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Noli Me Tangere

The Moral Untouchability of Humanitarianism

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Parrhesia is when truth is told in conditions that may incur a high cost for those who tell or have told that truth. In other words, in *parrhesia*, the true discourse reaches the interlocutor not through its internal structure or its purpose, but through the teller, or rather through the risk that telling truth incurs for the teller himself.

—*Michel Foucault,* Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 1983*

For the anthropologist the world of humanitarianism is in many ways a unique research object. First, its manifestations are so diverse and indeed contradictory that its purpose seems nearly impossible to apprehend. Ranging from programs for assisting Central Asians in refugee camps to Seattle street demonstrations against globalization policies, from the struggle against famine in Africa to the defense of the national social protection system in France, from nongovernmental organizations decrying armed intervention to military operations justified in terms of assistance, the humanitarian world always exceeds what we can say about it. Second, it appears saturated with discourses that often turn out to have been authored by its own actors. Regardless of whether those humanitarian workers speak in the first person or proceed by way of their authorized commentators, whether they denounce world disorders or their own errors, they themselves are the ones to circumscribe the relevant questions and define what may legitimately be said about them. Finally—and this point follows in part from the two preceding ones—the world of humanitarianism tends to

elude critical analysis. Because it is a valued good that many are seeking to appropriate for themselves by qualifying their own activities as "humanitarian," even when they are warlike, and because it operates by internalizing debate on the meaning and effects of its actions, it resists the inquiry of social sciences. It is this resistance that I am particularly interested in here, but I will also try to draw conclusions likely to improve our understanding of the "humanitarian world" itself. In other words, though I will focus on the conditions of possibility for studying the humanitarian world anthropologically, I will try to identify some of the blind spots of this anthropological study.

"Can any- and everything be laughed off?" one sometimes wonders. The Danish scandal known as the "caricatures of Mohammed" and the violent reactions it gave rise to in many Muslim countries remind us that the question cannot be thought of as a mere scholarly philosophical exercise—it is charged with political and moral issues. Here I will use a similar turn of phrase: not exactly "Can any- and everything be criticized?" (which would imply a normative position) but rather "Can any- and everything be submitted to critical analysis?" (implying a scientific approach). This question comes up every time we handle subjects that simultaneously involve persons trying to deal with painful situations—poverty, immigration, asylum, serious illness, childhood with AIDS, violence against women, to name only those I myself have worked on—and institutions whose mission is to help those persons. Deconstructing the obviousness of those categories, demonstrating that individuals assumed to be vulnerable also know how to use tactics for obtaining what they want, showing that the organizations or agents that take charge of them may have cynical attitudes and behaviors of their own and may actually be indifferent or cruel, is an undertaking that implies upsetting a kind of compassion consensus wherein the ill fortune or distress of some and the solicitude of others are understood to harmoniously respond to each other, pressured only by the impersonal, inhuman forces of the market, bureaucracy, or globalization, these last entities being easier to condemn than humanitarian actors and their sentiments. As anthropologists we may even feel embarrassed by such empirical observations and may hesitate to let them be known. In that case we practice self-censorship so as not to endanger, even abstractly or collectively, the men and women whose discourses we have collected and whose practices we have observed, fearing to betray their trust in us. We may also occasionally perceive reluctance on the part of our listeners and readers to learn about such matters, and it is not always easy in this case to know if what bothers them is the content of what we report or the very fact that we

are speaking of it. Some matters would thus seem more sensitive than others. But how can we characterize them?

One thing they have in common is that they bring affects and values into play around two figures: victims of poverty, illness, or oppression and benefactors who assist, protect, and struggle to defend them. A third figure—examples of which are the money-grubbing boss, the insensitive bureaucrat, the cruel soldier—is obviously easier to criticize. The first two figures are linked by moral sentiments in Adam Smith's sense, beginning with "sympathy," that "emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner" (Smith 1982:1). According to the Scottish philosopher, this affective dimension is what underlies the moral sense as it is inscribed in the actors' virtues, judgments, or the actions they take. Compassion and pity are not only emotions but good feelings in that they manifest attachment to others. Humanitarian government, which can indeed be defined as "the introduction of moral sentiments into the political and policy spheres" (Fassin 2010a:269), paradigmatically crystallizes the emotion-charged encounter between victims and benefactors within the many different scenes of planetary tragedy it operates on. It extends the gesture of traditional charity or rather shifts it from nearby victims (the poor person one can see) to distant ones (victims of disaster, war, epidemics). It thus goes beyond Hannah Arendt's (1963) conceptual distinction between compassion as direct attention to individual suffering and pity as abstract consideration for the suffering of the masses in that it makes possible a paradoxical form of long-distance compassion where those masses (of disaster victims, refugees, the sick) become real (in tents, camps, hospitals), if only through media-delivered images. In this connection, the exercise in critical analysis that focuses on humanitarian government exemplifies the difficulties that may be encountered in any anthropological study of morally prized social activities, precisely because those activities involve persons and institutions believed to be above suspicion because they are acting for the good of individuals and groups understood to be vulnerable.

