

# Humanitarian Reason

*A Moral History of the Present*

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# Introduction

## *Humanitarian Government*

Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.

EMMANUEL LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*

Moral sentiments have become an essential force in contemporary politics: they nourish its discourses and legitimize its practices, particularly where these discourses and practices are focused on the disadvantaged and the dominated, whether at home (the poor, the immigrants, the homeless) or farther away (the victims of famine, epidemics, or war). By “moral sentiments” are meant the emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy them.<sup>1</sup> They link affects with values—sensitivity with altruism—and some, indeed, derive the latter from the former and morality from emotions: in this philosophical tradition, the experience of empathy precedes the sense of good. Compassion represents the most complete manifestation of this paradoxical combination of heart and reason: the sympathy felt for the misfortune of one’s neighbor generates the moral indignation that can prompt action to end it. Thus, encountering the man left for dead by robbers at the side of the road, the Good Samaritan of the gospels is moved; he dresses his wounds, finds him lodging, and pays for his care.<sup>2</sup> This parable inaugurates the paradigm of a politics of compassion that feeds Western morality well beyond the domain of Christian doctrine, which obviously has no monopoly on concern for the misfortune of others, whether we consider the central role of compassion in Confucianism and Buddhism or its translation as charity in Islamic and Jewish traditions.

I will therefore use the expression “humanitarian government” to designate the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics. “Government” here should be understood in a broad sense,<sup>3</sup> as the set of procedures established and actions conducted in order to manage, regulate, and support the existence of human beings: government includes but exceeds the intervention of the state, local administrations, international bodies,

and political institutions more generally. Similarly, “humanitarian” should be taken in an extended meaning,<sup>4</sup> as connoting both dimensions encompassed by the concept of humanity: on the one hand the generality of human beings who share a similar condition (mankind), and on the other an affective movement drawing humans toward their fellows (humaneness). The first dimension forms the basis for a demand for rights and an expectation of universality; the second creates the obligation to provide assistance and attention to others: once again we encounter the articulation between reason and emotion that defines moral sentiments. Thus the concept of humanitarian government goes beyond the usual definitions that restrict it to aid interventions in the Third World and mimetically correspond to the image presented by organizations that describe themselves as humanitarian. In fact, humanitarianism has become a language that inextricably links values and affects, and serves both to define and to justify discourses and practices of the government of human beings.

When a candidate in the French presidential election addressed “the France that suffers,” he was using the same vocabulary of moral sentiments as his counterpart in the United States qualifying his own political program as “compassionate conservatism.”<sup>5</sup> And when, under pressure from organizations providing support for undocumented immigrants, the French authorities granted residence to immigrants only on the condition that they were suffering from a serious illness that could not be treated in their home country, on the grounds of “humanitarian reason,” they were using the same descriptor as the Western heads of state who called for the bombing of Kosovo as part of a military campaign they asserted was “purely humanitarian.”<sup>6</sup> On both the national and the international levels, the vocabulary of suffering, compassion, assistance, and responsibility to protect forms part of our political life: it serves to qualify the issues involved and to reason about choices made.

It may be objected that 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, measures that restrict the rights of immigrant populations, or military operations with essentially geostrategic goals—to take only the examples previously evoked. In this view, the language of humanitarianism would be no more than a smoke screen that plays on sentiment in order to impose the law of the market and the brutality of *realpolitik*. But even if this were the case, the question would remain: Why does it work so well? Thus, beyond the manifest bad faith of some and the good conscience of others—although the significance of these attitudes cannot be ignored on the level of what we might call an

ethics of policy—we need to understand how this language has become established today as the most likely to generate support among listeners or readers, and to explain why people often prefer to speak about suffering and compassion than about interests or justice, legitimizing actions by declaring them to be humanitarian. In the contemporary world, the discourse of affects and values offers a high political return: this certainly needs to be analyzed.

