Toward an Anthropology of Humanitarianism

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At the 2005 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, a single panel was devoted to the theme of humanitarianism. I attended this panel, which covered issues ranging from disaster relief in Venezuela to post-war military interventions in the Balkans. In the wake of events such as the Gulf Coast hurricanes, a devastating earthquake in Pakistan, and the Indian Ocean tsunami, I had expected there to be significant interest in this panel. At times, however, the panelists outnumbered audience members. During the question period, a woman commented that we as anthropologists do not yet have the vocabulary to address humanitarianism. I agree with her. In writing this essay, however, I have found that the stage is set for an anthropology of humanitarianism, one that can draw anthropological studies on related topics such as politics, social structure, and development as well as on writings on humanitarianism in diverse disciplines. The issue of humanitarianism appears prominently in legal studies, political science, international relations, public policy, and in recently developed fields such as refugee studies and peace and conflict studies. A cursory scan of literature on the topic reveals that particular attention has been placed to its relevance in the context of military intervention, inter-state relations, national sovereignties, and to a lesser extent, food aid. More or less absent from humanitarian literature are discussions of other forms of assistance (medical care, infrastructure, education...) or of the social dynamics that accompany the provision and receipt of aid. Socio-cultural anthropologists are particularly well positioned to address these topics in future work, and some scholars have begun to devote their attention to such issues. While the current body of literature in anthropology that directly addresses humanitarianism is limited in size, the topic’s position at the confluence of major themes in the discipline (power, suffering, transnationalism, emotion, development...) indicate that an
anthropology of humanitarianism must and will be written in the near future.

**Definitions and Categories**

There is no single accepted definition of humanitarianism. Defining the term does not appear to be a central preoccupation for most authors writing on the subject, who use it unproblematically. When defined, humanitarianism usually contains two common elements: a reference to “humans” or “humanity,” and a relational element. Humanitarianism in the Western tradition is often associated with Christian traditions of altruism and charity, although this emphasis may obscure its place as a “common heritage of humankind (Isaac, 1993: 14).” Because the term’s meanings are often left unspecified, it may be more interesting for anthropologists to examine how and when it is used, and for what reasons, than to attempt to identify a single definition.

In this essay, I review examples of research from several related areas that address different themes related to humanitarianism. The categories I have used to classify these writings are as follows: 1) the work of historians writing on the origins of contemporary humanitarianism; 2) works explicitly addressing humanitarianism from the perspectives of policy and journalism; 3) relevant works from the anthropology of development; 4) writings on the issue of refugees. These divisions are based on topic rather than position, as each contains divergent and sometimes conflicting perspectives and approaches. In conclusion, I present emerging works on humanitarianism and biopolitics by anthropologists and other social scientists.

Given the enormous range of issues related to humanitarianism that have received scholarly attention, this list is necessarily incomplete. Bodies of writing that I have not addressed include the literature on religious traditions of altruism or benevolence, or the anthropological literature on human rights, a movement which has become increasingly difficult to separate from humanitarianism in recent decades. In addition, future anthropological writing would benefit from a critical examination of theories laid out in early political anthropology, particularly those concerning power, authority, territoriality, and social relations. Nevertheless, the areas of research I have selected for this essay provide a framework for understanding and anticipating work on humanitarianism, and are indicative of the wide range of sources available to anthropologists interested in this field.

**Historical Perspectives**

Even limited reading in the field of history indicates the important contributions
this discipline can make to understanding contemporary humanitarianism. The latter’s emergence out of European and North American colonial and missionary activities has been well established. Fitzgerald (2001) uses data from India (the primary site of British and North American missionary activity in the 19th century) to describe how medical humanitarian work in that setting went from being perceived as irrelevant or even at odds with the goal of “saving souls” to comprising a central aspect of missionary activity. Missionaries came to make links between medical and religious realms, and medicine was explicitly described as a point of entry for evangelization, as well as a way of maintaining existing converts. As the century wore on, missionary medicine became seen as not simply a tool for gaining access to populations, but “capable of reaching a higher and more hidden realm to accomplish the ‘true’ missionary work of spiritual healing (Fitzgerald, 2001: 120).”

“Pain and suffering, the uncertainty of living and the threat of death were seen as transformative experiences that made the human heart and mind open, soft and malleable. The intimate and probing nature of the medical encounter, when the patient’s capacity for mental and physical resistance was at its lowest, was held to offer matchless evangelistic opportunities (ibid: 120-121).”

In addition, the author points to developments in Western medicine, such as the capacity to treat conditions such as diphtheria, cholera, plague and particularly developments in surgery, as being partly responsible for the growing presence of medicine in missionary work. By the turn of the century, there had been a large increase in the numbers of qualified medical missionaries to India, although this did not lead to a high rate of conversion among the population. Fitzgerald argues that while Western medicine did establish itself in India through missionaries, it did not replace pre-existing medical traditions, but instead became another option for ailing patients. As religion continues to be a driving force for many humanitarians, research in this area is essential for understanding the nature of contemporary humanitarian activities.

In addition to historical work on activities in non-Western settings that shaped and reflected humanitarianism, other scholars have examined relevant social and economic processes in North America and Western Europe. Thomas Haskell’s essay “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility” focuses on the role capitalism played in fueling humanitarian activity in the form of slavery abolition movements in the 18th and 19th centuries. Haskell argues against prevailing arguments that held that abolitionists were fundamentally motivated by self or class interests, even if masked by self-
deception or other Gramscian-influenced theoretical constructs. While Haskell instead proposes that:

“[w]hatever influence the rise of capitalism may have had generally on ideas and values through the medium of class interest, it had a more telling influence on the origins of humanitarianism thorough changes the market wrought in perception or cognitive style. And it was primarily a chance in cognitive style – specifically a change in the perception of causal connection and consequently a shift in the conventions of moral responsibility – that underlay the new constellation of attitudes and activities that we call humanitarianism (Haskell, 1985: 342, italics in original).”