Noli me tangere—"Do not touch me," said Christ to Mary Magdalene when she extended her fingers toward him after his resurrection. It is the "untouchability" of certain actors and the values they incarnate that is of interest to me here. The Christian reference (noli me tangere) and the dimension of sacredness (untouchability) are central to my remarks. The humanitarian world is heir to a religious tradition of caring for the other and giving of oneself; it has become the secular expression of that tradition. As Craig Calhoun (2009) recalls, Florence Nightingale and Henri

Dunant led their fight for the right to treat wounded soldiers on battle-fields in the name of religion, and the very choice of the name "Red Cross" and the accompanying symbol refer back to Christian imagery—the Islamic response being the Red Crescent. The "second age of humanitarian action," that of "bearing witness" (Fassin 2008a:536), presumably broke free of these religious references; many of the founders of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) and Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) were previously linked to either the worlds of communism or leftism rather than Catholicism or Protestantism. But in addition to the fact that the cross (a white one) has long been the emblem of the first of these humanitarian organizations and the dove, a biblical symbol, is still the emblem of the second, the concept of humanitarian work is still strongly marked by the history of Western thinking on charity. Specifically, humanitarian government links up with "pastoral power" as characterized by Michel Foucault: it is exercised on "a multiplicity," that is the "flock"; it is "fundamentally beneficent" in the sense that "its only *raison d'être* is doing good"; and it is "an individualizing power" in that "the shepherd directs the whole flock, but he can only really direct it insofar as not a single sheep escapes him, and the shepherd owes everything to his flock to the extent of agreeing to sacrifice himself for its salvation" (Foucault 2007:126, 127, 130, 132). This was precisely the language used by the president of Médecins Sans Frontières to establish an opposition between the "cannibal ideal" of states and their armies, which, by their murderous actions, organize "the premature deaths of a part of humanity," and "the humanitarian spirit," which has taken on "the radical, arbitrary challenge of trying to succor those the society itself sacrifices" and whose responsibility is "to save as many lives as possible" (Bradol 2003:17, 32). This mystical language of salvation and sacrifice, this moral language about absolute evil and supreme good, attains here a sort of paroxysm to which many humanitarian actors would probably not subscribe. Still, a euphemized version of it may be heard daily in the offices of nongovernmental organizations and on their fields of action.

Under these circumstances, how can any independent analysis be permitted—or even possible? What autonomy is left for using a moral anthropology approach to apprehend a social world that presents itself as imbued with a sort of moral supremacy—a world, therefore, that claims it need not submit to any external oversight? It is this situation, *where criticism becomes critical*, that interests me here. I will be making use of my experience in the world of humanitarian organizations and of a series of studies I have conducted. I first define an epistemological position that can be described as

distanced interiority. I then present two case studies that will illustrate my approach and its uncertainties and complications. Lastly, I draw a set of conclusions, putting forward two concepts that I hope will be granted some validity over and above the two examples. I would like this text to be read as a contribution to broader thinking on the conditions of possibility for criticizing practices and institutions that involve heavy moral investment, and on how to develop methods and concepts that will make noncomplacent and openly critical studies doable and receivable. The *parrhesia* that Michel Foucault (2008:67) spoke of—"truth-telling" that exposes the teller—seems to me a particularly decisive political issue for humanitarian government that, as mentioned, tends to elude just such truth-telling.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE CAVE

At the outset of a study he conducted on twentieth-century social criticism, Michael Walzer restates his own moral-philosophical position: "Over a number of years, I have been arguing against the claim that moral principles are necessarily external to the world of everyday experience, waiting *out there* to be discovered by detached and dispassionate philosophers. In fact, it seems to me, the everyday world is a moral world, and we would do better to study its internal rules, maxims, conventions, and ideals, rather than to detach ourselves from it in search of a universal and transcendent standpoint" (Walzer 1988:ix). Explaining that he has been criticized for this position by some who think that working from inside the social world amounts to eluding any radical thought coming from outside, he evokes Plato's celebrated allegory, suggesting that as far as he is concerned it is possible and necessary to analyze what "life in the cave" is, though others may choose to come out of the cave and examine it from a distance, "in sight of the sun." Ultimately, the question as he sees it is, "What further company should critics keep?" With whom should they have a conversation? "Some critics seek only the acquaintance of other critics; they find their peers only outside the cave, in the blaze of Truth. Others find peers and sometimes even comrades inside, in the shadow of contingent and uncertain truths" (Walzer 1988:ix–x). The author of *Spheres of Justice*, of course, belongs to the second group, though he recognizes the importance of the first. He advocates "connected" criticism rather than the classic representation of the solitary critic denouncing the power of the dominant, lamenting the ignorance of the dominated, doomed to tragic isolation.