A remarkable paradox deserves our attention here. On the one hand, moral sentiments are focused mainly on the poorest, most unfortunate, most vulnerable individuals: the politics of compassion is a politics of inequality.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the condition of possibility of moral sentiments is generally the recognition of others as fellows: the politics of compassion is a politics of solidarity.<sup>8</sup> This tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, is constitutive of all humanitarian government. It explains the frequently observed ambivalence of authorities, of donors, and of agents working for the good of others, and it accounts for what has been called compassion fatigue, the wearing down of moral sentiments until they turn into indifference or even aggressiveness toward the victims of misfortune. But it also explains the shame felt by the poor, the beneficiaries of aid, all those who receive these gifts that call for no counter gift, and accounts for the resentment and even hostility sometimes expressed by the disadvantaged and the dominated toward those who think of themselves as their benefactors.<sup>9</sup> Many philosophers and moralists have striven to minimize this asymmetrical relationship of compassion, placing emphasis rather on the egalitarian dimension and attempting to give it the status of a founding emotion of human community: it is because we see the other as another self, they maintain, that we feel sympathy for him or her and act for his or her good.

However, the problem is not psychological or even ethical, as these writers suggest: it is strictly sociological.<sup>10</sup> It is not the condescension on the part of the persons giving aid or the intention of their act of assistance that are at stake, but the very conditions of the social relation between the two parties, which, whatever the goodwill of the agents, make compassion a moral sentiment with no possible reciprocity. It can of course be pointed out that the apparently disinterested gift assumes a counter gift in the form of an obligation linking the receiver to the benefactor—for example, the obligation on the receivers sometimes to tell their story, frequently to mend their ways, and always to show their gratitude. But it is clear that in these conditions the exchange remains profoundly unequal. And what is more, those at the receiving end of humanitarian attention know quite well

that they are expected to show the humility of the beholden rather than express demands for rights.

Thus, if there is domination in the upsurge of compassion, it is objective before it is subjective (and it may not even become subjective). The asymmetry is political rather than psychological: a critique of compassion is necessary not because of the attitude of superiority it implies but because it always presupposes a relation of inequality. Humanitarian reason governs precarious lives:<sup>11</sup> the lives of the unemployed and the asylum seekers, the lives of sick immigrants and people with AIDS, the lives of disaster victims and victims of conflict—threatened and forgotten lives that humanitarian government brings into existence by protecting and revealing them. When compassion is exercised in the public space, it is therefore always directed from above to below, from the more powerful to the weaker, the more fragile, the more vulnerable—those who can generally be constituted as victims of an overwhelming fate. The concept of precarious lives therefore needs to be taken in the strongest sense of its Latin etymology:<sup>12</sup> lives that are not guaranteed but bestowed in answer to prayer, or in other words are defined not in the absolute of a condition, but in the relation to those who have power over them. Humanitarian government is indeed a politics of precarious lives.

This politics, which brings into play states and nongovernmental organizations, international bodies and local communities, has a history. This is not the place to retrace it, but it is worth underlining its dual temporality. The first, long-term temporality relates to the emergence of moral sentiments in philosophical reflection, and subsequently in common sense, in Western societies from the eighteenth century onward.<sup>13</sup> Modern identity is indissociable from the conjunction of affects and values that regulate conducts and emotions toward others and define a respect for human life and dignity.<sup>14</sup> The abolitionist movement, which fought slavery in Britain, France, and the United States, is often presented, in spite of its contradictions, as the epitome of this initial crystallization of moral sentiments in politics.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, emotional pleas and even military interventions to defend endangered populations, starting with the British, French, and Russian mobilization in favor of the Greek Revolution in the 1820s, have received little attention until recently.<sup>16</sup> The second, short-term temporality relates to the articulation of these moral sentiments in the public space, and even more specifically in political action, at the end of the twentieth century: while one cannot put a precise date on this phenomenon, one may note the convergence of a set of elements over the past two decades, including the creation of humanitarian organizations (which invoke a right or duty to

intervene), the establishment of ministries of humanitarian assistance (in several French governments but also in other countries), and the description of conflicts as humanitarian crises (which then justifies military intervention under the same banner), to which should be added the proliferation of measures and initiatives designed to aid the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, the sick without social protection, immigrants without residence rights, and applicants for refugee status—measures and initiatives defined explicitly or implicitly as humanitarian.<sup>17</sup> The first temporality provides the genealogical framework for the second.

