Ethi.que/cs
conomi.que/cs

INDEX

ARTICLES

Stubborn Realities, Shared Humanity:
The State of Humanitarian Ethics Today

BY/PAR **MLADJO IVANOVIC**

Northern Michigan University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current standing of humanitarian ethics from two different, and yet interrelated perspectives. The *first* argues that shortcomings of humanitarianism are symptoms of deeper social and political problems inextricably linked to the nature of humanitarian practices, while *the second* takes notion of humanitarian compassion as the primary moral (and political) disposition of the 21st century individual under critical scrutiny. By bringing inconsistencies of humanitarianism into the spotlight I show how humanitarianism has become a language that inextricably serves to govern human beings. Hence, by disclosing pathologies internal to the humanitarian system, I hope that I am at the same time pointing at things that a reimagined humanitarianism needs to avoid. Ultimately, I argue that this is only possible if we rethink the objectives and nature of humanitarian assistance today. Instead of falling prey to unhealthy dependencies of crisis relief and pathologies that it engenders, humanitarianism should focus on restoring the autonomy of those affected by humanitarian crises and foster further development of their social environment and individual capabilities. A satisfactory humanitarian regime should enable people to help themselves and their communities, particularly through improving their sustainability and resilience in the face of increasing global challenges and vulnerabilities.

Keywords: humanitarianism, humanitarian ethics, compassion, development, resilience, humanitarian sustainability

RESUME

Cet article explore le statut actuel de l'éthique humanitaire sous deux perspectives différentes et pourtant interdépendantes. La première affirme que les faiblesses de l'humanisme sont le symptôme de problèmes sociaux et politiques plus profonds inextricablement liés à la nature des pratiques humanitaires, tandis que la seconde prend la notion de compassion humanitaire comme la principale disposition morale (et politique) de l'individu du XXIe siècle et la soumet à un examen critique. En mettant en lumière les incohérences de l'humanitaire, je montre comment l'humanitaire est devenu un langage qui sert inextricablement à gouverner les êtres humains. Par conséquent, en dévoilant des pathologies internes au système humanitaire, j'espère que je pointe en même temps les éléments à éviter pour un humanisme réimaginé. En fin de compte, je soutiens que cela n'est possible que si nous repensons les objectifs et la nature de l'aide humanitaire aujourd'hui. Au lieu de devenir la proie de dépendances malsaines des secours en cas de crise et de pathologies qu'ils engendrent, l'action humanitaire devrait viser à restaurer l'autonomie des personnes touchées par les crises humanitaires et favoriser le développement de leur environnement social et de leurs capacités individuelles. Un régime humanitaire satisfaisant devrait permettre aux populations de s'aider et d'aider leurs communautés, notamment en améliorant leur durabilité et leur résilience face aux défis et aux vulnérabilités mondiales croissantes.
Mots clés: humanitaire, éthique humanitaire, compassion, développement, résilience, durabilité humanitaire

JEL Classification: O19

1. INTRODUCTION

Today more than 130 million people across the world need humanitarian assistance and protection. Their lives depend on the capacity of affluent societies to acknowledge their needs, and respond adequately to their suffering. Such a response is not only a matter of ethical deliberation, it strikes clear political chords, especially when we ask a difficult question of responsibility or justice in the face of such severe human deprivation across the globe. Any radical alternative to the urgent humanitarian circumstances needs to consider the tumultuous dynamics between history and our present reality. The cumulative effects of population growth, environmental degradation, rising inequalities, colonial history, increased resource scarcity, economic and geopolitical shifts, violence, and ongoing developments in technology are presenting the humanitarian sector with difficult challenges. Challenges that will impact the lives of the most vulnerable sectors of humanity for the most part. When we consider the lives of people who comprise today's humanitarian target, they are the embodiment of an increasingly harmful global interconnectedness between towering inequalities, historical hegemonies and human vulnerability that these relations of power nourish. For much of the last decade, witnessing the humanitarian crises unfolding at the Western European doorstep has turned into a fundamental crisis of solidarity with people in need and the failure of humanitarian practices in general.[1]

I take this crisis of solidarity as a starting point in addressing a complex moral and political nature of our humanitarian present. I understand *humanitarianism* as an organizational structure that articulates a specific ethical discourse and offers a site wherein different dimensions of moral, economic and political intersect with and determine one another. In the contemporary world, the discourse of affects and humanitarian values offers a high political return. This ongoing attempt to treat humanitarianism as a symbol of what is good about the world - as the world's superego, an echo of the possibility of a more humane world - tends to conceal inequalities on which humanitarianism draws its purpose and validity. Humanitarian language has steadily increased over the last few decades due to the fact that after a century of ideologies and bloodshed, it still offers a seductive simplification of our reality without real commitment to action. Sympathy can allow an entire generation to imagine the discovery and expression of solidarity, an empty solidarity, not through ideas of social criticism and emancipation, but instead in the management of expedient moral sentiments and care-taking. What is worse, many seem to believe that good intentions are enough. As humanitarian organizations increasingly ally themselves with governments and corporate donors, and by doing that compromise themselves in ways that ultimately corrode their core organizational values; it seems that the issue is not how to justify political undertones of a shifting humanitarian ideology, but whether and how humanitarianism can sustain its ethics.

