

Living in Emergency: humanitarian images and the inequality of lives

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Abstract

Within the growing literature in the political economy of humanitarianism, this paper focuses on ethical dilemmas raised by increased marketization. The aim of this article is to investigate the paradoxical relationship between humanitarianism as a project and the construction of an “emergency imaginary”, focusing on the ways in which aid agencies produce and disseminate images of human suffering. This article will first explore how the growth of humanitarianism in the last decades has been strongly correlated with the expanded use of image-based fundraising and awareness-raising campaigns. The focus will then examine the relationship between these images and the forging of “emergencies” aimed at persuading the audience to donate to aid projects. Finally, it will analyze how the humanitarian discourse shaped by fundraising appeals is playing an important role in shifting our attention from development to emergency assistance, as well as in establishing a moral geography of the world. Indeed, humanitarian aid rhetoric often portrays the wealthy global North as the “supranatural” performer of a civilizing mission in the underdeveloped South.

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism

Walter Benjamin

Introduction

The present article is not intended to condemn humanitarian assistance at large. Rather, its aim is to unveil some of the contradictions inherent in humanitarian projects, while analyzing the consequences of choices made and practices implemented, specifically, by marketing practitioners of mainstream non governmental organizations (NGOs) and humanitarian agencies.

Humanitarian assistance is typically associated with fieldwork, ranging from that of “Doctors Without Borders” staff engaged in saving lives in conflict zones, foreign social workers

providing relief and emergency response to victims of natural disasters, to well-intentioned individuals providing aid to hunger-stricken people. However, one should remember to give thanks to the daily efforts of the media and fund raising departments if human rights and humanitarian intervention are turned into practice. This article shows that the operations of marketing and fund raising departments are vital for the effectiveness of any humanitarian organization. The importance of these players has come to the fore particularly in the last several decades in the wake of considerable cuts in government funds to NGOs.

This article focuses on the methods used by NGOs to carry out their marketing activities, as well as on the weight that marketing departments have. It will show how humanitarian marketing practitioners can be considered as “political actors”. They adopt strategies that make financial sense, but lead to fundamental ethical dilemmas. For instance, how do we relate to the images of distant sufferers? What would solidarity with the people in such photographs mean? Why are such images tarred as voyeuristic, exploitative, and pornographic? Such issues beg the question of the ethical role of the NGOs marketing strategies, as well as the media, in public life today.

The intimate connection between international human rights awareness and photography was manifested already from the early days of humanitarian assistance: images and emotions have been central in making an audience empathize with the fate of complete strangers. The emotional and evocative power of photography is one of its main valuable assets, as well as a potential danger.

As influenced by both Benjamin’s friend and comrade, and by Frankfurt School authors, several twentieth-century photography critics argued that the victimization as portrayed by images could only offer a grim choice between narcissistic identification and voyeurism. Benjamin was highly suspicious of the passive, aestheticized society created by photographic images, which had turned “abject poverty itself ... into an object of enjoyment” and made “human misery an object of consumption” (Benjamin, 1996).

Sontag’s article “*On Photography*” and Barthes’s “*Camera Lucida*”, published in the late seventies, were pioneer texts in criticizing the image as “imperialistic”, “voyeuristic”, “predatory”, “addictive”, and “reductive”. Similarly, they criticized professional photographers as “agents of Death”, consistently with the view of the postmodern and poststructuralist children of Sontag and Barthes in that photographs were not only an integral part of capitalism but also its obedient slave. The “regime of the image” has been described as a “tool of oppression”, deeply implicated in the “apparatus of ideological control” wielded by the ruling

class, while the depiction of powerless, vulnerable people was seen as a metaphor of the “imperialist sensibility in all phases of cultural life” (Sontag, 2002). With that said, there is undeniably a strong correlation between the practice of photojournalism and the rise of human rights movements (Linfield, 2010).

Can photography itself make the world more livable? Can it illuminate the dark?

On the one hand, images of victims have made a real difference in the creation of a human rights consciousness. On the other hand, employed for fundraising purposes it has reproduced what has been called the “humanitarian narrative”, a social construction that shapes an “emergency imaginary”, related to the spectacle and commodification of suffering. Within this imaginary, snapshots of helpless victims become the public face of humanitarianism and aid organizations, as well as of Western donors, appearing as the only heroes who can respond to emergencies. Moreover, many campaigns with a focus on human rights, hunger, social injustice, gender inequality, conflict, and poverty are all packaged and sold to us as humanitarian emergencies. As a consequence, our perception of living in a world of constant emergencies is reinforced.

The purpose of this article is to show that when humanitarian action is reduced to the task of reducing suffering and saving lives, as compared to the moral general possibility of improving them, working for long term progress in the pursuit of human rights, end of inequalities and social injustice through political actions, the role of NGOs is challenged. If all the contradictions and limits of development are presented as emergencies by the NGOs, the idea of humanitarianism shifts toward the more general idea of charity and philanthropy, and their own mission risks being more and more associated with low-cost managers that can intervene to solve these “exceptions” to the global order and to put things right again.

From my point of view, the investigation of the semantic field of the “humanitarian space” is necessary to understand whether or not the media used by fundraising campaigners entertains a genuine commitment to the far-apart targets of humanitarian assistance. It will also be significant to see whether NGOs can create a global audience with a sense of social responsibility towards the distant sufferer.

The humanitarian narrative is determinant because, as Orbinski stressed during the speech for the Nobel Peace Prize received by Doctors Without Borders (MSF), it shapes a political discourse that has profound consequences for the production of social reality, in our rich countries as well as in the so-called Third World.