It is the latter that I am principally interested in here—the recent constitution of a humanitarian government. My aim is to offer a clear account of the reconfiguration of what can be called the politics of precarious lives over the past few decades: the studies presented here essentially relate to measures, initiatives, and forms of government (whether governmental or nongovernmental) that have been brought into operation, at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, to manage populations and individuals faced with situations of inequality, contexts of violence, and experiences of suffering. Obviously I am not arguing that compassion is a recent invention, although it should be recognized that some historical periods, including the one under study, are more conducive to sentimentality than others. Nor do I hold that the shift that has begun is irreversible, for nothing is more unstable and revocable than the sentiment of compassion in politics, as can be viewed with the rise of the sentiment of fear related to the rhetoric of security in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Nor, finally, am I suggesting that the advent of compassion excludes other phenomena, for the social body is continually pulled by contradictory logics, particularly that of repression in the case of precarious lives. Of these multiple tensions, the case studies of this volume will provide many examples. My goal is simply to grasp the specific issues involved in the deployment of humanitarian reason in the contemporary public space and to understand how moral sentiments have recently reconfigured politics.

The social sciences themselves are not absent from the developments I am considering here. The 1990s were remarkable for the increasing importance, on both sides of the Atlantic, of what we might term a scientific literature of compassion—a body of writing relating to suffering, trauma, misfortune, poverty, and exclusion. Interestingly, two distinct intellectual geographies can be drawn. In France, the disciplines most involved are sociology and psychology. In the United States, this concern is above all the domain of literary criticism and medical anthropology.<sup>18</sup> Several of these



publications were the result of major research programs and have been financially supported by French public and semipublic organizations and American private foundations and nonprofit institutions, respectively. In France, the grant made available by the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, a national savings and investment bank, for a series of studies on minor and major adversities among various social categories, from the young immigrant to the police officer, has produced the best-selling sociology book in a decade; in the United States, the Social Science Research Council has funded a series of seminars and publications on political and structural violence, from South Africa to Sri Lanka, which has had a marked influence on the scientific field in North America and beyond.<sup>19</sup> Thus a specular dynamic has developed whereby public bodies and private groups produce representations of the world, and the social sciences give them the authority of their theoretical reflection and the substance of their empirical research. Legitimized by politicians as well as scientists, this view is consolidated and gradually comes to be assumed as self-evident. Inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma. While the old vocabulary of social critique has certainly not entirely disappeared, the new lexicon of moral sentiments tends to mask it in a process of semantic sedimentation that has perceptible effects both in public action and in individual practices, although the influence on policies and more generally on society of this scientific literature and these intellectual stances is probably greater in France than in the United States.<sup>20</sup> The translation of social reality into the new language of compassion is thus mirrored by a sort of epistemological, but also emotional, conversion of researchers and intellectuals to this approach to society, more sensitive to the subjectivity of agents and to the experience of pain and affliction. Studies, research programs, and scientific publications have proliferated. Within a few years, exclusion and misfortune, suffering and trauma have become commonplaces of the social sciences, lending academic credit to the new political discourse.

This novel account of the world has largely been taken for granted. Many have adopted the view that it simply reflected changes in society: people spoke more often about the excluded because there were more of them, and about suffering because its prevalence had increased; doctors and nurses, and even armies, were being dispatched to aid populations that were victims of war or disaster because our world had become more generous. Some, indeed, welcomed this development, seeing it as a sign of moral progress: in their view, public authorities and nongovernmental organizations, trade

unionists and politicians, journalists and researchers were finally showing greater humanity and had more understanding of the plight of ordinary people. Others, however, derided or waxed indignant about what they interpreted as a drift toward sentimentalism, suggesting that we all now consider ourselves as victims, in a sort of frantic race to expose our misfortunes, have our pain recognized, and even claim compensation.

I take a completely different approach here, analytical rather than normative. Our way of apprehending the world results from a historical process of “problematization” through which we come to describe and interpret that world in a certain way, bringing problems into existence and giving them specific form, and by this process discarding other ways of describing and interpreting reality, of determining and constituting what exactly makes a problem.<sup>21</sup> Whereas volunteers eager to come to the aid of victims of conflict and oppression would previously have done so through political and sometimes military struggle, like Lord Byron in Greece, George Orwell in Spain, or Jean Genet in Palestine, today they do it via humanitarian assistance and advocacy, symbolized by Bob Geldof organizing a concert for Ethiopia, Bernard Kouchner carrying a sack of rice on the Somalian shore, or George Clooney pleading for the persecuted people of Darfur. It is not that the situation on the ground has radically changed, it is rather that violence and injustice have a different meaning for us, and more specifically, that we now justify our actions in a different way, to the extent that governments are increasingly invoking the humanitarian argument as a ground for their armed interventions. But in emphasizing this evolution in our collective understanding of the world I am not seeking to judge whether it is useful or dangerous, to determine whether we should celebrate it or be concerned about it: I am simply trying to recognize the phenomenon for what it is—and also to measure its effects, or more correctly, to interpret the issues involved with these anthropological transformations. It is for the readers, if they accept my analysis of these moral and political stakes, to draw the normative conclusions they consider to conform to their ethical and ideological view.