In what follows, I approach this question from two different, and yet interrelated perspectives. *The first* argues that shortcomings of humanitarianism are symptoms of deeper

---

[1] By denoting 'West,' 'Western subject,' I do not intend to conflate all members in one nation under the heading of 'privileged' (or affluent). I am aware that not all citizens of affluent western societies have a 'privileged' existence. Thus, when I phrase 'western subject' or 'western public' I have in mind individuals who share a certain social status, belong to certain gender, bear certain cultural and economic independence, and who have the capacity to provide aid to distant people in need. These individuals are usually target of humanitarian campaigns, and such campaigns rely on their donations.

social and political problems inextricably linked to the nature of humanitarian institutions and practices, while *the second* takes the notion of humanitarian compassion, as the primary moral (and political) disposition of the 21st century individual, under critical scrutiny. By bringing inconsistencies of humanitarianism into the spotlight I show how humanitarianism has degenerated into a system that inextricably serves to govern human beings.[2] We are presented with humanitarianism that is instrumental in nature—one which has not been encouraged to question its own means and ends; this feature alone makes it an effective servant of militarism and capitalism. Hence, by disclosing pathologies internal to the humanitarian system, I hope that I am at the same time pointing at things that a reimagined humanitarianism needs to avoid. This brings us to an important question: *is there an alternative?*

Answering it requires investigations into the current nature of humanitarianism, how it is changing, and how it ought to change. Although I address distortions, and pathologies that result from humanitarian practices and individual agency, my aim is not only to disclose present inequalities and limits of Western humanism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My motivation is to also make humanitarianism transparent to itself and chart a path toward a different kind of humanism altogether. To do so, my work here approaches humanitarian practices from the standpoint of an imagined, alternative understanding of humanitarianism (and solidarity); one which remains critical towards itself and considers challenges tied with nature and the limits of an unjust institutional order plagued by exclusion, violence, and inequality. Ultimately, if we want to avoid repeating the mistakes of an outdated humanitarian system of aid and governance, our policies, practices and social institutions that enable it require more transparency, self-criticism, creativity and boldness.

2. LIMITS OF OUR HUMANITARIAN PRESENT

Humanitarianism today finds itself at crossroads. It is a deeply contested and polarized system of values and commitments that is increasingly unfit to face new types of emergencies related to increasing global inequalities, poverty, environmental degradation, urbanization, and shifting geopolitical dynamics that result in the massive forceful migration of people. It is truly remarkable how despite decades long growth of international institutions and norms governing the humanitarian sector, and despite the undeniable increase in public awareness of the experiences of people who suffer under such conditions, there has been relatively little substantive change in the ways how humanitarian principles and practices

---

[2] What remains a task for the future is a thorough empirical analysis of the structural aspects of humanitarianism (e.g. workings of institutions, agencies; their practices, implementation of policies, etc.). Some humanitarian mechanisms that require critical scrutiny are poor coordination, exacerbating existing problems, damage to accountability and trust due to malpractice, corruption, etc. In the face of the current refugee crisis, for example, the oppression and various forms of exclusion faced by refugees (especially female refugees) demonstrate the structural limits of the present institutionalized humanitarian refugee and asylum system. The outdated and gendered nature of these political structures leaves refugees with terrible choices: internal displacement, sexual violence, squalid refugee camps, enslavement, urban destitution or dangerous migration. This, in effect, denies them effective protection and amounts to their persecution and suffering.

operate.[3] There seems to be a growing inclination of the 'Western' public to engage with the suffering of distant others, especially if we consider the ongoing development of information technologies (and ways in which media outlets articulate awareness to acute hardship across the globe), and yet humanitarian impact often seems feeble and impotent.[4] If we take a more closer look into normative commitments of current humanitarian culture we can see that it revolves around a discrepancy between moral universalism (i.e. claim that every human being deserves equal moral concern – has equal moral value) and unequal exposure to vulnerabilities grounded in historical and ongoing political and economic forms of marginalization. This discrepancy allows us to approach humanitarianism not only as a system of care-giving, but rather as set of ideas and practices that can be located materially in their institutional and discursive forms. Reflecting on this multifaceted nature of humanitarianism, Didier Fassin insightfully notes that it ultimately stands for a system of *governance* that designates "the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics." (Fassin 2011: 2) Indeed, humanitarianism has always focused on the impact of its discourse on the attitudes of the public, and as such it represents a system of governance that deploys and manipulates moral sentiments in the public sphere (i.e. feelings of sympathy, compassion, empathy, resentment, etc.). Governance here should be understood in a broad sense, as a set of procedures established and actions conducted in order to manage and regulate the existence of human beings and harm that they are exposed to; while 'moral sentiments' refer to emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and motivate us to remedy their suffering. (Fassin 2011)

This interconnection between regulative practices and invocation of moral sentiments displays the complex role and value of moral emotions in contemporary politics. The political economy of moral sentiments is evident in ways in which it nourishes political discourses and legitimizes political practices, particularly where these discourses and practices are focused on the disadvantaged and the dominated, whether at home (e.g. historically marginalized social groups such as racial, ethnic and sexual minorities, the poor, the immigrants, etc.) or further away (the victims of famine, epidemics, natural disasters, or war). Such a complex humanitarian assemblage includes, but also exceeds, the intervention of the state, local administrations, international bodies, political institutions more generally, spatial organizations, technical standards, procedures and systems of monitoring.

This complex apparatus, of course, has a history. This is not the place to retrace it, but it is worth underlining two stages of its development. *The first* stage relates to the emergence of moral sentiments in philosophical reflection and subsequently in intellectual culture from the

---

[3] Let us consider the humanitarian practices aimed at forcefully displaced people. Most of the humanitarian management of refugees takes place in squalling refugee camps. These UN governed spaces often do not only fail in providing aid, but structures and policies that these spaces embody, directly violate human rights of those who they allegedly intend to help (e.g. sexual and gender-based violence, ethnic and religious violence, lack of medical support, lack of freedom of movement, etc.).