Haskell uses the hypothetical case of the “starving stranger” (a starving individual in a poor country whose life the author or reader has the power to save) to argue that we are causally involved in (but not the cause of) the deaths of others, and that recognition of this causality and moral responsibility for it depends on the presence of appropriate “recipes” (a term borrowed from Douglas Gasking to describe a “producing-by-means-of relation [ibid: 357]”). Haskell goes on to argue that there are four preconditions to the emergence of humanitarianism: the adherence to ethical maxims that make the humanitarian activity in question the right thing to do; the perception by the agent that he or she is causally involved in the evil event; the perception by the agent that he or she can stop the suffering in question; and finally, that the recipes for intervention available must be sufficiently ordinary, familiar, effectual, and executable so that failing to implement them would constitute a suspension of routine or even an intentional act (ibid: 357-358).”

Haskell reminds the reader that he is attempting to explain the emergence of a generalized humanitarian sensibility, rather than explain the actions of individual humanitarians. In the second part of his essay, he argues that the emergence of the market compelled people to keep promises and respect contractual obligations, while increasing a generalized awareness of the impacts one’s deeds could have in faraway settings. These elements combined contributed to another precondition to furthering a humanitarian cause: “a proliferation of recipe knowledge and consequent expansion of the conventional limits of causal perception and moral responsibility that compelled some exceptionally scrupulous individuals to attack slavery and prepared others to listen and comprehend (ibid, 563).” An understanding of how individuals today construct and maintain their perceptions of causality (particularly in the current climate of global inequalities and injustice) would benefit from Haskell’s contributions.
In an article describing later developments in this area, Rozario’s (2003) work on the emergence of contemporary American humanitarianism investigates the development of American reactions to suffering in the 20th century, and the means by which humanitarianism became “a creation of a sensationalistic mass culture (Rozario, 2003: 481, italics in original).” The author describes the contested emergence of strategies to combat “compassion fatigue,” namely the presentation in print and film of vivid accounts of suffering. Drawing on sources ranging from Augustine’s Confessions to Red Cross Magazine, Rozario explores the social mediation of sentiments provoked by witnessing carnage and horrors. Citing Norbert Elias’ work on the “civilizing process” that made it unacceptable to admit to enjoying the pain or suffering of others, he situates contemporary debates about representation and ethics in historical context. These debates continue to emerge as central issues in writings on humanitarianism and suffering.

**Views From Within: Policy and Journalism**

Much of the literature that directly addresses humanitarianism has been written by individuals involved in the movement itself. Having worked as consultants, administrators, or as direct providers of humanitarian assistance, these writers draw from their intimate knowledge of the inner workings of humanitarian organizations and agencies. These texts have generally been written with the goal of clarifying the work that humanitarian groups undertake, pointing out flaws in the current modes of functioning, and proposing avenues for improvement or change. Many of these authors suggest that fundamental changes are taking place in the settings where humanitarians operate, and that emergencies have grown more “complex” due to the changing geopolitical climate that has resulted from the end of the Cold War. Others suggest that it is the humanitarian responses themselves that have changed rather than the situations that provoke them.

Texts in this category include both monographs and edited volumes. Thomas Weiss and Larry Minear have prepared several volumes that address humanitarian values, military intervention, institutions, and policy. These texts can serve as a general introduction to the dominant issues humanitarians face today. The volumes Humanitarianism Across Borders (Weiss and Minear, 1993) and Humanitarian Challenges and Interventions (Weiss and Collins 2000) are representative of this genre, tracing the historical context of humanitarian ideals in the Western tradition, describing the most important groups working in the field, introducing contemporary conflicts by region, and presenting the dilemmas and contentious issues involved in interventions. These books and
others like them give particular importance to the role of humanitarian intervention in militarized settings, and suggest that humanitarianism today is confronting a world of increasingly complex emergencies and catastrophes. Their authors generally devote a portion of their text to explaining the web of institutions, organizations, structures and official agreements involved in humanitarian action. Some may take on particular national or regional aspects of humanitarian activity, such as Conoir and Verna’s edited volume L’action humanitaire au Canada (2002).

Another category of writings by current and/or former humanitarians is comprised of critiques of the institutional structures that are expected to deal with crises. In his 1996 book Frontline Diplomacy, John Prendergast offers a standard critique of humanitarian aid. His writings focus on “complex political emergencies” in eastern Africa, and are based on the author’s experiences as an advisor to the U.S. State Department and as the Director of African Affairs for the National Security Council. Many of his observations are echoed throughout the literature on humanitarianism, and are therefore worth describing here. Prendergast focuses primarily on food aid, and explains how it can be used as an instrument of war (by blocking or re-appropriating supplies), and as a source of revenue for violent parties (through taxes, duties and bribes). He also claims that aid can exacerbate the causes of war by intensifying rivalries, undermining local responsibilities, and destabilizing authority and power structures. His list of “Seven Deadly Sins” committed by aid agencies includes the manipulation of numbers and distortion of representations, the fostering of competition between groups, a general lack of accountability, and the diversion of aid to support violent causes.