A new moral economy,<sup>22</sup> centered on humanitarian reason, therefore came into being during the last decades of the twentieth century. We continue to live within it now, in the early twenty-first century. It brings forth new kinds of responses—a humanitarian government—in which particular attention is focused on suffering and misfortune. Whether this shift stems from sincerity or cynicism on the part of the actors involved, whether it manifests a genuine empathy or manipulates compassion, is another question: the point I want to emphasize is that this way of seeing and doing has

now come to appear self-evident to us.<sup>23</sup> However, this problematization of our societies does not go without saying. One could even state that it is in itself problematic. It requires us to examine not only the significance of the development itself but also its social and political implications, its consequences both objective and subjective. What, ultimately, is gained, and what lost, when we use the terms of suffering to speak of inequality, when we invoke trauma rather than recognizing violence, when we give residence rights to foreigners with health problems but restrict the conditions for political asylum, more generally when we mobilize compassion rather than justice? And what are the profits and losses incurred in opening listening centers to combat social exclusion, requiring the poor to recount their misfortunes, sending psychologists to war zones, representing war in the language of humanitarianism?

But how are these stakes to be understood? Social sciences and humanities have taken two main approaches in response to this question, which can be described by making a provisional distinction between humanitarian morals (the principle on which actions are based or justified) and humanitarian politics (the implementation of these actions). The first has often been limited to national territory and even to local space. The second has taken the world as its field of inquiry. The link between the two has rarely been made. This is what I intend to do here.

In the first approach—the analysis of humanitarian morals—philosophers have recently begun to examine public expressions of moral sentiments, some largely in affinity with sympathy, others on the contrary condemning its sway. The former consider suffering a lived reality that cannot be called into question (it is therefore naturalized) and frequently attempt to articulate it with a political economy (their critique thus relates to the social injustices that produce suffering). The latter see suffering as a manifestation of the modern sensibility (it is consequently culturalized), and their aim is generally to demonstrate the excesses of its public exposition (here the critique is of the sentimentality that makes a spectacle of suffering).<sup>24</sup> Take people who suffer seriously, say the former. Do not be fooled by the upsurge of compassion, retort the latter. Both views are seen as critique. But the realism of the first position ignores the historicity of moral sentiments and hence of the political use to which they are put, while the constructionism of the second stance ignores the subjectivation of social inequality and hence the experience that individuals have of it. The two perspectives never come together, for the first rejects the genealogy of compassion and the second turns away from the truth of suffering.

Sociology has not entirely escaped this dualism, and significantly, it was in France in the 1990s, at the point when the issue began to emerge in the public arena, that the discipline first addressed it, initially from two almost symmetrical positions. In *The Weight of the World*, Pierre Bourdieu sees suffering as the contemporary expression of “a social order which, although it has undoubtedly reduced poverty overall, has also multiplied the social spaces and set up the conditions for an unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering (*la petite misère*).”<sup>25</sup> The accumulation of interviews conducted by the researchers working alongside him shows that the whole of society is suffering almost indiscriminately, from the youth of the housing projects to the residents of middle-class suburbs, from immigrant workers to far-right campaigners, from police to trade unionists. The fact that suffering is also a characteristic language of the contemporary world and that compassion has become a political force escapes Bourdieu’s analysis, which promotes the “intellectual love” the researcher must feel for his informants—at the risk of renouncing objectivation in his description and ultimately of reinforcing the social construction to which he unwittingly contributes. By contrast Luc Boltanski, in his *Distant Suffering*, proposes a displaced gaze, since he takes as his object the “spectator’s dilemma” of those exposed to the suffering of others and caught “between the egoistic ideal of self-realization and an altruistic commitment to causes which enables one to ‘realize oneself’ through action,” a dilemma to which the “humanitarian movement” offers a solution.<sup>26</sup> His inquiry thus relates to the topics of suffering and the rhetoric of pity, but in drawing on a wealth of historical cases and literary fiction it abandons almost any perspective on the contemporary world. The final section on “humanitarian action” mainly consists in a discussion of the “polemics” about the “return of moralism” to which it has given rise, and hence an analysis of strictly ideological arguments exchanged among those he ironically calls “media intellectuals.” By doing so, Boltanski however risks de-realizing the political stakes of this form of action and ultimately offering a mere apologia for humanitarianism.