[4] This may be the case due to sheer severity of human deprivation worldwide, but even if that is the case, such state of affairs requires from us to redefine methods we use, and goals we aim to achieve by providing aid to those in need.

eighteenth century onward. To address the general characteristics of compassion it is necessary to start with the basic assumption that human beings have a predisposition to be concerned with the wellbeing of others and that under certain circumstances exposure to the pain or suffering of others can elicit moral reactions among spectators. Historically, early modern thinkers have made human passion a central topic of moral and political theory, arguing that compassion is one of the inherent aspects of being human. Thus, modern subjectivity and identity cannot be seen independent from the conjunction of affects and values that regulate conduct and emotion toward others based on a respect for human life and dignity. *The second*, more recent development, relates to the articulation of these moral sentiments in the public sphere and in political action, during the second half of the twentieth century onward. While it is difficult to determine a precise date when this development started, one may note that increased convergence of diverse measures and initiatives over the past three-four decades have been defined explicitly or implicitly as a humanitarian. Such measures and initiatives include (but are not limited to) the creation of diverse humanitarian organizations, the development of governmental ministries that deal with humanitarian assistance, and the public presentation of various conflicts worldwide as humanitarian crises (which then justifies military intervention under the same banner), the proliferation of initiatives and regulations designed to aid the marginalized parts of society (i.e. the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, people without healthcare protection, immigrants, and applicants for refugee/Asylum status, etc.). Although there is a significant time gap between these two phases, they are nonetheless interconnected, and the development of recent humanitarian practices draw their genealogical framework from the philosophical discourse on moral sentiments.

This latter phase is the one that I am principally interested here. Despite inherent difficulties with the philosophical foundation of humanitarianism, my primary goal is to offer an account of the shifting nature of what can be called *the politics of precarious lives* over the past few decades. (Butler 2004, 2009) Alongside the technological developments in recent years, there is an ongoing shift in discursive formation reflected in an increased public presence of humanitarian conundrums in an unjust world. The ongoing translation of social reality into the new language of compassion (and a development of practices that embody such language) seems to mirror the West's epistemological and affective conversion of individual and collective moral capacity. I have talked about this process in more details elsewhere, but at this point it is necessary to mention that there are inevitable constraints under which knowledge of human suffering and hardships that humanitarian victims experience takes place. Even though portrayals of human suffering encompass a significant part of our understanding of instances of injustices, there lies the danger that the Western individual is unable to receive what a humanitarian victim has to say due to failed linguistic/testimonial exchange, and/or sheer ignorance. Here too, cultural prejudices and asymmetry of power in such epistemic interactions serve as a threshold for determining why often social inclusion fails even if the institutional setting has enabled space for management of people who are target of our humanitarian efforts. (Ivanovic 2018)

Despite the proliferation of literature that deals with suffering and trauma, and the fact that these themes are now commonplace within the social sciences and new political discourses,

humanitarianism ultimately seems to be the *politics of inequality*. There is often a form of cynicism at play when one deploys the language of moral sentiments at the same time as implementing policies that increase social inequality, regulations that restrict the rights and liberties of asylum seekers and their children, or military operations with essentially geostrategic goals.[5] From this perspective, the language of humanitarianism seems to be nothing more than a deceptive cover for the imposition of unjust and brutal market forces of an equally unjust and brutal world. But even if this is the case, and I think it is, the question still remains: *Why does it work so well?*

3. ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK?

In order to answer this question, it is not enough to ask how humanitarianism generates support among general public. We must instead focus on explaining why people often prefer to invoke the idea of suffering and compassion instead of *justice*.[6] Traditionally, humanitarianism has been located at the intersection of ethics and politics, and, often dramatically, demonstrates the interdependence of these spheres. Understanding its emergence and implications requires more than simply examining the history of humanitarianism's attempts to address human vulnerability. It is only by exploring how humanitarian discourse is organized by political and economic forces (as well as the cultural values that sustain and contest them) that we can grasp the impact this discourse has on individuals and their agency. This impact is not always immediately evident. Despite its *benign* objectives, humanitarianism tends to accept divisions and inequalities that it

---

[5] Let us consider present situation in refugee camps scattered around arid areas in Jordan, Turkey, Kenya, Malawi, etc. The founding statute of UNHCR outlines two main roles: to provide protection to refugees and to find a long-term solution to their plight. Neither of these goals are being met. International humanitarian aid programs are desperately underfunded and often cannot meet even the most basic needs of an increasing number of displaced people in an ever-shifting landscape of personal and group vulnerability. The principal ways the refugee system currently provides protection are simply ineffective and outdated. The dominant model, as Betts and Collier see it, leaves other alternatives aside and focuses into the long-term provision of assistance in refugee camps and closed settlements. At first, designed to attend to immediate needs of refugees, camps have since become the dominant practice of humanitarian governance. (Betts and Collier: 2017, 52) Frequently located in remote, arid and insecure border areas, refugee camps facilitate the disheartening reduction of what was once distinctively human to merely biological. As people begin to settle into their new life in the camp, they quickly realize that there is no future for them. Refugees are given food and shelter but not freedom to pursue their individual aspirations. They are usually not permitted to work legally, and there is little they are allowed to do to improve their own situation. For refugees, "resigning yourself to a refugee camp meant putting your life on pause, receiving just enough food and water to get through the next day, but robbed of any chance to provide for a family or plan for a future." (McDonald – Gibson 2016a, 80) What at first was intended to be emergency relief turned into long-term containment and the denial of basic human rights and dignity.