Prendergast points out that the concept of neutrality has been called into question, both in terms of its desirability for humanitarian operations, and on a more fundamental level by those who argue that it cannot exist. Many of his and his colleagues’ arguments indicate a growing awareness by humanitarians of the inseparability of their activities from politics. For example, Prendergast argues that emergency operations should encourage “the facilitation of a humanitarian lobby within the society receiving aid, [thereby] strengthening internal mechanisms of accountability and internal demands for improved behavior by all parties in the aid relationship (Prendergast, 1996: 42).” He also argues for the implementation of codes of behavior for warring parties, and the suspension of aid in cases where the codes are not respected.

The author addresses other fundamental changes in the nature of humanitarian assistance, such as the militarization of aid, as well as the promotion of long-term, structural development projects by humanitarian aid agencies. His
strategies for minimizing potentially harmful side-effects of aid include technical measures such as standardizing costs to avoid extortion, but also involve more fundamental social dynamics. Citing UNICEF official Ian Levine, Prendergast writes, “Complex emergencies are breaking down the former dichotomy between human rights as political critique and humanitarian aid as apolitical charity as massive, systematic rights abuses force donors to confront the ‘sheer inadequacy of providing goods and services without seeking to protect rights’ or to make the latter a fundamental aspect of assistance (ibid: 80).” Prendergast devotes a significant portion of the text toward arguing for “engagement and capacity building with authorities and civil institutions,” so that relief may become better integrated in receiving societies. He defines engagement as “actively advocating particular principles with authorities as well as consulting with them on these issues and building where appropriate on their views (ibid: 92).” This is in sharp contrast to earlier humanitarian endeavors, many of which opposed collaboration with government agencies or representatives for fear of compromising neutrality or impartiality.

Throughout the text, Prendergast uses examples from East Africa to underline his points, and his familiarity and experience with the area have provided him with a compelling range of evidence. However, like many writers in this genre, his examples are too disparate and decontextualized to offer an in-depth or nuanced understanding of the consequences of humanitarian aid. They rather serve to support broad claims and arguments, and would benefit from ethnographic research to illuminate the social contexts in and through which humanitarian interventions take place.

While humanitarianism’s relationship with armed conflict and military intervention has a central place in writings such as Prendergast’s, writings about aid in the context of famine have also received significant attention. Although famine has long been an area of concern and investigation, Amartya Sen’s claim in his 1981 book *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* that famines are primarily caused by political failings rather than food shortage has spurred critical inquiry into the issue. The co-director of the organization African Rights in London, Alex de Waal, situates his book *Famine Crimes* within an established critique of humanitarianism. Much of this critique, he claims, identifies humanitarianism as an obstacle rather than an aid for resolving famine. According to de Waal, however, this critique is more polemic than informative, and he wishes to provide a more thorough account of the “political roots of famine and the political routes to its conquest (de Waal, 1997: xv),” and does so by examining “both the ‘problem’ (famine) and the ‘solution’ (humanitarianism and related forms of public policy) (ibid: 4).” De
Waal introduces the term "humanitarian international‘ – the international elite of the staff of international relief agencies, academics, consultants, specialist journalists, lobbyists and also, to an increasing extent, ‘conflict resolution’ specialists and human rights workers (ibid: 65).” The use of this term is justified if (as this author and others argue) these individuals are converging toward a common culture. He lays the blame for failing to prevent famine on African governments, Western donors and humanitarian groups, arguing that a political contract to prevent famine lies at the heart of solutions to this problem. As it currently stands, de Waal claims that “… humanitarianism is hugely self-justifying: it may even be the paradigm of a secular human enterprise that does not need to succeed in order to justify itself. Humanitarianism works, by definition [4].”

In her monograph Condemned to Repeat? Fiona Terry uses the case of aid to refugee camps to illustrate the conflicts and contradictions that emerge from humanitarian assistance. In contrast to many other writers, Terry denies that humanitarian emergencies or disasters today are more “complex” than in previous decades, claiming instead that it is the response to calamities that has expanded and diversified. The popular notion that post-Cold War emergencies are fundamentally different from their predecessors, Terry argues, “influences the interpretation of experience, imbuing aid workers with the idea that there are no relevant solutions from the past, that the complexity is new and requires novel solutions and approaches.” This in turn acts as an “institutional constraint to learning (ibid: 228).” For this author, the primary paradox at hand is that humanitarian aid, despite its conception through the best of intentions, has the potential to do harm – specifically, that aid destined for worthy populations (refugees, victims of warfare, disaster survivors…) may benefit the perpetrators of violence and genocide. Her conclusion is that “…the most that aid organizations can hope to do is minimize the negative consequences… Humanitarian action will never attain perfection: rather than aiming for a first-best world, we must aim for a second-best world and adjust to that accordingly (ibid: 245).”

Terry’s text is another example of work in policy and other fields that would benefit from ethnographic data. Drawing on a variety of case studies from around the world, she discusses a number of interesting points, such as the right to receive aid (and its counterpart, the right to provide aid), the multifaceted notion of responsibility (involving duty, accountability, virtue, and causality), frictions between aid agencies, and the privatization of aid. Unfortunately, apart from a brief reference to a study on “psychological coping strategies that aid personnel adopt in response to the stress of their
environment (ibid: 225),” humanitarian aid is presented as a mechanical, organization-driven process bereft of human agency, process or variation. Like many other writers who focus on humanitarian policy, Terry neglects to mention any of the macro-level political or economic forces that contribute to humanitarian catastrophes or shape its response. Nevertheless, her insider’s perspective and “meso-level” analysis contribute to a greater understanding of humanitarian dilemmas, and will significantly inform research at other levels.