What eludes both sociologists, in Bourdieu’s case because of his denunciation of the social order and in Boltanski’s because of his sociological study of denunciation, is an approach that would allow us to analyze the effects of domination expressed through suffering (which Bourdieu does) at the same time as the construction processes of which suffering is the object (which Boltanski exposes)—in other words, to consider the politics of suffering in their complexity and their ambiguity. The reason for these authors’ difficulty in grasping these issues is no doubt partly methodological:

the interviews conducted by Bourdieu furnish accounts that put emotions into words without distance, while the texts analyzed by Boltanski present rhetorical figures that keep the social at a distance. In fact, whatever the richness of the exclusively discursive material collected by both sociologists, it is no substitute for the participant observation and long-term presence that make it possible to reconstruct more precisely described scenes and more broadly situated contexts, thus avoiding simplification, locating narratives and arguments within their frame of utterance, and eventually grasping the issues within which they are contained and which they contribute to constituting. Ethnography, if they had undertaken it, would certainly have made them see the world differently.

In the second approach—the analysis of humanitarian politics—international relations and political science have recently begun to scrutinize the deployment of these unfamiliar forms of intervention in zones of disaster and conflict. Political scientists and legal scholars have constructed ambitious panoramas of what they sometimes describe as the new humanitarian world order.<sup>27</sup> Here the scale of analysis is no longer an imaginary individual or an indeterminate collective, as in the philosophical and sociological approaches, but the world with relations of power between states, international institutions, and nongovernmental organizations—rather than a clash of civilizations. Two opposing positions emerge. Some do not question humanitarian intervention, even when it is conducted by the military in the name of protecting civilians: their analytical efforts focus on the conditions in which this action is deployed, its legality, or even its legitimacy, and sometimes include recommendations based on lessons learned from recent operations. Others make humanitarian intervention the subject of a radical critique: even while conceding that politicians may wish to defend just causes, they see the action undertaken in these conditions not only as a violation of sovereignty but also as an imposition of values and models.<sup>28</sup> Thus all of these studies address macropolitical configurations rather than microsocial situations: they concern international relations. The few case studies that have been conducted have until recently been carried out mainly by actors close to humanitarian organizations, who have been interested in the contradictions thrown up by interventions in which they themselves have been involved: detailed sociopolitical analyses have thus emerged from Darfur and Rwanda, for example.<sup>29</sup> But these are not ethnographic studies that could offer insight into the logics of actors and the justifications for their actions.

Anthropology has, in its turn, recently become interested in these far-off sites. There has been an unprecedented empirical investment against the

background of a broad movement to redefine the discipline, now present at scenes of war and violence from which it had hitherto scrupulously held itself apart.<sup>30</sup> However, the descriptions resulting from these studies take various positions. For example, Mariella Pandolfi, who has studied the joint military-humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, presents a critical reading.<sup>31</sup> She decrypts the language of international organizations, particularly the notions of “complex emergency” (which amalgamates all crises, from earthquakes to war) and the “right to intervene” (used to justify operations supposedly aimed at protecting civilians, especially in extralegal situations); she puts in perspective the big hotels where the military, humanitarians, and journalists congregate and the refugee camps where these same actors invent “mobile sovereignties” as a substitute for failing state authorities. As an involved participant in the situations she observes (employed as an expert by an international organization), she delivers an implacable analysis of the humanitarian world. Conversely, Peter Redfield, who focuses on the daily life of a French nongovernmental organization in Uganda, takes a more empathetic approach.<sup>32</sup> Examining the humanitarian gesture close-up, he finds a convergence between the moral sentiments of the humanitarian and the anthropologist, whom he sees as “faced with the same problem,” the same experience of the suffering of others and the desire to act; like the doctor or the nurse, he is concerned with the precariousness of lives, highlighted by his study of the “bracelet of life” that is distributed to babies to measure their nutritional state.