[6] There is a dramatic distance between the top and the bottom billion in the world. The affluent nations and their most affluent citizens have become powerful beyond the wildest imaginations, and yet the poorest three billion live in the same abject misery as before. Despite ongoing international efforts to contain a range of conflicts across the world, the brutality of armed forces and the suffering of the innocents remain a tragic reality for millions. Of course, these patterns of violence harm the most vulnerable individuals due to the intersection of different layers of oppression and exclusion, often deeply woven into the cultural fabric of societies in question.

otherwise aims to efface. There are serious problems in many of its facets; these faults are both subjective and institutional in nature. The reach and effectiveness of a humanitarian ethic are compromised by tendencies toward excessive individualism, (Eurocentric) cultural universalism, and moral selectivism. Positioned between the spectator as a fully sovereign agent, and the humanitarian victim who remains the passive target of humanizing efforts, humanitarianism ultimately reinforces, rather than bridges, the distance between two distinct moral perspectives. This division is reflected in the articulation and representations of human suffering and subsequent formation of social conscience manifested in sentiments of compassion and sympathy - from which humanitarian discourse ultimately derives its moral force.[7]

The predominant neoliberal understanding of compassion thrives on its premises to enlarge the moral and political boundaries of communities and to engender equal respect across contingent geopolitical and cultural contexts. Yet in practice, it seems not only that this sentiment does not deliver on its moral and political promises, but rather it imposes limits on agency that lead to further entrenchment of victimhood and exclusion. By diminishing the moral and political agency of recipients, it fails to redress the injustices it identifies, it exhausts empathetic identification (i.e. resulting in desensitization, compassion fatigue, voyeurism, etc.) and, in addition it generates indifference and political fatigue.

To explore this claim further, it is important to understand the circumstances under which compassionate dispositions towards others may develop (or fail to do so). Specifically, it is necessary to understand how social positions of individuals and formations of identities of *the other* influence the potential for mobilizing solidarity towards them as distant strangers. I understand compassion as 'the feeling that arises witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help.' (Goetz et all. 2010, 351) This ability to feel the suffering or misfortune of others contains within itself an appraisal of the seriousness of various predicaments that the other experiences and centers upon a concern for ameliorating their suffering. Attempts to understand how our sentimental attachments to others might be fashioned for the purpose of social reforms (and equity) is nothing new; as we could see earlier, they have been part of liberal political culture since the 18th century.[8] Such accounts come close to suggesting that compassion grounds ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of connection, meaning and solidarity. We are all vulnerable creatures, prey to physical and psychological wounding; thus, one important aspect of our sociality is an inability to see ourselves independent from others. Given this innate human vulnerability, at least some form of minimal solidarity between social actors is necessary in order for social attachments to make sense.

---

7. See Luc Boltanski, Distant Suffering: Politics, Morality and the Media (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lilie Chouliaraki, The Spectatorship of Suffering (London: Sage, 2006) and The Ironic Spectator (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Kate Nash, "Global Citizenship as Show Business: the Cultural Politics of Make Poverty History." Media, Culture & Society 30/2 (2008): 167 – 81

[8] In an attempt to understand why people might be motivated by moral feeling to care for others, Rousseau argues that the possibility to act compassionately towards others is lodged deep inside us, and as such is a natural disposition present in all humans. He argues that one can either choose to ignore this feeling and defy what is essentially part of human nature, or to cultivate the experience of compassion to bring us closer to the rest of humankind. (Rousseau 1993, 13-14)

Historically, we have seen that this moralizing process depends upon the capacity of privileged people to imagine themselves in the position of those who are less fortunate.[9] If we look at contemporary political culture we see that it has come to encompass a wide range of mediated practices that rely on our social capacity to nurture this moral imagination in an attempt to make this disposition to act compassionately a public imperative. This is important not only because it is essential to focus on the ways in which human misfortune is presently mediated and articulated, but also because such articulation sets norms that subtly regulate our capacity to recognize ourselves as actors upon the unjust conditions of others. While most of the contemporary humanitarian discourse relies on documentation and representation of human suffering in order to cultivate a relationship to distant others and move the Western public into action, the ways in which our witnessing of inhumane conditions succeeds (or fails) in establishing moral bonds with victims tells us a lot about the social processes in which we seem to be formed as moral (and political) actors. Although the insistence of humanitarianism on the moral acknowledgment of the unfortunate conditions of others highlights the obvious importance of compassion and imagination in shaping public humanitarian imaginaries, at the same time we also see the difficulties anchored to this view. The movement *from feeling to action* is not straightforward. It is clouded by social differentiation and cultural situatedness that are the biggest obstacles for decentering away from imperatives of care and moving towards questions of rights, responsibility, and justice.

Although at the heart of contemporary humanitarianism lies the moral acknowledgment of unfortunate others whose suffering calls for public action, such calls also disclose the moral distance between those who watch and those who suffer. Despite the innate optimism of current Western political culture, compassion itself is manifested as the personal choice of a Western consumer; it remains a form of public action insofar as it silences vulnerable others by negotiating their humanity as a consumerist practice devoid of genuine solidarity. Even if we are able to transcend the contingent social differences that constitute post-modern individuals, the moral cornerstone of solidarity that we discover today, bears the form of life that has an elementary biological character and lacks all the qualities which make it possible to treat it as a life. (Arendt 1998, Agamben 1998) Evoking images of others who are suffering, such an encounter between a Western spectator and the gruesome scenes of human vulnerability seem to yield only the most basic biological fact: namely that victim feels pain and suffering. Thus, recognition of what we share in common with other individuals leads to the disheartening reduction of the distinctively human to the merely biological. What this reduction does is not only exhaust the concept of humanity, but also through this process of exhaustion it creates conditions for the production of a specific form of humanism that enables 'Western' civilization to identify and define itself. As Jacques Rancière describes this feature of contemporary humanitarianism:

> The predicate "human" and "human rights" are simply attributed, without any phrasing, without any mediation, to their eligible party, the subject "man." The age of the "humanitarian" is one of immediate identity between the ordinary

---

[9] This identification with the other is, for thinkers like Rousseau, not only an inherent aspect of subject formation, but it also accounts for the development of intersubjectivity and the genesis of morality in social context in which my encounter with others creates regimes of meanings that enable us to mediate knowledge about the world around and potentially efface the difference that exists within social landscape.

example of suffering humanity and the plenitude of the subject of humanity and of its rights. The eligible party pure and simple is then none other than the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible. More precisely, this person who is merely human then boils down to the couple of the victim, the pathetic figure of a person to whom such humanity is denied, and the executioner, the monstrous figure of a person who denies. (Rancière 1999, 126)

The irony of this 'monotonous moan' is that humanitarian solidarity today carries within itself virtually all of the vices of a Eurocentric hegemonic order that sustains power relations between the West and the global south. Thus, the convenient fiction of human equality remains just that – a fiction.