Another group of writers offering their perspectives on humanitarian activities are journalists who have covered war or emergency zones, and have drawn from these experiences to produce extended critiques of agencies and policies. Samantha Power’s book *A Problem From Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* traces the international political response (or lack thereof) to mass killings and genocide in the 20th century. Beginning with the Armenian genocide, Power describes the development of new ways of conceiving state-sponsored attempts to destroy populations. Using journalistic prose rather than scholarly or academic analysis, Power’s well-researched text is useful for placing current debates around genocide and humanitarian intervention in historical context. Her ultimate conclusion (that the United States’ inactivity in the face of genocide is due to a lack of will) could be developed further by research in the social sciences.

Another journalist whose writing on humanitarianism has received significant attention is David Rieff, author of *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*. Rieff, who has reported from various settings of war and conflict, is critical of humanitarian groups’ alignment with Western governments, which he feels leads to their use as a “fig leaf” in the place of concerted military or political action. The author briefly sketches the relationship between anti-slavery movements, empire building and humanitarianism, pointing out that the support for the abolishment of slavery lent credence to imperial projects. Imperialists and advocates of state humanitarianism share a belief that “a combination of high moral intent, military force, the imposition of good government and benign tutelage [...] could be a force for the betterment of humanity (Rieff, 2002: 61).”

In light of recent events, Rieff points to the irony of the twentieth century: “No century has had better norms and worse realities (ibid: 70),” illustrating the discrepancy between legal structures, conventions and treaties and the horrors of actual events. He warns against describing wars as humanitarian emergencies, saying that doing so will distort both their reality and their significance.
“...[H]umanitarianism has ended up serving as a kind of moral Rorschach blot for the Western media and, through them, the public at large. We discern in it what we have come looking for, and its plasticity as concept consoles us. There is the humanitarian as noble caregiver, as dupe of power, as designated conscience, as revolutionary, as colonist, as businessman, and perhaps even as mirror (ibid: 88).”

Rieff examines the rise of the humanitarian movement after the 1970s, to determine how it became “the principal vehicle for the moral hopes of so many in the West... (ibid: 91)” Without explicitly stating so, he implies that humanitarianism conforms to existing political structures, and that it is “antipolitical,” a claim easier to accept than “apolitical.” He also suggests (responding to human rights philosophers such as Michael Ignatieff) that humanitarianism is “modern conscience given an alibi,” and that “the real significance of the revolution of moral concern [is] that the modern conscience is thereby allowed to delegate its guilt and its anxiety to the designated consciences of the world of relief, development and human rights (ibid: 96).”

Rieff’s work is another example of well-researched and insightful journalistic writing that could benefit from the findings of social science research. For example, his claim that “Certainly neither most of their beneficiaries in the poor world nor most of their supporters at home can really distinguish between an MSF, an OXFAM or an IRC (ibid: 114)” is sweeping and unfounded. Particularly in the case of the recipients of aid, whose lives often depend on it, one can assume that they would have particularly detailed knowledge of aid organizations, even if such knowledge is partial or doesn't correspond to the typologies and definitions presented by Western authors and critics.

The anthropology of humanitarianism will hopefully contribute to our understanding of the lived experiences of aid, both on the receiving and the giving ends. Currently, there are almost no works that address the latter. One exception is a series of interviews conducted by French journalist Olivier Weber, which presents the reflections of doctors, nurses, technicians, and administrators involved in humanitarian aid. While respondents were probably selected for the depth and clarity of their narratives, their concerns and analyses suggest that a systematic study of diverse humanitarians (not just policy analysts or administrators) would shed light on key concerns such as responsibility, power, compassion and care. In a similar vein, several histories of the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières have been written in recent years, either by journalists, or members of the organization, past and present. These offer, often in glowing terms, portraits of the individuals and events that were
instrumental in shaping the organization. (Delalique and Ninin, 1991; Vallaeyns, 2004).

**Humanitarianism and Development**

While humanitarianism has received relatively little scrutiny from anthropologists, the same is not true for development, which has attracted significant attention in the form of ethnographic studies as well as theoretical analyses and reflection. Much of the literature in this area is directly relevant to the topic of humanitarianism, and can serve as an important resource for the emerging domain. While development and humanitarian assistance are two distinct phenomena, they are not without significant overlap. Much of the activities described as “development” (improving the lives of impoverished populations through education, health care, agriculture, etc.) can be (and often are) glossed as humanitarian activities, and vice-versa. In addition, both development and humanitarian projects, despite their differences, entail relationships between individuals and institutions in wealthy and impoverished countries, and have developed sizable infrastructures to facilitate these relationships and the processes that emerge from them.

Many of the justifications for an anthropology of humanitarianism were expressed by William Fischer in a call for anthropological studies of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). He writes, “An enhanced anthropological contribution [to the study of NGOs] would enrich a literature the majority of which is replete with sweeping generalizations; optimistic statements about the potentials of NGOs for delivering welfare services, implementing development projects, and facilitating democratization... (Fischer, 1997: 441).” Many of the groups carrying out humanitarian work are described (and describe themselves) as NGOs, and Fisher’s observation that “[t]he often stated aim of ‘doing good’ is undermined by an inadequate understanding of what NGOs do in specific circumstances (ibid: 449)” is particularly relevant for such organizations, whether they identify as development, humanitarian, or both.

Articles such as Mary Anderson’s “Development and the Prevention of Humanitarian Emergencies” attempt to correct mistaken assumptions about the relationship between humanitarian and development activities. She argues that short-term aid and long-term development are not mutually exclusive, that the motivations and processes of aid do not always interface harmoniously, and more generally, that aid of any kind is complex and political. While these perspectives seem to be accepted by most authors writing on humanitarianism, the gap in perception between those involved in the field and the general public in donor countries is such that they frequently appear in humanitarian
literature as claims that must be explained and defended.