Obviously, the contexts are different. In the first case, the confusion between the military and the humanitarian reaches its climax under the lights of the media and with the background of international tensions. In the second case, the nongovernmental organization acts in a peaceful and almost forgotten region, where its members attempt to provide medical assistance. However, beyond these contrasts between the situations, the perspectives adopted by the analysts are somewhat distinct: the former gives priority to denunciation, whereas the latter remains attentive to constraints and ambiguities. The parallel between the two approaches—the critical distance of one and the empathetic engagement of the other—shows to what extent the anthropology of humanitarian government is epistemologically but also morally linked to its object, in a mirrorlike relationship that is actually difficult to avoid. Significantly, most fieldwork studies, as is the case for the two I evoked here, concentrate on the politics of distant tragedies (wars, camps) rather than the politics of nearby suffering (the poor, immigrants). Yet many elements, not least the increasing involvement of humanitarian organizations, both in distant countries and at home, and the use of the same

humanitarian language in national and global politics, suggest that the two worlds need to be analyzed together and that anthropology should simultaneously address both realities.

Considering the two lines of social science and humanities research on the humanitarian question over the past twenty years, as I have summarized it far too briefly here—referring respectively to humanitarian morals and politics—my project can thus be stated simply. It is to seize morals at the point where it is articulated with politics—to comprehend the humanitarian government. This necessitates a dual focus.

First, it involves using the same theoretical approach, and the same empirical procedure, to address what is being played out in our society and in distant worlds, what is arising in both national and international arenas.<sup>33</sup> The moral economies in operation in a health clinic for the disadvantaged and in a refugee camp, in a listening center for the excluded in a poor neighborhood and in a trauma consultation in a war zone, in the allocation of scarce resources to the unemployed in the French welfare system or to patients in an African medical aid program have many points in common, which need to be grasped together as a whole. The case studies presented in this book therefore relate to the government of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the immigrants in France, but also of AIDS orphans in South Africa, disaster victims in Venezuela, traumatized adolescents in Palestine, and nongovernmental organizations in Iraq.<sup>34</sup> Each of these contexts throws light on the broader reality of the transformations being wrought through humanitarianism in the contemporary world. To grasp what is at work in this shift, one needs both to anchor empirical studies in local realities and to get a sense of the global landscape. This combination of the two scales thus avoids both monographic narrowness that delivers only circumscribed interpretations, and teleological claims that seek to identify a direction in history.

Second, I propose to base this analysis on precise inquiries rather than general propositions, to study a small number of situations that may shed some light on the question—essentially, to subject this political and moral anthropology to the test of ethnography.<sup>35</sup> My hypothesis is that in-depth study of specific objects, be they letters of application for financial assistance, medical certificates for the undocumented, testimonies published by humanitarian organizations, a support service in a housing project, or a military intervention after an earthquake, are more illuminating than an exhaustive analysis or a general overview in providing an intelligibility of the social world.<sup>36</sup> It should therefore be no surprise that we have to go by way of the casuistry of decisions on allocation of assistance to low-income

individuals, the rhetoric of attestation of torture for asylum seekers, the tactics of immigrants applying for residence, in order to understand how the state politics of compassion operates in France. It is through this work at the margins that we can grasp the logics and the assumptions, the ambiguities and the contradictions, the principles of justice and the practices of judgment: the devil is in the detail. Similarly, to understand humanitarian practices in distant regions, we need to examine the images produced of children with AIDS in South Africa, the writings of psychiatrists and psychologists reporting the situation of Palestinians under the Israeli occupation, and the debates within a nongovernmental organization over whether its members should stay in Iraq under the bombs. In each case, ethnography provides insight into the convictions and doubts of the actors, their blind spots and their lucidity, their prejudices and their reflexivity: we owe our informants the respect of restoring these dialectical tensions. This has long been missing from the essays on humanitarianism and pamphlets about moralism whose monolithic theses recognized neither the complexity of the issues nor the intelligence of the actors.

The book is constructed around two series: the implementation of humanitarian reason in the politics of precarious lives in the French context, and the dissemination of humanitarian government in tragic contexts throughout the world. The nine scenes thus analyzed, covering a period spanning the mid-1990s through the middle of the first decade of this century, sketch vignettes of what we might call the humanitarian moment in contemporary history.