These fundamental dependencies and inequalities invoke fear that Western moral sentiments ultimately promote configurations of power that legitimizes the corrupt global order and the inequalities that it engenders. Interfering in the current struggle over the boundaries between humanitarianism, the economy, and politics, the explicit invocation of justice is the only morally legitimate alternative to the neoliberal imaginary and its dehumanizing processes. And yet, before we can chart the ways in which this shift is possible, there are other problems that demand our attention. One way to think through the challenges of humanitarianism is to conceive the contemporary humanitarian agency of Western spectators as a form of subjectivity that has inadequate conceptions of motivation or inadequate goals in regard to solidarity with vulnerable others. Hence, solidarity as personal preference not only constitutes the West as a self-assertive, narcissistic public, it also constitutes the vulnerability of the other, often as a semi-fictional figure that inhabits epistemological limbo wherein the Western public negotiates her ontological and moral worth. Thus, just as the solidarity of the Western humanitarian agent belongs to the private realm of personal choices and affections, whereby often these choices *appear* to be made independently of the configurations of social powers that actually constitute and define them, the Non-Western other is disposed of her vulnerability and thrown into the realm of public negotiations as an image of human suffering that awaits Western acknowledgment.

As a consequence, these images lack historicity and any concrete link to justice. Even if these representations are linked to historical circumstances and sustain an impotent rhetoric of common humanity, their depiction in public imagery does not present those people as historical agents who are part of a world that invokes a sense of solidarity and obligations. Rather, their agonizing experiences are reduced to a process of distributing resources, wherein the relation between the Western spectator and Non-Western victim is negotiated both materially and symbolically. The suffrage of the humanitarian victim, consequently, is manifested as a personal experience of the Western bystander who remains ignorant of the moral and political weight inherently entailed in the inhumane conditions faced by the other. Hence, it is not the case that stories of humanitarian tragedies lack a 'vocabulary of justice' but, rather, that such stories lack *autonomy* in the sense that their experiences and relation to responsibility and justice is subordinated to experiences of the Western humanitarian agent and stories about 'the West.' Hence, the notion of shared humanity cannot be taken as universal property, devoid of any classifications. Rather, it is often a lethal neocolonial

construct of diverse material and discursive practices which selectively humanize certain groups of people rather than others. (Quijano, 2008) Closely linked to this notion of 'humanitarian' selectivism is the complex overdetermination of the subject's moral and political dispositions by social institutions that ultimately articulate and manage social and global maladies.

4. THE DARK SIDE OF COMPASSION

Despite much elaborated rhetoric, compassion remains a controversial and unreliable ethical and political motive. The critics in their various disciplinary iterations, conceive of compassion to be far too partial, inconsistent and unreliable to rely on as a moral and political drive. As we could see above, it motivates actions and policies that: unwittingly entrench victimhood and exclusion rather than create agency; express itself as a shaming pity that diminishes its recipients and fails to redress injustices it identifies; exhaust empathetic identification and generates indifference and fatigue; and worse still, is profoundly connected to subordination, exploitation and domination. While I do not intend to completely reject the political and moral worth of the idea of compassion, I do think it is necessary to disclose the ways in which it can go dangerously awry, what in turn jeopardizes an impartial application of principles of justice that is important to advance.

Even though the moralizing potential of 'sympathetic identification' constitutes the disposition to act compassionately, such a disposition does not automatically arise as the consequence of the sight of suffering as such.[10] Rather it inheres in the capacity of the society to humanize the other, and as such incite the spectators' identification with the victim. (Boltanski 1999, Chouliriaki 2013) If one wants to understand why people might be motivated by moral feelings to care for distant others, one has to first disclose the social and cultural conditions that delimit our comprehension and affective response when confronted with scenes of human suffering. Despite the much-celebrated rhetoric of contemporary proponents of humanitarian compassion, their claim that the experience of the suffering of others serves to radically transform our political outlooks and moral dispositions, our historical record of growing social and global inequalities, actually reveals the opposite tendency. (Nussbaum 1996, 2001) It is also very likely that the moral and political contradictions that arise for people in connection with the experience of being positioned as remote witness of distant suffering complicate the compassionate sensibility insofar as the latter depends on the increased mediation of human misfortune through what some scholars

---

[10] As mentioned earlier, the concept of 'sympathetic identification' was developed by J.J. Rousseau. It remains an important aspect of his theory of compassion that serves as a foundation of civic sensibilities and educational practices. Both, The Discourse and Emile, show that whether or not we follow 'voice of compassion' depends on our ability to recognize and identify with one another. Because of our dependence on other people, and because of the way trauma affects us, one way to comprehend weight of conditions that some parts of humanity are experiencing depends on our capacity to transcend ourselves and the illusion of self-sufficiency by taking a perspective of the other person. This identification with the other is, for classical enlightenment thinkers, not only an inherent aspect of subject formation, but it also accounts for the development of intersubjectivity and the genesis of morality in social context in which our encounter with others creates regimes of meanings that enable me to mediate knowledge about the world around and potentially efface the difference that exists within social landscape.

identified as complicity between technology and increasing inequalities of a world driven by market profits and history of violence. (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947/2002)