Of particular relevance to humanitarianism are recent works in which anthropologists have turned their attention from the “developees” to the processes of development itself. Seminal among these is James Ferguson’s The Anti-Politics Machine, an influential study of development in Lesotho. Ferguson’s work, which he describes as a “case study of the way in which ideas about development are generated and put to use (Ferguson, 1994: xiv),” focuses on the ways in which development in Lesotho attempts to de-politicize the most political of issues: livelihoods, economy, and government. Rather than offer a straightforward critique of development, Ferguson believes that

“...in tracing the political intelligibility of the ‘development’ problematic, the question of the truth or falsity of ‘development’ ideology is not the central one. If one begins, as I do, from the premise that thinking is as ‘real’ an activity as any other, and that ideas and discourses have important and very real social consequences, then in analyzing systems of ideas one cannot be content with interrogating them for their truth value (ibid: xv).”

While this work is not deeply grounded in social theory, the author does make limited use of Foucault’s concepts of “apparatus,” “governmentality,” and Foucauldian theories of power.

Ferguson uses a livestock development project as the principal subject for his analysis, and makes a number of compelling claims. Development is organized in a way that fits the activities of development groups – by sectors, in conveniently labeled domains. Developers depict their areas of intervention in ways that correspond to the activities they propose, whether by describing migrant mine workers as “farmers” to promote agricultural development or claiming that a society is remote and isolated as justification for introducing roads and transportation. Programs are initiated without sufficient consideration of local socio-cultural factors that may affect their outcome (in this case, the networks and identities that emerge from cattle ownership). Failures are attributed to the population’s ignorance, or to a lack of technical infrastructure.

Despite the strength of Ferguson’s analysis and the originality of his ideas, some important issues receive little attention in this work. For example, almost no mention is made of macro-economic or political forces that have contributed to poverty in Lesotho. Nor does the author mention the activities of groups and agencies working independently of states or the conflicts in power and
authority that ensue from such work. Finally, in explaining his use of the term machine, Ferguson aims to “...capture something of the way that conceptual and discursive systems link up with social institutions and processes without even approximately determining the form or defining the logic of the outcome (ibid: 275).” While this is a welcome respite from exposé accounts of development that posit a simplistic, causal link between the ill will of wealthy “developers” and the suffering of the impoverished, the “machine” in question is built, operated, maintained, and contested by individuals, who do not feature prominently enough in Ferguson’s analysis. Ferguson has laid essential groundwork by calling into question assumptions about the nature of development, but his work stands as an invitation for further ethnographic work to describe human involvement in the anti-politics machine.

More recently, Mindry (2001) describes the changes that occurred among women’s associations during the transition to post-apartheid rule in South Africa. These changes included an increasing attention to “grassroots” (understood to mean Black) organizations and leaders. In addition, Mindry argues that many transnational development projects are the legacies of philanthropic colonial activities, through which European women supported programs that taught African women housekeeping and crafts. In colonial times, as in the present, groups or individuals were identified as worthy or unworthy of assistance or access to development. Women, particularly rural women, have been the objects of (and have themselves promoted) a moral essentialism in order to constitute themselves as good people. Similarly, the grassroots is invoked as a “morally pure terrain, innocent of politics (Mindry, 2001: 1202).”

Mindry points to the importance of recognizing the political effectiveness of these groups and their ability to “use networks to situate themselves strategically to take advantage of opportunities to access funding and resources (ibid: 1204).” The author uses the term “‘hierarchies of virtue,’ through which ‘the country’ is imagined as a morally pure terrain – at best untouched by, at worst a victim of, or simply in need of capitalist and technological developments (ibid: 1207).” Mindry calls for further investigations of the “moral politics” of virtue, asking “How is virtue deployed as a means of exercising power? (ibid: 1205)” The issue of moral politics is central to humanitarian activity, as is the construction of worthy recipients through essentialized categories, as in the case of refugees, discussed below.

Erica Bornstein’s ethnography The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOs, Morality and Economics in Zimbabwe is an example of what promises to be an important new direction in ethnographies of development and aid. In this work,
the author examines the role of Protestant Christianity in the work of two NGOs, the transnational agency World Vision, and Christian Care (the development arm of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches). The author’s interest in this project grew out of what appeared to her as a contradiction between Christianity and development. She concludes that in fact, the two are not antithetical, and that religion, politics and development should not necessarily be divided into discrete realms. Ferguson’s impact on work in this field is evident when Bornstein writes:

"Whether Christian development is “good” or not is not the question at issue here. Rather, one might ask: how does development make things good or not? How does development create moral categories that connect those who help the needy with those who are in need? These relationships, links in the relational economy of humanitarian aid, are expressions of hopes and dreams, and sometimes despair. They are the efforts, products, and contributions of some to change the lives of others, and they are the desires of some to have their lives changed (Bornstein, 2003: 177)."