The critical position I advocate is situated on the threshold of the cave, where a step in one or the other direction puts one either inside or outside. The humanitarian world I am concerned with here is a world I chose to

mix with, collaborate with, and even belong to for a time, though I preserved a certain critical distance from it even while operating inside it. For fifteen years or so, starting in the mid-1980s, I had regular exchanges with nongovernmental organizations, particularly Médecins du Monde. Without being a member myself, I organized training for the organization's volunteer workers before they set out for their mission sites, and I myself did several missions, one for developing a program in Ecuador following the earthquake there, another with a fellow anthropologist in two West African countries to study policies for combating AIDS. In the late 1990s, the French section of Médecins Sans Frontières invited me to join its administrative board, and I accepted; I was later elected to the position of vice president of this organization, actively partaking in collective thinking on actions to be taken in the areas of assistance and bearing witness. Throughout those years I made a point of maintaining my critical independence, including within the organizations I was working with—a stance facilitated, of course, by the fact that I never received any remuneration and that I long remained a nonmember. Thus, when the organization would ask me to intervene "as an anthropologist" to help them understand what had caused the difficulties they encountered during a particular mission, expecting me to give them "cultural keys" for interpreting "resistance from the population," I would explain that, as I saw it, the analysis should encompass the entire intervention scene—that is, not just aid receivers but the association and its members. And when I became administrator of what was the largest French nongovernmental organization, I sought to pursue my critical discussion of the presuppositions of its leaders and volunteer workers, such as their relative indifference to the sovereignty of the states whose populations they were assisting. My position occasionally caused tension, but it was generally respected by the humanitarian actors. My critique, then, sought to reconcile my intellectual autonomy with my solidarity with the organization.

In the late 1980s, with the growing success of the French humanitarian epic, the discursive field came to be saturated first by humanitarian actors themselves, then by their authorized commentators.[1] These writings were not devoid of critical spirit, but what criticism they did make was circumscribed either by humanitarian actors themselves—several of whom have made their lives into novels (Jean-Christophe Rufin won the Prix Interallié for *Les Causes Perdues* [Lost Causes])—or their biographers, several having produced works that quite literally amount to hagiographies (Michel-Antoine Burnier relates *Les Sept Vies du Dr. Kouchner* [The Seven Lives of Dr. Kouchner]). These works criticized not the humanitarian world as such

but rather other actors, accused or suspected of profiting from it. Some authors took out after the "charity business" and the "humanitarian trap"; others lambasted "predators of humanitarian action," the argument being that media or states manipulate nongovernmental organizations. In contrast, "the French doctors" were seen as "peace warriors" going about the world "succoring life." They did, of course, run into difficulties in the field, but according to these sympathizers, the moral force of their mission made its justice evident and irrefutable to all. Some have actually been quite clear-minded when it comes to internalizing criticism; namely, Rony Brauman (1993), who showed how, by keeping silent, humanitarian actors had facilitated the displacement of Ethiopian populations by an authoritarian government in 1985, and how in Rwanda in 1994 they had been helpless to save Tutsi staff members. But even in these cases, the target was not so much the organizations themselves as the governments of the countries involved, or the Western powers, or international institutions, starting with the United Nations. Overall, then, for nearly two decades, directly or indirectly, humanitarian workers themselves have been the ones to reflect critically, from the inside, on their own actions. And they have done so often in heroic mode, sometimes in a more sober style, rarely beyond testimony. Few authors produced studies based on their experience but substantiated by research carried out in an academic framework. Notable exceptions are Alex de Waal's 1989 book, written after he worked at Oxfam, and Fiona Terry's 2002 study, based on her activity at Médecins Sans Frontières.