The first series of case studies has for background the important social, economic, demographic, and political changes that took place in France in recent decades. After what has been called in French the *Trente Glorieuses*—the thirty years of prosperity following the Second World War—the oil crisis and, more crucially, the restructuring of the economy with the industrial decline had important consequences. First, the increase in unemployment and job insecurity, concomitant with the enrichment of a minority, resulted in growing levels of poverty and inequality; as a “minimum guaranteed income” was instituted in 1988 for the disadvantaged, the language of social exclusion, with the idea that disparities were no longer vertical (up/down) but horizontal (in/out), became commonplace. Second, the immigrant workforce, which had been so decisive in the period of economic growth, became undesirable, and restrictions were brought to labor immigration, then to family reunification, eventually to any entry of foreigners from developing countries, including asylum seekers, henceforth



suspected of being so-called false refugees; the rapid progression of the far-right National Front, whose candidate came second in the 2002 presidential election, was mostly based on a xenophobic discourse, which made the “immigration question” a central issue in the public debate. Third, after twenty-three years of right-wing domination—under Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing—the left took power with the 1981 election of Socialist François Mitterrand, who remained president for fourteen years, the longest mandate under the Fifth Republic; however, this political change inaugurated a period of instability, with the alternation of majorities in the National Assembly, leading from 2002 to an exclusive domination of an increasingly conservative right, with Jacques Chirac and later Nicolas Sarkozy as presidents. It is in this context of profound objective change that the subjective metamorphosis I am analyzing here should be understood. The contradictions between the social, economic, and political evolution and the founding values of French democracy, the confrontation between the neoliberal policies of the governments and the moral concerns of civil society partially expressed via nongovernmental organizations, account for the emergence of compassion as an ambiguous principle underlying the politics toward the disadvantaged, not exclusive, in its actual practice, of the exercise of repression.

The second series of case studies is embedded in broader transformations on the global scene. The progressive collapse of the Communist regimes, which reached its climax with the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, reconfigured the international political order that had been shaped by the Cold War for several decades. These events precipitated rather than directly provoked structural changes at the level of the planet. First, the neoliberal creed appeared not only stronger than ever, but even the only viable ideology; the negotiations of the World Trade Organization established this ultimate victory, leaving open however the 2002 Doha “health exception,” a compassionate measure to keep certain drugs accessible for the most severe diseases. Second, the supremacy of the Western world under the banner of the United States gave birth to a doctrine of interventionism, officially sanctioned by the adoption of the “responsibility to protect” principle at the 2005 World Summit of the United Nations; from Somalia to Bosnia to East Timor, the invocation of this moral obligation served as a justification for military interventions, with or without the legality of the Security Council vote. Third, the presence of nongovernmental actors instituted a new equilibrium of power with states and international agencies; AIDS activists such as the South African Treatment Action Campaign, charity organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières, and private foundations on the

model of the Gates Foundation redrew the political map of the world. It is in this context of changing moral geography that one should apprehend the attitudes toward children in South Africa or disaster victims in Venezuela, and the stakes of humanitarian action in the Palestinian Territories or in Iraq.

In the first section of this book, I examine the policies implemented in France over the past two decades in relation to the marginal and the excluded, the unemployed and the poor, undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers through four case studies. The identification of psychic suffering resulting from social conditions led to the establishment, from 1996 onward, of so-called places of listening for marginalized teenagers and youth at risk in poor urban neighborhoods. Set up by psychiatrists and staffed by psychologists, these facilities redefined social inequality in the language of mental health; however, rather than a psychiatrization or psychologization of the social question that many prophesied, what actually occurred was the dissemination of moral sentiments in deprofessionalized spaces where presumed suffering was addressed (chapter 1). Shortly after, the abolition of emergency welfare grants for the unemployed in late 1997 sparked major protests, to which the government responded by announcing the allotment of 1 million euros on the basis of individual case assessments. Analysis of the actual procedures for distribution of this public largesse reveals the principles of justice and the practices of judgment within state services. Notably, given that applicants were required to adopt the method of petition, we can see how the exposition of their hardship results in an emotional fatigue among administrators that ultimately produces a mixture of contingency and arbitrariness in the allocation of financial aid (chapter 2). The following year, as a result of demands by charitable organizations seeking to prevent people in poor health from being deported, a criterion was introduced into the 1998 law on immigration allowing immigrants suffering from a serious illness to be granted residence. This compassionate regimen concludes a development whereby the body of the immigrant, previously valued for its labor force, is now increasingly recognized on the basis of the illness that invalidates it. A study of the practices of physicians responsible for selecting the individuals to be granted residence demonstrates the shift in legitimacy from social life to biological life (chapter 3). In parallel, the dramatic decrease in the numbers of those granted asylum, which plummeted to less than one out of five in 2000, induces a growing demand for evidence, primarily medical certificates testifying to the persecution suffered. As the condition of refugees is delegitimized, this new scenario underlines the way the applicant's word is discredited and increasingly