After describing the historical context of missionary and development activities in the area, Bornstein introduces the concept of lifestyle evangelism, through which individuals articulate faith-based development. She discusses child sponsorship, with the inclusion of two case studies from her ethnographic research. Other subjects addressed include collaboration with and avoidance of the state, the bleeding that occurs between political and religious frameworks, and the concept of “free markets.” After describing the discourses surrounding the term “participatory development” and the conflicts surrounding resource allocation and development priorities, the author describes the role of Christian development in legitimizing individuals’ material success, which would otherwise make them vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. Development, Bornstein claims, “involved the remaking of persons within the context of living communities (ibid: 161).” Her conclusions give insight into the lived experiences of development neglected by earlier generations of writers. "In the case of World Vision [WV], employees were not ‘appeasing the Gods,’ but were using the implicit link between gift exchange and spiritual forces to transcend worldly political structures that restricted their mobility and made their work impossible (ibid: 107).” Elsewhere, she writes, “WV Zimbabwe workers helped people to become who they were ‘supposed to be’ through development. It was liberating. Human potential, unlocked through Christianity (and WV Zimbabwe staff) was made possible through divine intervention (ibid: 133).” These findings, supported by interviews and participant-observation research, will allow for future work in this area to compare local impacts of
work by transnational groups like World Vision. This work will serve as a useful resource for future studies of development in action. Its emphasis on the role of religion in development helps fill a major gap in development studies, and Bornstein’s findings are likely to be applied to research on similar projects conducted by humanitarian groups.

Finally, David Mosse’s recent volume *Cultivating Development* is informed by the author’s former position as a consultant for a British aid project in rural India. The work builds on earlier work in the anthropology of development, although Mosse criticizes its critical turn (as represented in the work of James Ferguson) as “an ethnographic blind alley, which merely replaces the instrumental rationality of policy with the anonymous automaticity of the machine... The relentless Foucauldian microphysics of power occurs beyond the intelligence of the actors; although not, it seems, that of the decoding anthropologist (Mosse, 2005: 5).” Mosse wishes to “reinstate the complex agency of actors in development at every level, and to move on from the image of duped perpetrators and victims...(ibid: 5-6).” Focusing on the interpretation and translation of development activities, he draws on the work of Bruno Latour to explain how projects are understood to fail or succeed. Mosse argues that while policy may influence practice, practice also has a strong impact on project representation and ultimately, the shape of policy: “... policy models do not generate practices, they are sustained by them (ibid: 182).”

Because this is an ethnography of practice, one does not get a strong sense of a “population” or “community,” even though the book addresses a single project in a specific locale. This may be a necessary weakness of multi-site ethnographies and studies of processes rather than research on fixed social groupings. Mosse’s perceptive analysis and insights more than make up for this lack, however, and in the end, leave us with findings that could be applied to other settings. This volume makes an important contribution to the anthropological literature on development by examining the administrative and discursive practices that take place in intermediary spaces, spaces that are also present and relevant for the understanding of humanitarian organizations, and that have escaped analysis by both world-systems theorists and ethnographies of poverty and suffering.

The anthropology of development will serve as a valuable resource in building an anthropology of humanitarianism in no small part because it, like development, has been posited as “a benign and universal human project... ... the point of insertion for a bureaucratic power that has been neither benign nor universal in its application (Ferguson, 1994: 267).” Studies like the ones
described above have helped open the way for studies of dynamic processes and complex exchanges that occur between shifting social landscapes.

**Refugees**

Like humanitarianism itself, the issue of refugees lies at the crossroads of many larger themes: space, history, rights, identity and inequality. It may be for this reason that “refugee-ness” has been the subject of significant scholarly attention in recent years. Journals, conferences and even academic programs have been created to address the topic. David Keen’s text *Refugees: Rationing the Right to Life* was published as part of Oxford University’s Refugee Studies Programme, and outlines the shortcomings of relief (particularly food aid) to refugees. Without resorting to the exposé genre common among critical writings on humanitarianism, the text calls into question basic assumptions about food aid. These assumptions (that famine represents shortage, that grain alone is suitable for sustenance) along with a lack of commitment by the international community have contributed to an exacerbation of crises among refugee populations. The author suggests that a lack of resources also represents a major impediment to aiding refugees, and discusses the arguments for and against encouraging economic self-sufficiency among displaced populations. Finally, he makes several general recommendations for improvements, including the distribution of cash to refugees and developing alternatives to camps.

The text is quite short, and while it does not address any of these important and complex issues in any length, it provides an introductory analysis of important issues in refugee assistance, and is representative of the period in which it was written, a time when the failings of humanitarian projects became glaringly apparent (the early 1990s), and their tactics and structures became the subject of increased scrutiny and critique. One can also see evidence of the shift toward rights-based rhetoric in this work. The author “examines ways in which a set of relief practices based largely on the idea of ‘charity’ might begin to be replaced by a set of practices based on rights, and on clear obligations and accountability on the part of organizations involved in relief (Keen, 1992: 69).” There is very little discussion, however, of who these organizations are, either as identities or in terms of the composing members.

Anthropologists have been active in contributing to this growing area of interest. Foremost among these is Liisa Malkki, whose ethnography *Purity and Exile* examined “the contingent sociohistorical processes of making and unmaking categorical identities and moral communities in two specific sites [a Tanzanian village and a nearby Hutu refugee camp] (Malkki, 1995: 17).” Malkki
situated her findings among this population within existing theories of nationalism, historiography and liminality to argue that, in this case, “the nation becomes first of all an imagined moral community… ultimately, such an imagination elaborates itself into a cosmolgy of nations (ibid: 24)” In subsequent work, Malkki focused on the ways in which refugee perspectives and narratives are erased from international media, policy, and analyses. Malkki argues that the provision of relief and assistance is accompanied by “other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing (Malkki, 1996: 378).” In contrast to refugee accounts, which situate individual lives and experiences within the context of larger historical events and political forces, humanitarian practices tend to avoid textual or narrative representations in favor of visual depictions of refugees, depictions which transform individuals into a form of universalized, bare humanity.