External views of the humanitarian world began appearing later, first in the form of essays taking one of two diametrically opposed stances. On the one hand, a minority of these authors presented their works as praise of humanitarian action; more exactly, they set out to paraphrase the discourse of the protagonists of that action. This applies to a 1995 lecture by Renée Fox, a pioneering text in the sociology of humanitarian action. The author adopts the discourse of her interlocutors without critical discussion or analysis; she thus unconsciously becomes a spokesperson for Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde, either by justifying their actions or by disqualifying competing international aid organizations. In this her text hardly differs from Nicholas Stockton's 1998 plea "in defense of humanitarianism" or Fiona Fox's 2001 argument in favor of the "new humanitarianism," the former speaking out for Oxfam and the latter for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD). On the other hand, a larger group of authors chose instead to denounce humanitarianism. Their targets are not humanitarian actors per se (it was considered

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good form to recognize those workers' devotion and courage) but a certain ideology, understood to have overtaken them. This is the substance of Bernard Hours's 2000 work, which sarcastically lambastes not only humanitarian actors' presuppositions but also their social function of making the distress of the world acceptable. For him, the humanitarian ideology works hand in glove with market logic and military policy, concealing inequalities and serving domination. This grim view is also present in the writings of Robert Redeker (1996), for whom humanitarianism corresponds to an age void of significant ideological or intellectual innovation and Jean Bricmont (2005), who rejects the empire of humanitarianism and its right to intervene. Though these two sets of texts make opposite arguments—panegyrics on the one hand, scathing indictments on the other—they do have one significant point in common: they give priority to the normative perspective rather than an ethnographic approach. We can say that the first are in the cave and settle for mimicking its shadows, while the second are outside but tell us nothing of what is getting played out inside. That the issues involved are complex, that argumentation is dialectic, that positions may be ambiguous, that actors may be uncertain—these realities are not reflected anywhere in these analyses, as they contain nothing that cannot be simplified or readily evaluated.

Given these circumstances, the question I would raise is, can a critical discourse be produced on the threshold of the cave? A discourse that critically analyzes what those in the cave are doing while remaining "audible" to them? Both points are important. It is crucial to give a critical account of humanitarian actors' action, but that critique has to be audible to whom it is directed. The difficulty of developing a critique that is both autonomous and engaged is thus twofold: the actors have to recognize themselves in what is said of the way they act, but at the same moment, they have to perceive the distance that is being established. To put it more forcefully, the critical stance I am advocating necessitates for my interlocutors a dual sentiment of recognition and betrayal. Criticism is both loyalty and displacement. This is why I am particularly concerned in my work to examine "where it hurts"; in other words, where an institution or group is divided, what tears it apart. This is not intellectual sadism, but a theoretical choice: in periods of conflict, in the interstices of disagreement, a certain truth gets told that would not be told otherwise. An anthropologist who attempts to grasp that truth does not usually emerge from the experience entirely intact himself: the truth-telling ordeal puts him in a difficult position too. This is not mere rhetoric. It often seems to me that the accuracy of an analysis can be measured by the discomfort it causes in both the person

who produces it and the person who receives it. With regard to humanitarian organizations, neither (of course) admiring support nor (paradoxically) virulent denunciation constitutes a moment of truth; the truth will only rise toward the surface if we stick as close as possible to the action. From this perspective, the distinction proposed by Iris Jean-Klein and Annelise Riles (2005) between two possible stances that anthropological studies of human rights can adopt is not entirely satisfactory, whether this distinction is meant to be prescriptive or descriptive. In their introduction to a series of articles on the issue, they first identify a "co-construction" mode, wherein the ethnologist is situated on the side of victims of violence and abuse, and a "denunciation" mode, wherein the ethnologist studies the bureaucracies whose tasks are to take charge of the victims, judge offenses, and repair damage. But they later seem to accept this duality, as if it were obvious that the anthropologist should take the side of the vulnerable and look harshly on institutions. The critical stance I am advocating is an attempt to escape this alternative.

SITUATIONS OF CRISIS

I propose to illustrate this stance by way of two case studies. My aim is to show that being attentive to the often tense debates that go on within the humanitarian world makes it possible to shed light on questions that are usually either hidden or simply invisible, both because they touch particularly sensitive nerves and because they do not get formulated adequately in the usual discourses on humanitarian action.[2] I do not want to assume a superior overview position, but rather to develop a critique that will resonate with the actors' own discussions—simply by taking those discussions a bit further than they allow themselves to do, something I can do both because the social sciences have familiarized me with a certain "unveiling" practice and because my somewhat marginal situation makes the cost of making such revelations much lower for me than for those who live for and from humanitarian work. There is thus no specific merit for using my critical sense; I simply felt it was the space I could usefully occupy. And in the explicit contract I had with my interlocutors in these organizations, I told them from the outset that this was perhaps the only thing I could bring with me.

