnians, already subjected to the humiliation of being fed by the very people who had tied their hands behind their backs, were also expected to show docility and gratitude, as UN civil and military representatives regularly reminded them. The main contribution of the humanitarian approach to the war in the former Yugoslavia, supposedly the groundbreaking introduction to a new politics, was to eclipse Europe's responsibility to address a conquering fascism at work on its soil. The rhetoric of the victim replaced revolt, determination gave way to lamentation and logistic performance was offered as an example of political courage. From the massacre at Vukovar to the carnage in Srebenica, aid, or rather humanitarian activism, served as a form of spin, transforming renunciation, lies and pretence into as many victories over injustice and violence. Far from mapping the contours of a fairer world, humanitarianism - or the awful parody that passed for it in Rwanda and Bosnia - endowed the law of the strongest with a presentable image.

Misfortune's insurgents

The European 19th century, intoxicated by its scientific and technical progress, had gradually 'denatured' disasters. Wars and massacres may have caused great suffering but the worst disasters that had befallen Europe until then, the catastrophes involving a significant fall in the population, had been principally caused by nature - epidemics, droughts and floods. The triumphant century of reason believed it could correct the devastating caprices of nature at a time when the threat they cast over daily life was beginning to decline. This sense of power partly gave rise to the modern humanitarian movement - inaugurated by the creation of the Red Cross - and the conviction that Man's deadly passions, if not entirely eliminated, could at least be bridled, by civilisation.

One of the paradoxes born out of humanitarianism's success at the end of the 20th century resides in the 'renaturalising' of misfortune. Humanitarian discourse, its strength and limits defined by its concentration on suffering, imbues all distress with an equivalence of meaning. Famine, exclusion, ethnic cleansing, epidemics, floods, pogroms, earthquakes are thus consigned to the metaphysical category of the 'ills of the era' under the generic term of 'humanitarian crisis'. It is a recent term and has been adopted by all protagonists (humanitarian organisations, the press, the

UN, governments) when describing the activities of professionals dispatched to disaster areas to repair the damage, whatever its nature.

'NGOs have introduced a duty of international citizenship, of constantly asserting to the eyes and ears of governments the ills afflicting mankind…The ills afflicting mankind must never be a silent residue of politics. They are the basis for an absolute right to stand up and appeal to those in power. This is the way that NGOs have opened.' When Foucault formulated this programme, a model for all humanitarian organisations, could he have imagined what was to become of the discourse of misfortune?

Misfortune has effectively emerged from the silence and become a media theme. Bob Geldof, the ephemeral prince of public opinion who set up the Concert of the Century to aid the victims of famine in Ethiopia, was one of its most vociferous spokesmen. This modern rebel, misfortune's insurgent, with his scruffy, bohemian appearance and grating pragmatism, was the right man for the job. The appearance reinforced the statements: 'We've got to make famine sexy', 'We've got to make hunger fashionable', he insisted, articulating the key words of a strategy which, in the space of a moment, transformed the world into a gigantic electronic festival, a 'global juke box', to use his own term. As the rock stars of 'Charity World plc' filled the screen, their amplified guitars stifled the groans of the humiliated and the Ethiopian regime stepped up its campaign against land-owning peasants, the main cause of the famine well before the drought and the locusts arrived. Addis Ababa was quick to grasp that presentable victims constituted an invaluable resource. The starving expressed their boundless suffering through the voice of their saviours, while the compliant rebels of the small screen distanced themselves from any topic likely to annoy the authorities. Pragmatic and non-political, as they were eager to repeat, these crusaders for life simply wanted to fill empty stomachs and keep death from the door of the hungry.

This spectacular victory for rough and ready humanitarian sentiment was a bloody defeat to solidarity. By ignoring the causes of the famine and focusing on the spectacle of disaster, the 20th century apostles reinforced the power of the Ethiopian government and handed it undreamed of means to accelerate and intensify its policy of transferring populations. In 1985, the distribution centres became traps where disaster victims from the high plateaus, encouraged by the presence of international humanitarian organisations, came in search of aid before being rounded up by the militia. 700,000 people were torn from their families and villages and forcibly removed to transit centres - death centres for many - before reaching the wastelands where the 'new man', the Ethiopian of tomorrow, was to be born. This radical social surgery, which killed at least 200,000 people in 1985 alone, had become the principal cause of mortality in the country.

Never again?

The dependency of the Ethiopian regime on international aid, combined with the omnipresence and strength of the humanitarian movement , both in the field and with the media, provided NGOs with a powerful weapon of resistance. They rarely used it, being more concerned to protect their 'neutrality' and not jeopardise their work. A similar attitude was adopted by the International Red Cross in another era, when confronted with the 'Jewish Problem'.

As in Bosnia and Rwanda, this blood-soaked deception, achieved with the collusion of the UN, raises the stakes involved in examining the limits of a rhetoric and of a practice, which hold that the urgency of the wounds to be treated should take precedence over consideration over their causes. This is not to imply that Europe, or more generally the great powers, should be held directly responsible for the war in former Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda or the famine in Ethiopia, and therefore be enjoined to provide solutions to problems that they themselves have

created. And it certainly does not mean that we should revoke, in the name of a promise of future justice, the duty of providing immediate assistance to anyone in danger.

What is in question is the illusion of a humanitarian 'protopolitics'; the belief that political responsibility will germinate from the compost of humanitarian aid, the recourse to pious incantations like 'never again!' What is in question, in other words, is the sentimental 'Newspeak', the repertoire of exhilarating clichés and righteous indignation - we are 'against' famine, 'against' AIDS, 'against' social exclusion and poverty, 'against' the death of the innocent. By shifting the focus of politics from deliberation and responsibility to lamentation and compassion, by shrouding the cynicism of power in the conventions of indignation, we reduce humanitarian action to a simple public relations exercise - we drain it of its meaning. And we dissolve the demand for justice in the rhetoric of good works by effectively reducing it to the morality of the ambulance.

Because humanitarian action has become an element in the postmodern shadow play, it has assumed the appearance of a political policy, the courage and determination of its volunteers passed off as political commitment. The misunderstanding would not be so serious had it not served as a virtuous cloak camouflaging cowardice and renunciation. This new form of demagoguery, the enemy in the rear, must be confronted. Perhaps then, in a final paradox, humanitarian actors may succeed in revealing the hidden, authentically political dimension of the battle to establish a minimum morality.