replaced by the opinions of experts. Analysis of the attestations produced and of campaigns by support organizations shows how what appears to be a simple search for truth becomes a practice of testing veracity through the body, altering the spirit and even the letter of the 1951 Geneva Convention (chapter 4). Although oriented toward different publics, these politics of precarious life draw the moral landscape of contemporary France.

The liminality of the situation of refugees and the ambiguity of the hospitality they are provided offers a transition between the national and the international scenes (chapter 5). The controversy over the center of Sangatte between 1999 and 2001 is remarkably revealing, since it opens onto transnational issues, with the growing tension between compassion and repression in the management of immigrants and the deterrence of asylum seekers. On the border, the contradictions between the rhetoric of human rights and the practice of exception and the polarization of the world between a North to be protected and the South viewed as a threat become extreme.

In the second section of the book, I consider the implementation of humanitarian practices as a means of addressing afflictions throughout the world, again via four case studies distributed across four continents. The AIDS epidemic has affected South Africa more than any other country and since 2000 has resulted in an unprecedented political and social crisis, particularly painful in relation to children. The vulnerability of this age group is manifested through the three images, omnipresent in the public space, of the sick child, the abused infant, and the orphan. However, the empirical investigation reveals the implications of this emotional mobilization, especially the misrecognition of historical and social realities to which it contributes (chapter 6). A similar observation can be made about Venezuela, where the natural disaster of December 1999 occurred in a specific context of moral reconstruction of the nation and indeed, by a remarkable coincidence, on the very day of a referendum on the new constitution. Faced with collective misfortune, the entire society supported the declaration of a state of exception to facilitate aid to the victims. The unanimous compassion thus masked both the violence perpetrated by the police and the army, and the deep disparities in the support offered to victims (chapter 7). The same affective dimension was at stake during the Second Intifada, which erupted in September 2000, and more specifically via the emergence of a humanitarian testimony in the international public arena. On the basis of their members' experience as psychologists and psychiatrists, nongovernmental organizations exposed the wounds of the violent occupation of Palestinian territories by the Israeli army using the language of trauma.

The documents produced by Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde illustrate the difficulties and obstacles this language presents both to articulating the historical and political context of suffering and to recognizing local forms of subjectivation of violence (chapter 8). Humanitarianism was again put to the test in April 2003 by the launch of the Iraq War, which highlighted, even more clearly than any other recent conflict, its complex relationships with the military. The heated debate in Médecins Sans Frontières about whether it should remain in Baghdad when bombing was imminent questions the meaning of such a potential sacrifice. The implications of the decision to stay demonstrate the difficulty of weighing the relative value of lives and ultimately reveal ontological inequalities rarely recognized for what they are (chapter 9). Beyond the diversity of situations and contexts, it is the logics and consequences of the deployment of humanitarian reason in these various sites that are at stake.

This book thus brings together works I have conducted over a decade. However, the project, which was outlined in my seminar on “the politics of suffering” at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in the early 2000s, has progressively shifted and been refined over time. My initial intuitions have been confirmed for some and corrected for others. This is why I decided to publish the texts, many of which were not easily accessible, that marked this journey, but to rewrite them completely to give my argument the coherence that is now apparent to me. It is usual when collecting papers for a volume to leave them in their original form, partly through a concern for authenticity, partly because of the difficulty and length of any revision that transcends the purely cosmetic. I go against this custom here in order to make sense of a project that only became completely intelligible to me when I reached the end of it—an end that is of course in itself provisional. Via a series of studies on apparently disparate subjects and geographically diverse locations, it is an endeavor to grasp humanitarian government in the diversity of its expressions, to explore the complexity of contemporary moral economies, and therefore to contribute as an anthropologist to the moral history of the present.