The first scene, which I have recounted in detail elsewhere (Fassin 2007a), takes place at Médecins Sans Frontières, an organization founded in 1971 by a small group of doctors and medical journalists. Some of them (the most renowned being Bernard Kouchner) were "veterans" of the war in Biafra. They had worked there two years earlier for the International

Committee of the Red Cross, and had experienced that organization's neutrality principle as a genuine "law of silence." On the basis of what they had learned there, they decided to base future humanitarian action on two areas of activity: assisting populations and bearing witness. Three decades later, this group of friends had developed into an influential international nongovernmental organization; its original French section was the largest in the French humanitarian world, with more than four hundred positions in approximately one hundred "field" missions, one thousand volunteers per year being sent to work in those missions, and a budget of approximately $200 million, raised almost exclusively from private donors, a guarantee of financial independence. Being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 gave Médecins Sans Frontières international legitimacy and made it an actor to be reckoned with in every conflict it was present in. It was in this context—that is, after the association had become a sort of humanitarian force or power—that the following scene took place.

In March 2003, just before the United States' air attack against Iraq, a Médecins Sans Frontières mission made up of six persons, including the president of the international bureau in charge of coordinating the nineteen national sections, chose to remain in Baghdad. The decision was a source of painful tension. Two of the six were not in favor of staying but did so to show their solidarity. Some in the headquarters were against this option but they constituted a minority on the executive committee. The question posed during the administrative council meeting a few days later was quite simple: Why take such a heavy risk (getting caught between American bombs and Iraqi resistants) for such modest anticipated results (six volunteers alongside several hundred qualified Iraqi medical personnel spread out among the capital city's thirty-five hospitals)? Both the president and the director-general argued in favor of keeping the team on the scene, the understanding being that even that minimal presence would save lives. However several members of the executive committee and administrative board had their doubts, and events proved them right. Twelve days after the first attacks by the United States and its allies, two members of the Médecins Sans Frontières team were taken hostage—the organization had not even set to work yet and there it was, paralyzed both locally and internationally. The wounded, meanwhile, began pouring into the hospitals. After eight days, the hostages were released—and revealed they had been kidnapped by Iraqi policemen. The Marines were already entering Baghdad. Traumatized by the hostage-taking, the association's head officials in Paris decided—against the recommendation of their colleagues on the scene, who were now in a position to help the local population—to shut down

their mission and repatriate the volunteers to France, at just the time the other two Médecins Sans Frontières sections and most of the other humanitarian organizations were getting down to work. To justify their sudden departure, it was claimed that there was no real humanitarian emergency.

The violence of the disagreement on the executive committee and later on the administrative board about whether or not to stay in Iraq suggests that what was at issue was more than the technical matter of assessing the danger involved and the potential benefits. This is what I tried to explain during the debate. In fact, up against an army that was massively bombing the territory, causing high numbers of deaths in the Iraqi civilian population mostly to avoid losses of its own, the decision to remain was a courageous symbolic gesture aimed at establishing a kind of balance: by exposing themselves in this way, the humanitarian workers seemed to be showing that their lives were just as vulnerable as those of Iraqi civilians. However, this gesture revealed a twofold tension—theoretical and empirical. First, the notion of symmetrical exposure of lives did not hold up to analysis: in reality, Iraqi civilians were being sacrificed whereas humanitarian actors were sacrificing themselves—one group passive victims; the other committed heroes. Second, the notion of symmetrical exposure of lives did not hold up against the facts either: the humanitarian actors were free to pull out of the ordeal, whereas the civilian population had no other option but to remain—the former could protect themselves; the latter simply had to endure. This tension is not circumstantial but structural. To reveal it is to unveil a hidden truth of humanitarian work, a sort of family secret not even mentioned by the actors when they are among themselves. The humanitarian "gift" of assistance to the suffering is founded on two unrevealed facts. First, that the gift is unequal in that there can be no counter-gift: recipients of humanitarian assistance cannot offer anything in return, except in the highly asymmetric form of gratitude or in narratives of their distress. Second, that the gift cannot be complete in that those proffering assistance always protect themselves as much as they actually help, and everybody finds this normal because, after all, they are not there to lose their lives. The Iraqi scene, the spectacular exposure of organization members and the subsequent withdrawal of the team in response to the danger, thus functioned as a moment of truth-telling—or more precisely of *véridiction*, in Michel Foucault's (2007) words in his last lectures at the Collège de France.

The second scene, which I have also mentioned in another text (2004), involves Médecins du Monde, a humanitarian organization founded in 1979 out of a schism in Médecins Sans Frontières between certain founders

(led by Bernard Kouchner) and a segment of the newcomers (including the president Claude Malhuret); the conflict came to a head around the question of chartering a ship to help Vietnamese boat people in the China Sea. The first group considered the object to be to save the lives of civilians fleeing communist persecution, but to the second group, the action appeared dangerous and primarily conceived to attract media attention. One can only be struck by the parallel with the scene just analyzed, which took place twenty-four years later. Finding itself outvoted by the young guard, the veterans' group favoring intervention seceded and left to found a new organization: Médecins du Monde. That organization considers this episode emblematic. Its motto is "There are no good or bad victims," a reference to the presumed indifference of leftist humanitarian workers to the Vietnamese boat people because they were victims of communism. A quarter of a century later, this dissident organization has consolidated itself and operates on a budget of approximately $65 million—one-third that of the French section of Médecins Sans Frontières. Like the older organization, Médecins du Monde gives special emphasis to one of its missions: the one it has set up in the Palestinian territories. The second scene thus concerns Médecins du Monde's presence there and unfolds in the context of the second Intifada.