Refugees were held to the standard of an “exemplary victim”: the imagined refugee was helpless, in need of aid, and void of particulars – “an ideal figure of which any actual refugees were always imperfect instantiations (ibid: 385).” They were also considered unreliable and dishonest by policy makers, administrators, journalists, and others. Physical injuries or wounds were considered more reliable than subjective accounts, which increased the process of silencing. By their very nature, Malkki argues, Hutu refugees’ narrative accounts were irrelevant and unusable to the organizations working to aid them. (In other contexts, such as in the spheres of poverty-reduction, international development, and human rights, narrative accounts are trimmed to short vignettes, which appear carefully selected to support a specific approach or intervention undertaken by an organization.)

Malkki stresses that her analysis is not intended to dismiss or call for an end to humanitarian interventions, but rather to contribute to “better ways of conceptualizing, designing, and challenging them (ibid: 379).” Her insistence on this point is indicative of the degree to which humanitarian interventions have not been critically examined, and how those proposing to do so may be accused of worsening the plight of those in need of urgent assistance. Future scholars would be well informed by Malkki’s point that “established practices of humanitarian representation are not timeless, unchangeable, or in any way absolute (ibid: 389),” and therefore, regular examination and analysis is essential for developing and improving interventions.

Drawing from Malkki but writing with a greater emphasis on institutions and refugee policy, geographer Jennifer Hyndman (2000) draws on her experiences with the UNHCR in East Africa to produce a critical analysis of formal institutional responses to refugee crises. Hyndman uses the concept of a
"politics of mobility" in order to examine “the connections between migrant subjects, the geopolitics of money, and the borders — political and cultural — they cross (Hyndman, 2000: 32).” The author draws from several disciplines and schools of thought, including anthropology, post-colonial studies and feminist studies. Like other writers on the subject, she conflates the issues of refugees and humanitarianism in general, but does include a wide range of issues in her discussion (borders, culture, gender, quantification, and power, among others). Hyndman’s work in refugee camps has given her a privileged perspective on techniques for “ordering disorder,” such as the layout of camps, counting techniques, and “sitreps” (situation reports), all of which paradoxically help construct refugees as both partners in decision making and prisoners. She argues that humanitarian responses could be improved by professionalizing humanitarian personnel and increasing linkages between long-term and short-term aid organizations.

As in the case of development, social science research on the issue of refugees and responses to them has addressed central humanitarian concerns, including power, sovereignty, intervention, aid and representation. It remains to be seen whether “refugee-ness” will remain the prevalent framework for understanding and describing issues of displacement, conflict and inequality.

**Emerging Work in the Anthropology of Humanitarianism**

As mentioned earlier, anthropologists have only recently begun to address humanitarianism directly in their research. Searches of social science literature from the early and mid-1990s produce brief texts such as Jonathan Benthall’s 1991 essay on “sans-frontièrisme” (in which he discussed the right to intervene) and Renée Fox’s article on MSF and MDM (Médecins du monde) in the 1995 volume of *Social Science and Medicine*, a series of observations and directions for further research on these two organizations. Anthropologists working on humanitarianism have produced work in disparate sub-fields, and it remains unclear where an anthropology of humanitarianism would be situated, if it does indeed emerge as a body of work. Medical and political anthropology appear as likely possibilities at the present time.

It also appears that most of such work will be produced by scholars based in North America, or in Western European countries, which have developed distinct structures to promote the study of humanitarianism. The Network on Humanitarian Assistance (NOHA), based in universities throughout Northern and Western Europe has produced a text entitled *Anthropology in Humanitarian*
Assistance, which provides a rare summary of specifically anthropological issues that emerge out of humanitarian assistance projects. It draws from an extensive bibliography of works related to disasters, conflict, and displacement. The authors use various terms interchangeably (emergencies, disasters, conflict, catastrophes...), to refer to what they call “tears in a social fabric.” One senses in this imprecision the difficulty of determining what exactly constitutes a “humanitarian crisis” and therefore, the scope and nature of humanitarian activity. The authors draw from theoretical and ethnographic material to outline brief overviews in different thematic categories pertaining to humanitarian assistance. While too brief to offer an in-depth discussion of humanitarianism’s multiple facets, they do introduce readers to central themes in this area and provide useful references for more detailed information.

Anthropologists working on these issues will also do well to remain attentive to social science research being conducted in North American and European societies in addition to data collected from impoverished nations. An example is a recent article based on survey research among nearly three hundred individuals in New York City, through which the authors aimed to understand the contradiction between the American public’s general support for social welfare programs despite misgivings about the idea of welfare (Feldman and Steenbergen, 2001). Their explanation rests on the divisions between egalitarianism and humanitarianism. The former, they argue is a value that is associated with support for active government intervention in economic and social processes, whereas the latter is associated with support for poverty relief. They define humanitarianism as “a sense of responsibility for one’s fellow human beings that translates into the belief that one should help those who are in need (ibid: 660).” Drawing from research in social psychology, they characterize humanitarianism as a pro-social orientation (entailing a personal reaction to the problems of others), whereas egalitarianism represents as norm or societal rule, which “contain[s] abstract prescriptions for the construction of social and political structures (ibid: 661).” The authors found that informants with strong humanitarian values supported government programs that addressed needs, whereas those with stronger egalitarian values supportive more extensive policies beyond poverty reduction, and that people should benefit from these policies as a right.

This kind of quantitative research on humanitarianism is informative in that it provides grounds for defining humanitarianism as a distinct set of values by testing its co-relation with other values or orientations (in this case, separate from egalitarianism). These authors illustrate that individuals may have varied views on welfare and aid policies based on the nature of the policy, who is
implementing them, and who the recipients are. While the premises and methods of such studies contrast with those in socio-cultural anthropology, the paucity of research on such topics make such studies valuable, even if only to critically shape our own analyses.