Hence, political agency that results in compassion can take various forms, and resulting political action might have various outcomes. What is more important, being compassionate establishes a relation between social actors where the causes of suffering and vulnerability already set up the context between the political agents active within the political system and the victims of injustice who are excluded from the exercise of political agency. Compassion conceived in this way is a practice that not only polarizes humanity into the beneficiaries of compassionate acts and agents who are providing the aid, but also as a mechanism of 'othering' that navigates pitfalls of global economy, colonial history, historical and present injustices, and a private calculable logic of sentimental obligations towards vulnerable others on the side of Western consumer. (Chouliaraki 2013, *5*) Hence, despite its focus on human vulnerability as the clearest manifestation of common humanity, it is an awful paradox that a life in which we devotedly strive for shaping dependencies is already grounded in an asymmetry and difference in the vulnerabilities we experience. While compassion in its humanitarian renderings takes this human vulnerability as the starting point, it also simultaneously evokes the language and workings of power, wherein a constitutive dimension of compassionate behavior appears to rest on inherent difference in social positions that benefactors and beneficiaries share.[11]

The central question, then, for contemporary proponents of the ethical and political dispositions grounded in compassion is whether we can ever feel commiseration for another without somehow invoking our self and our standing relative to the conditions that shape and affect us and other human beings. Today, a constitutive dimension of humanitarian discourse organized around nurturing compassion among the Western public does not take place among the individuals who confront one another as universal bearers of humanity (and rights that follow from it), but instead are subsequently and inevitably marked by contingent differences (e.g. male, female, poor, black, white, disabled, Christian, Muslim, etc.). Even if the initial effect of an encounter with the other reveals the vulnerability we all share as sensible human beings, the next and inevitable aspect of intersubjective recognition is its dependence on the layers of our subjectivity that are conventional, particular and alien. Hence, imagining ourselves in the position of another creates challenges for different agents, because different social groups share different cognitive and material dispositions for experiencing their environment and other human beings. Mapped onto the broader asymmetry between the affluent and poor, white and black, and male and female, contemporary humanitarian arrangements render the mediation of afflicted parts of humanity

---

[11] The danger that lurks underneath such processes is a continuous risk of transforming our moral bonds with vulnerable others into narcissistic self-expression that has little to do with solidarity and aid. In blurring the boundaries between witnessing and acting, one reduces the encounter between the Western spectator and the humanitarian victim from an ethical and political event to an often narcissistic self-reflection that turns our actions into mechanism of 'othering.' At the heart of this reduction lies a deeper concern—namely, that despite its benign objectives, humanitarianism (and our dispositions of solidarity and compassion that it aims to advance) in general ultimately follows rules of neoliberal logic of management and control. In the context of such critiques, humanitarianism may deprive us not only of the voice of vulnerable others, but also of a moral discourse that would link vulnerability to justice.

mainly through cultivation of the ethical dispositions that are undermined by the same differences that humanitarians want to highlight and overcome. We are consequently much more likely to lose touch with the sensible voice of compassion insofar as we are socially constituted, wherein such constitution defines the limits of our ability to imagine ourselves in the position of the other. Following directly from this systematic gap between social actors, the difference between distinct social groups explains not only why we are so often incapable of mobilizing a generous ethos of engagement across these disparities, but also why differences so often result in insensitivity, ignorance, and subsequently cruelty and violence.

5. FIRST STEPS TOWARDS NEW FORMS OF SOLIDARITY

Critical social philosophy has traditionally been suspicious of the moralizing potential of compassion to address human deprivation and vulnerability as an object of critical reflection and deliberation. To this end, I take my point of departure in Adorno's critical iteration of the limits and inconsistencies of an ethics of compassion. His major line of criticism is centered on the view that an ethics of compassion sets out only to mitigate injustice, and not actually to change the conditions that create and reproduce it. Rather than challenge the social contexts that give rise to human suffering, compassionate behavior takes such contexts as a starting point, and at least implicitly resigns itself to them. Given Adorno's emphasis on human suffering and on moral impulses generated in response to it, it is precisely this inadvertent character of compassionate behavior that ultimately defines its limits and determines the value of our actions that are related to others. As he elaborates on this theme in one of his lectures:

> This is because the concept of compassion tacitly maintains and gives its sanction to the negative condition of powerlessness in which the object of our pity finds itself. The idea of compassion contains nothing about changing the circumstances that give rise to the need for it, but instead, as in Schopenhauer, these circumstances are absorbed into the moral doctrine and interpreted as its main foundation. In short, they are hypostatized and treated as if they were immutable. We may conclude from this that pity you express for someone always contains an element of injustice towards that person; he experiences not just our pity but also impotence and the specious character of the compassionate act. (Adorno 1963/2001: *173-4*)

Adorno's criticism seems to rest on two distinct, though related, considerations. *First*, compassion does not entail address of the cultural, economic, legal or political context of the victims' suffering. The benefactor responds exclusively to the bare fact of the victim's deprivation, while for social criticism it is of crucial importance to track and address its systematic causes. Such a depoliticized understanding of compassion, Adorno argues, occludes the political dimensions of suffering which leaves victims without proper means to invoke questions of justice and responsibility of individuals and collectives accountable for their misfortune. This inadequacy of compassion is entailed not only in its contingent character of people's capacity for compassionate behavior, but also in the fact that this capacity itself is dependent on the same injustice and inequality it aims to make bearable. Put

differently, whereas compassionate behavior partially enables the alleviation of human suffering in some cases, it also simultaneously conceals the act's own complicity with relations of power that result in such unjust conditions and subsequently divide humanity into subjects with agency and vulnerable others. *Second,* Adorno seems to insist that we address the hard question of whether and how we can formulate and institutionalize a type of compassion that fully acknowledges and addresses the political agency of victims. He remains suspicious towards the nature of relation that is established between the benefactor and the victim who is the target of compassionate acts, a relationship whereby the figure of the spectator is fully sovereign in her agency over the victim, whereas the victim remains a passive target of humanizing efforts. Unlike mainstream political culture, which assumes a universal character of compassion exercised as moral solidarity between equal members of humanity, Adorno urges us to be aware of subordinating, voyeuristic and narcissistic dispositions of compassion, wherein modern subjects enjoy the sense of her own superiority through acts of passionate engagement with the suffering of others, at the same time fortifying the vulnerability of the victim. In this sense, the act of compassion does not bridge the moral distance between those who watch and those who suffer, but ultimately intensifies such distance by establishing different social status between benefactors and beneficiaries.