When the Palestinian revolt against Israeli oppression broke out anew in September 2000 after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Esplanade of the Mosques known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, Médecins du Monde had already been present for several years in Jerusalem and the territories, namely through its surgical assistance, psychological aid, and drug addiction prevention programs. The new violence led the organization to undertake new actions, particularly testifying actions, as was the case for Médecins Sans Frontières during the same period. In early 2002, it carried out a joint mission with the Fédération Internationale des ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH; International Federation for Human Rights) in the city of Nablus, where a Tzahal military operation had killed 85 and wounded 289, a third of them civilians according to Palestinian hospital sources. The acts of violence committed by the Israeli army were recorded and violations of international law identified on the basis of eyewitness accounts by health professionals and services, municipal authority estimates, press articles, and direct observation by members of the Médecins du Monde mission—of building destruction, for example. The fully substantiated report concluded that the state of Israel had failed to abide by the "body of international law that governs armed conflict" and called upon it to carry out the necessary investigations, punish the guilty parties,

and repair the damage done. Publication of the report elicited contradictory reactions within the organization, specifically on its administrative board. Some said they were satisfied with the report, which objectified war crimes and allowed for envisioning judiciary responses; others deemed it entirely one-sided and were indignant at what they considered its biased perspective. In this particularly stormy context, the decision was made to conduct another investigation, this time in Israel, to show the damage caused by Palestinian attacks. The FIDH refused to participate in this second study. The information collected came from Israeli police statistics and accounts by individuals who may not all have been directly involved in the violent acts. The attacks were termed "crimes against humanity," and the neologism "democide" was coined to signify murder of civilians. In the section assessing consequences, emphasis was placed on psychic trauma, which, it was explained, affected not only direct victims but also persons exposed by way of television coverage. This report was published together with the first report, and the cover bore the association's watchword, a direct reference to its founding moment: "There are no good or bad victims."

Published in the summer of 2003, the text provoked intense internal debate and wounding accusations. Initiators of the second investigation, including the organization's acting and honorary presidents, were openly suspected of having conducted it for reasons of religious group affinity: clearly they were accused of defending Israel because they were Jews. This was a hard blow for Médicins du Monde, which of course claimed to be above all partisan allegiance and to be working to promote universal ideals. But the point here is to understand the real implications of the organization's watchword about victims. We might think of the expression as amounting to a kind of founding credo not only for this nongovernmental organization but for the humanitarian world as a whole. Humanitarian workers who succor civilians in conflicts are not there to choose sides—this is what differentiates them from the military, as humanitarians themselves like to recall, especially since, in the field, some organizations actually confuse sides. This presumably obvious point is nonetheless misleading. On the one hand, sides are often chosen: humanitarian workers recently intervened in favor of the Kosovars rather than the Serbs, just as some time ago they intervened in favor of the Biafrans rather than the Nigerians and the Afghanis rather than the Soviets. On the other hand, not to choose may involve complex issues. Thus in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the organization's apparent neutrality has two consequences. First, it reduces actors in the conflict to the status of victims, a status to which they then have to conform so as to enable humanitarian testimony to follow its expected

course: in the case of the Palestinians, we agree to consider them trauma victims, not combatants or martyrs. Second, in order for the organization to more effectively claim victim equivalence, its apparent neutrality abolishes collective and individual history: insisting on the shared experience of psychic trauma cancels out the meaning of the violence and, in this case, the historicity of Israeli occupation and oppression. This twofold impasse is revealed by publication of the second report, meant simply to "supplement" the first one.