In a related line of inquiry, anthropologist, sociologist and medical doctor Didier Fassin (2001) describes a program of emergency financial assistance operated by the French government in 1998. Fassin discusses the ways in which individuals seeking aid prepared written claims, which were subsequently analyzed by program administrators. Fassin’s main concern is to understand the processes through which charity government aid is attributed to the needy. The program was initiated as a means of defusing organized hostility by the unemployed, in the context of a new administration and the discontinuation of previously existing funds. An emphasis was made on presenting the assistance as the giver’s moral (rather than legal) duty: as one of the administrators stated, “In no way should the assistance appear as owed (Fassin, 2001: 444).” The assistance was expressed in biopolitical terms of “survival.”

While this article addresses a domestic rather than international humanitarian assistance program, many of the themes pertinent to international humanitarianism are addressed here. For example, Fassin describes how, despite the language of “emergency” used in the program’s elaboration, the vast majority of claims reflected a condition of chronic poverty, what Fassin designates as being more political than social. Claims were accorded based on four factors: need (factual and quantifiable); compassion (leading to both an empathy for the claimant and the satisfaction of providing assistance); justice (described wrongs, often in a vindictive tone); and merit (based on efforts to better one’s condition and a renunciation of delinquency or social deviance). In describing inconsistent evaluations of cases, Fassin remarks, “Charity is always discretionary (ibid: 469).” He counters the traditional divide between sentiment/charity and justice, saying that the former informs the latter, and that the plethora of varying criteria used to evaluate claims indicates the strong presence of justice rather than its absence. Fassin calls for an examination of “the workings of justice in charitable practices (473).” He relates this project to an understanding of the gift in contemporary society, where fragments of life are counter-gifts to gifts of means to live.

Another anthropologist who has been attracted to the multiple dynamics of humanitarianism is Mariella Pandolfi, whose previous work in medical, psychological and political anthropology informs her analysis of humanitarianism and bio-power in the post-communist Balkans, specifically in Albania and Kosovo. A piece published in 2000 in the journal Multitudes
suggested that anthropologists had avoided the subject of humanitarianism because of their implication in the movement as consultants, experts, and policy-makers. She describes humanitarian agencies as "supracolonial" forces, claiming that they provoke "the erosion of democracy, collective participation and political negotiation, not only in the society where the intervention is taking place, but in the transnational apparatus itself. Even if the intervention is taking place in a particular territory, the manipulation of time is the central element of supracolonialism, as a mobile governmentality on a global scale... (Pandolfi, 2000: my translation).”

A subsequent text published in 2002 in the journal *Anthropologie et sociétés* elaborates on the term "*souverainetés mouvantes*" (moving sovereignties), using it to describe NGOs and international organizations that, through their actions and operations, “impose institutions and concepts of citizenship that are alien to territories in which the nation-state has never established its power... (Pandolfi, 2002: 34, my translation).” In order to do so, these groups use a wide range of means, but rely on existing structures of power. The moving sovereignties constitute “a network of governance characterized by innovative strategies of de- or re-territorialization (ibid: 35).” Space is a key concern for this author, much in the same ways that the space of the refugee camp has been central to others.

Pandolfi situates her analysis within Foucauldian notions of biopower, as well as Agamben’s theorizing on legitimate power and the state of exception. She identifies the humanitarian apparatus as acting on three levels: the right to intervene, the temporality of emergency, and the imperative to act. Humanitarian work, Pandolfi argues, is fundamentally homogenizing, creating interchangeable categories such as “the trafficked woman” or “the refugee child.”

Finally, an article in *Cultural Anthropology* presents recent work by Peter Redfield, an anthropologist who has conducted ethnographic research on the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), primarily in its European headquarters (France, Belgium and Holland), but also at field sites in Uganda. Like Pandolfi, Redfield draws on Foucault and Agamben to underscore the biopolitical dimensions of humanitarian work, but emphasizes that “such a biopolitics extends norms of power in an effort to effect the government of health, but without any certainty of control as responsibility for rule is ever deferred by humanitarian organizations such as MSF to absent political authority (Redfield, 2005: 330).” Redfield’s analysis is substantial and compelling, and in addition to directly addressing the issue of humanitarianism, may be part of a larger movement in which anthropologists move toward a serious engagement with
ethics, after years of holding that domain at arm’s length.

Conclusion

While anthropologists have begun to grapple with the numerous topics related to humanitarianism in the 20th and 21st century, many have not yet broached. For example, it is recognized that societies around the world encourage their members to assist the suffering and be generous to those in need, but we know little about the local structures in place to deal with the indigent, their institutional manifestations and promoters of these moral and social values. As we have seen, the relationships and conflicts that develop between humanitarian agencies and governments has been a key issue for political scientists. The interface between international relief agencies and local or pre-existing structures, however, has not been examined, and is one of many potential areas of interest for anthropologists.

It is still too early to determine what form the anthropology of humanitarianism will take. It may be that prominent writers will emerge and establish a central theoretical paradigm that others will build on and critique. Or it may develop along the lines of its current progression: building from data and theories culled from a range of disciplines and sub-fields, remaining heterogeneous and difficult to classify, ultimately resembling the wide range of discourses and analyses it aims to elucidate. What is certain is that anthropologists choosing to conduct research in this area have the unusual luxury of working in a relatively uncharted domain while drawing from a wide range of relevant scholarship in a variety of fields.

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