These criticisms notwithstanding, there is also another lesson to be taken from Adorno's analysis. Although his critique takes as a starting point the breakdown of the referential function of compassion in regard to the nature of human agency and sociopolitical conditions that give rise to injustice and atrocities, the advantageous effects of this breakdown could be seen as an arousal to critically reflect upon the possible ways to redress the effects of those conditions. In order to escape the shortcomings of a depoliticized account of compassion, such critical reflection of causes of suffering entails that compassion needs to be accompanied by an insight wherein our response to suffering is connected with awareness of the culpability of prevailing sociopolitical conditions and our own complicity and privilege. Rather than merely legitimizing claims for solidarity by confronting the urgency of human suffering, the moralizing function of this insight relies on the emergence of new dispositions of solidarity that invite us to render deep asymmetries of power and injustice the very object of our reflection and engagement. This not only shifts the role that compassion has for constituting moral or political agency, but also more importantly, it offers an alternative vision of morality in general, wherein moral practice becomes 'a right form of politics' and a critique of society. (Adorno 1963/2001, *176*)

This is possible only by looking beyond others' distress to its causes; political compassion establishes the conditions necessary for anger or indignation. Anger motivated by political compassion, Adorno maintains, has an important cognitive and political function—it alerts states and citizens to the sources of harm and suffering that require political redress and focuses our compassion on its systematic causes. While this connection to social justice does not necessarily give compassion any explicit role (beyond a general obligation to attend to suffering and its causes) a more specific contribution of Adorno's work to thinking about political compassion is to suggest the possibility that our moral sentiments and critical reflection can be a justified element in politics as an impetus to and a sustaining force of political agency and action. In arguing that compassion requires more than mere charity, Adorno allows for bringing our understanding of the moral sentiment into the sphere of justice: compassionate action has a specifically political focus where suffering is perceived

to be a result of systematic injustice and distorted social conditions. Even then another problem remains: there are no guarantees that knowledge about the causes of social injustices may result in significant changes in human agency. On the contrary, exclusionary practices often depend upon the fact that dehumanization and indifference take place regardless of knowledge or awareness of the social agents.

6. CONCLUSION: BEYOND HUMANITARIANISM

In retrospect, drawing upon what I have introduced in so far, it seems that the moral and political methodology of humanitarianism relies, on the one hand, on the representation of vulnerability that carries with itself the moral claim to common humanity, and on the other, the assumption that such knowledge motivates the public to act. Compassion, in this sense, constitutes the dominant figure of a natural inclination to care for others, which is the cornerstone of humanitarian philanthropy that is the dominant practice for today's management of human deprivation worldwide. I have argued that by invoking human vulnerability and suffering as the moral cornerstones of solidarity, humanitarianism collapses important political questions of responsibility and (global) justice with moralizing discourses, around which the Western public is called to organize a charitable action towards the misfortune of Non-Western others. Ironically enough, compassion and the representation of human suffering—the two structural aspects of the humanitarianism—have failed to mobilize and sustain moral dispositions to act on the vulnerability of others. We have seen from preceding pages that compassion cultivates a flawed disposition of solidarity, which often ignores the historical injustices and contemporary inequalities sustained by a dehumanizing logic of the global market and neoliberalism (this is most evident in the widespread indifference and moral selectivism of the Western humanitarian public). Whereas the analysis of compassion discloses the limits of liberal discourses of care and responsibility, the suspicion towards humanitarian institutions and practices raises another set of problems.

Despite its benign objectives, I argued that the humanitarian regime in its current form ultimately legitimizes the neoliberal logic of the market that turns altruistic aspirations of contemporary humanitarianism into the concealed aspirations of a global economy, and the political interests of affluent countries. In doing so it not only fails to serve its moral and political purpose, but perpetuates a questionable climate of dependence that has harmful effects on vulnerable others, a dependence which often masks traces of historical injustices and ongoing exploitation. In blurring the boundaries between sociopolitical conditions, spectatorship and action, I challenged the contemporary conception of compassion as moral and political drive, and the ways in which such sentiment has been cultivated through institutions and presupposed objectified perceptions of the human deprivation.

Finally, we can now ask what remains of the idea of humanitarianism once we have considered the ideological tendencies and pathologies that I have outlined in this paper. Far from offering a comprehensive guide to public action, my analysis has modest emancipatory aims. Building upon the ongoing dehumanization of humanitarian institutions and practices, it invites us to carefully consider how we may develop a kind of solidarity that enables persons to realize how and when their sentiments become ideological and inappropriate. For these reasons, we may consider how the social imaginary of contemporary humanitarian

culture is composed of ambivalent moral and political perspectives, which in turn rely on violence, the economy, and the media to inform and regulate how our epistemic practices govern articulation of others and how formation of their ontologies bears on political dispositions. Overcoming such determinations requires the difficult work of trying to understand our social environment and to accept how our privilege is complicit with exclusionary nature of policies and institutions that enable our living standards amidst appalling conditions that billions are forced to endure. At the same time, this needs to ensure that sense of our obligations towards less-fortunate others does not jeopardize their autonomy, individuality, and dignity. This is not an easy task, because it requires us to surrender the privileged spaces that we comfortably inhabit and to venture beyond our social immediacy.