FROM CONTRADICTIONS TO APORIA

I first outlined the preceding discussion—of Médecins Sans Frontières' politics of life in Iraq and Médecins du Monde's politics of victims in Palestine—with those two organizations at or near the time they were making their decisions. In other words, this critique is not being made from any retrospective heights; it was made earlier—and is made again here—in the interests of reopening dialogue with humanitarian actors. As explained, I mean to position myself on the threshold of the cave—as I did when I was on the administrative board of Médecins Sans Frontières and as I did again, in connection with the scene involving Médecins du Monde, by participating in a special issue of a journal on humanitarianism. Each of these organizations was in a crisis situation, which I tried to understand while sharing my analyses with my interlocutors. Their reactions—actually the presidents'—were sharp, probably because the distancing I was trying to manage touched on particularly sensitive points: the sacredness of life for Médecins Sans Frontières (the president's reaction was most virulent when I suggested that staying in Baghdad seemed comparable to a type of sacrifice); the issue of choosing victims for Médecins du Monde (it was when I showed how the maps of Palestine presented in the two reports differed, since the first was historical and political whereas those dimensions had entirely disappeared in the second, that the president asked the review to publish a response). Before further clarifying these two points, I would like to put forward the two levels of discussion I perceived during these crises. At the first level, humanitarian actors were debating together—inside the cave, as it were—and the issues raised did not ultimately affect the foundation on which their practices are based. At the second level, an internal foreigner came to dispute the normal proceedings. He was situated on the threshold of the cave, neither truly outside nor entirely within, and the questions he asked were troubling precisely because of this liminal position. Paradoxically, a possible third level—namely, contesting from "outside" the cave by asserting that humanitarian work can actually facilitate military

action and that humanitarian actors partake of a neocolonial order—
would not have shaken my interlocutors so much. They would either have
rejected those accusations or even appropriated them for their own pur-
poses, probably to call into question the work of other organizations. The
idea I am defending here is that this liminal position is a specific one. Let
us push the distinction further, bringing to light two orders of argument
and confrontation.

At the first level, that of internal dispute, protagonists themselves point
out the contradictions in their action; in other words, they themselves
observe that the facts are running counter to their values and norms.
Contradiction, then, can be thought of as "the relation that exists between
affirmation and negation of one and the same piece of knowledge"
(Lalande 1993:183). In the case of Médecins Sans Frontières, members'
criticism of the decision to remain in Baghdad bore on the contradiction
between the high level of risk incurred and the slim benefits to be
expected. The organization's charter made clear to those taking action that
they were there to "bring help to the population" and that they had to
"measure the risks and perils of the missions they set out to accomplish."
The president and director-general's reply, of course, was that lives would
be saved and that the risks incurred were no greater than usual. In the case
of Médecins du Monde, the suspicion that the organization leaders pro-
voked when they decided to conduct an investigation in Israel and later to
publish the report on it concerned their presumed "denominational" or
"ethnic" allegiance, as any such allegiance would contradict the "neutrality
principle" that is the cornerstone of humanitarian intervention and the
very condition for ensuring that such intervention remains legitimate.
Obviously the accused rejected that interpretation, arguing that their
moves actually reflected a return to the organization's origins; in other
words, concern for all victims, regardless of side. The advantage of contra-
dictions of the sort brought to light by the actors at the first level is that they
can be uttered, demonstrated, and even overcome. In Baghdad, later devel-
opments proved the accusers right: Médecins Sans Frontières picked up
stakes after its kidnapped workers were returned and left without having
succored a single Iraqi. The risk was shown to be real, and the organiza-
tion's ineffectiveness was clearly demonstrated. In Palestine, conclusions
were harder to reach: media support of the second report and the approval
it received from Jewish organizations in France were not sufficient evi-
dence to establish that the leaders had particular affinities. However that
may be, contradiction could be overcome in both these cases.

At the second level of what I am calling liminal critique, an internal

foreigner raises questions that reveal an aporia—an inextricable impasse. I am using the modern, strong sense of the word: aporia are "logical difficulties that cannot be gotten out of" (Lalande 1993:69). I would be tempted to rephrase that definition for anthropological aporia; in this case I would call them questions that touch on the very foundations of humanitarian action and admit of no solution given the state of the contemporary world. Contrary to contradictions, aporia are not a matter of organizational dysfunction but rather of the dysfunction intrinsic to their very functioning. For Médecins Sans Frontières (I am, of course, only citing this example for its general import), the aporia lie in the impossibility of actually maintaining the "equality of lives" promoted by humanitarianism. As I suggested—and above and beyond any rational risks/benefits calculation—the point of staying in Baghdad was not to sacrifice oneself but rather to recall that the lives of Westerners could be as vulnerable as the lives of Iraqis and that Westerners were morally capable of endangering themselves in order to protect Iraqis—in sum, that all lives were equally sacred. The fact is that in addition to the asymmetry of the exchange, due, as mentioned, to the fact that the victims can never offer a "counter-gift" in return for the "gift" of their benefactors, the hostage-taking revealed a vulnerability specific to such organizations, as well as a hidden truth: the lives of humanitarian workers are actually deemed to be much more precious than those of local civilians—even (as was discovered then) within the organization itself. The lives of "expatriates" are valued more than those of "nationals" in matters of wages, social protection, freedom to associate, recognition—to the point where the belligerents themselves, when attacking humanitarian mission sites, always differentiate between the two, demanding ransoms for Western hostages and simply killing local workers. The fact that there is a hierarchy of equally "sacred" lives represents a sort of anthropological nonsense—a fairly unbearable one. In the case of Médecins du Monde (but once again, the illustration only matters for its paradigmatic relevance), the aporia lie in the impossibility of maintaining victim equivalence as the humanitarian world claims to do. The suffering of Israelis threatened by Palestinian attacks can only be considered equivalent to the suffering of Palestinians crushed by the Israeli army if we reduce the social experiences involved to wounds and trauma—in other words, to the physical and psychic body—and eschew any grim accounting, which would quickly show a casualty ratio between the two sides of one to ten—one to one hundred in some instances. Above all, deciding to focus on suffering means deciding not to attend to either the historical dimension or

the political issues of the conflict, though these, too, correspond to what victims are going through. More than bodies fall under bullets or bombs—though many more bodies fall on one side than the other. What fall are human beings who have not been and are not treated with equal dignity. The Palestinians experience daily oppression, humiliation, negation; this is not true of the Israelis. When Médicins du Monde forgot this, it was called to order by its own members, who spoke of injustice at the very moment their leaders explained that they were only defending all victims equally.

CONCLUSION

What I am calling anthropological aporia here concern humanitarianism precisely because they are inscribed in contemporary moral economies. The fact that lives and victims are not equal is not specific to the humanitarian world. The truths thus revealed go beyond the framework of nongovernmental organizations and their volunteer workers (though these organizations and volunteers do represent a kind of moral core in our societies and deserve particular attention). We therefore cannot hold these groups entirely responsible for the complex tensions and insurmountable problems with which they are confronted. But we can expect them to be more clear-sighted than they often appear. Discovering that they actually partake of certain realities that they condemn and that the principles of equal lives and equivalent victims that they identify as their own cannot be realized, due to the very foundations of their action—in other words, asymmetrical, ahistorical solidarity—means that they would have to surrender a certain representation of the moral hero in our time. That is, of course, hard to do.

As is uttering these truths publicly. The liminal critical position I have advocated exposes its defenders to virulent reactions from actors who feel they possess a legitimate truth and whose authority—together with the authority of what they represent—may be shaken by such revelations. As Michel Foucault suggests, we can perhaps judge such "truth-telling" precisely in terms of the risk it involves for the teller. But to suggest that my interlocutors have not heard my scientific criticism would be to yield, in my turn, to the power of another representation: that of the misunderstood, even accursed researcher—which is far from true. My critique *has* been heard, but, of course, more by those seeking to probe and question the humanitarian order than by those seeking to maintain it in its present state. In democracy, however, that amounts to a quite ordinary sociological fact.

Translated by Amy Jacobs

Notes

1. The many books written by French humanitarian actors themselves include Rony Brauman, *Humanitaire: Le Dilemme* (Paris: Textuel, 1996), *Penser dans l'Urgence: Parcours Critique d'un Humanitaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), *Aider, Sauver: Pourquoi? Comment?* (Paris: Bayard, 2006); Xavier Emmanuelli, *Les Prédateurs de l'Action Humanitaire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), *Au Vent du Monde* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), *Au Secours de la Vie: La Médecine d'Urgence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Bernard Kouchner, *Charité Business* (Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1986), *Le Malheur des Autres* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1991), *Les Guerriers de la Paix* (Paris: Grasset, 2004); Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le Piège; Quand l'Aide Humanitaire Remplace la Guerre* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1986), *L'Aventure Humanitaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), *Les Causes Perdues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). Works glorifying French humanitarian organizations or their heroes include Olivier Weber, *French Doctors: L'Epopée des Hommes et des Femmes qui Ont Inventé l'Humanitaire* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999); David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Anne Valleys, *Médecins Sans Frontières: La Biographie* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); Alain Guillemoles, *Bernard Kouchner: La Biographie* (Paris: Bayard, 2002); Michel-Antoine Burnier, *Les Sept Vies du Dr. Kouchner* (Paris: Editions XO, 2008).

2. For the case study of Médecins Sans Frontières I used the organization's *Rapport d'Activities 2002–2003* (May 2003), 123 p.; *Compte-rendu de la Réunion du Conseil d'Administration,* March 23, 2003; and *DazibaG* (May 2003), 125. For the case study of Médecins du Monde I used the organization's *Rapport Moral 1999* (October 2000), 175 p.; *Opération Mur de Protection Naplouse: Mission d'enquête conjointe Médecins du Monde-Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme, West Bank* (May 2002), 64 p. and *Les Civils Israeliens Victimes des Attaques des Groupes Armés Palestiniens: Mission d'enquête Médecins du Monde, Jerusalem* (August 2003), 70 p.