The first step towards this goal is to find the right balance between the need for standardized approaches and the need to adapt to unique contexts and challenges for each specific humanitarian crisis. A reimagined humanitarian regime must work for everyone, not just for fortunate few who reach gates of 'civilized Europe.' On both ends of the humanitarian sector, institutions and general public, we need to cultivate a different sense of obligation or we risk ignoring an important opportunity to affect the lives of people in a more meaningful (and long-lasting) way. For humanitarianism to fulfill this role, it has to rethink the foundations of its ethics, change its normative commitments from charity to justice, detach from universalizing patriarchic discursive hegemonies, reimagine its methodology and reconstruct institutional organization in order to strive towards a more inclusive approach towards afflicted individuals. Hence, it is necessary to focus on developing *humanitarian sustainability*. As the nature of humanitarian crises change we are witnessing the increase in number of those affected. Such sustainability focuses on restoring the autonomy of individuals who are target of humanitarian efforts. After immediate relief, humanitarian policies and institutions should focus on enabling environment that promotes self-sufficiency and development. Of course, empowering nature of these development projects will depend on the specific social context and requires certain creativity (and flexibility) in improving social resilience of those affected. In other words, the precise models of humanitarian development will vary across different contexts that will take into consideration nature of economic circumstances (i.e. are the nation's economies agricultural, industry oriented, or focused on service). Hence, the key is in creating long term development opportunities where the second tier of humanitarian efforts is on generating opportunities in the aftermath of immediate relief.

In the end, how should we achieve these objectives? In order to ensure that humanitarian victims thrive rather than merely survive, every feasible change in ways how humanitarianism works today needs to focus on provision of autonomy for victims of humanitarian crises (victims such as refugees, IDPs, victims of famine, violence, etc.). Empowering people will allow them to engage in rebuilding their lives and making an impact on social circumstances that surround them. We need to realize that humanitarian response is never 'humanitarian' response alone, and that success of humanitarian practices often depends on the institutional capacity to creatively interact with different 'policy fields:' development, human rights, humanitarianism, community and environmental sustainability, economic and ecological resilience, etc. (Betts and Collier 2017, 239) How we understand aims and methods of humanitarian action (and our role in it) is extremely important, and in

part will allow transformation of the nature of our moral and political responsibilities. If we want to avoid repeating mistakes of an outdated humanitarian system our agency, and social institutions that enable it, require more transparency, self-criticism, creativity and disclosure. On both ends of humanitarian sector, institutions and general public, we need to cultivate different sense of obligations, otherwise we are ignoring an important opportunity to affect lives of people in a more meaningful (and longstanding) way. For humanitarianism to fulfill this role it has to rethink foundations of its ethics, reimagine its methodology, and reconstruct institutional organization in order to strive towards a more development-based approach.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Adorno, T. (2001) *Problems of Moral Philosophy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Arendt, H. (1998) *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Betts, A. and Collier, P. (2017) *Refuge.* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Boltanski, L. (1999) *Distant Suffering: Politics, Morality and the Media.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boltanski, L. (2000) The Legitimacy of Humanitarian Actions and their Media Representation: the Case of France. *Ethical Perspectives* 7(1): 3 – 16.

Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Life.* New York: Verso.

Butler, J. (2009) *Frames of War.* New York: Verso.

Chesterman, S. Ignatieff, M. and Thakur, R. eds. (2005) *Making States Work: State Failure and the Crisis of Governance.* New York: UN University Press.

Chimni, B. S. (2000) "Globalization, Humanitarianism, and the Erosion of Refugee Protection." Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper. Oxford: Oxford University.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering.* London: Sage.

Chouliaraki, L. (2013) *The Ironic Spectator.* Cambridge: Polity.

Cohen, C. (2001) *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering.* Cambridge: Polity.

Fassin, D. (2007) Humanitarianism: A Nongovernment Government. *Nongovernmental Politics,* ed. Michael Feher. New York: Zone Books. 149-60.

Fassin, D. (2011) *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fassin, D. and Pandolfi, M. eds. (2010) *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Intervention.* New York: Zone Books.

Goetz et al, (2010) Compassion: An Evalutionary Analysis and Empirical Review. *Psychol*

Bull. 136(3): 351 – 274.

Schmid Noerr, G. (1997) Moralischer Impuls und geselschaftliche Refelxion. Das Verhaltnis der Kritischen Theorie zur Mitleidsethik, *Gesten aus Begriffen. Konsteallationen der Kritischen Theorie*. Frankfurt am Mein.153 – 197

Ivanovic, M. (2015) Lives Rendered Invisible: Bearing Witness to Human Suffering. *Realizing Global Justice: Theory and Practice*, edited by Melina Duarte and Tor Ivar Hanstad in *Etikk I Praksis* (2), 1-16

Ivanovic, M. (2016) Holding Hands with Death: The Dark Side of Our Humanitarian Present. *Radical Philosophy Review*. 19(2): 359 – 379.

Ivanovic, M. (2018) The European Grammar of Inclusion: Integrating Epistemic and Social Inclusion of Refugees in Host Societies. *Radical Philosophy Review,* 21(1): 103-127.

Nussbaum, M. (1996) Compassion: The basic social emotion. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13: 27–58.

Nussbaum, M. (2001) *Upheavals of Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mignolo, W. D. (2008) The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference. *Coloniality at Large,* eds. Mabel Moraña, Enriqué Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui. Durham: Duke University Press. 181-225.

Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rousseau, J. J. (1992) *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Rousseau, J. J. (1979) *Emile or On Education.* New York: Basic Books.

Weizman, E. (2011) *The Least of All Possible Evils.* New York: Verso.