Moreover, humanitarian aid images and appeals that reach us in our living rooms produce norms as to how the audience should relate to the sufferer and what they should do about the very source of that suffering. To analyze the ethical values embedded in this discourse is to reveal the status of “bare life”, to borrow Agamben’s term (Agamben, 1998). The “life” that Agamben wrote about is same life that serves as the basis of the very concept of “humanity”, which is separable from specific cultures and web of relationship, towards as human beings we have ethical obligations.

This article explores these ethical and political dilemmas related to the visual portrayal of human suffering based on both the author’s 10-year long experience as president of an Italian NGO and qualitative research that interviewed several humanitarian marketing managers. In the last four years I have invited marketing managers of a number of Italian and international NGOs to present their activities to classroom students, as well as the contradictions that make the object of the following discussion.

1. Humanitarianism: Images and emotions

To better investigate how the humanitarian discourse is related to the photographic imagery let me start with a brief history of the origin of humanitarianism, an idea usually referred to as consisting of virtually any activity motivated by the desire to improve the life of the worse-off. We can contextualize the humanitarian space - intended as a moral imperative to act directly in response to fundamental values and urgent needs - within the moral order of what Taylor (2004) calls the “modern social imaginary”: our common understanding of what legitimates our social arrangements. As argued by Taylor, humanitarianism is part of modern social imaginaries: it reflects at once a secular view and a more monotheistic-transcendent notion of the Good. It means that the defining principles of it - humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence – are part of what Taylor calls “the long march” to modernity.

As many authors assert, contemporary forms of humanitarianism began to emerge in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, originated from a mixture of religious and Enlightenment ideas. In a context marked by the rapid rise of modern industrialization, urbanization and market expansion, the development of modern nation states, the continuous achievements of modern science and technology, “various intellectuals, politicians, jurists, and members of the clergy adopted the language of humanitarianism to describe their proposed social and political reforms and to push for public interventions to alleviate suffering and restore society's moral basis” (Barnett, Weiss, 2008, p. 21). Charity for the poor, regulations

regarding child labor, the end of the slave trade and mass education were the main ideas campaigned by humanitarian activists.

The intimate connection between international human-rights consciousness and photography has manifested itself since the early days of humanitarian movements: The phrase “crime against humanity” is believed to have been first used during the Anglo-American campaign against the crimes committed by King Leopold in the colonized Congo.

Part of the development literature believes that international humanitarianism in conflict settings is a concept harking back to J. H. Dunant’s call for the establishment of a permanent system of humanitarian assistance after witnessing the 1859 battle of Solferino. However, it was only at the time of the first Biafra war that modern humanitarian movements were first organized. In 1968 Biafra, a generation of children was starving to death. As Gourevitch (2010) argues, “hardly anybody in the rest of the world paid attention until a reporter from the *Sun*, the London tabloid, visited Biafra with a photographer and encountered the wasting children: eerie, withered little wraiths. The newspaper ran the pictures alongside harrowing reportage for days on end. Soon, the story got picked up by newspapers all over the world. More photographers made their way to Biafra, and television crews, too. Suddenly, Biafra’s hunger was one of the defining stories of the age — the graphic suffering of innocents made an inescapable appeal to conscience — and the humanitarian-aid business as we know it today came into being”.

Stick-limbed, balloon-bellied, ancient-eyed, the tiny, failing bodies of Biafra had become as heavy a presence on evening-news broadcasts as battlefield dispatches from Vietnam. The Americans who took to the streets to demand government action were often the same demonstrators who were protesting against their government’s Vietnam strategy. Out of Vietnam and into Biafra—that was the message. As Mesnard (2002) has shown, the Holocaust and the Biafra war became one thing through the eye of a camera: few had seen such images since the liberation of the Nazi death camps. Compelled by that visual comparison, Westerners contributed money, time, and in some cases their lives, to the Biafra cause. It appears that the people in the West believed that another genocide was imminent. On the face of this potential aberration the humanitarian response turned out to be unprecedented in its scope and accomplishment.

Images have played a key role in making the international public opinion sympathetic to the misfortunes of fellow human beings. Photography has made a significant difference in the creation of a human-rights consciousness. It is simply impossible to imagine transnational NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or MSF in the pre-photographic

era. Moreover, it is difficult to understand the link between the visual projections of human suffering and the growth of the so-called humanitarian industry without taking into account that in 1967 the International Committee of the Red Cross had a total annual budget of just half a million dollars. A year later, the Red Cross started to spend approximately one and a half million dollars per month in Biafra alone, while the number of other NGOs, both secular and religious ones (including Oxfam, Caritas, and Concern), was also growing exponentially in response to Biafra.

The Biafra war led to a rethinking of humanitarian aid and inspired the founding of MSF in 1971. What is often overlooked, however, is that since the Biafra crises, the number of NGOs soared, and so did their annual budgets, as well as their influence. To mention but one example: As of 1967, the Red Cross was reputed for being the oldest and largest NGO across the board; by contrast, today it does not even figure among the significant members of the club of “Big Eight”. The eight members of this club make up for over 70 percent of the world’s relief budget. Like other areas of the non-profit sector, the world of NGOs can be compared to an oligopoly, dominated by a limited number of sizeable actors, surrounded by a plethora of smaller actors engaged in a constant struggle to attract the “crumbs” (Kerlin and Thanasombat, 2006).

As Salamon (1994) suggested, the status acquired by nonprofit associations in our time is comparable to the strength and influence that characterized nascent nation states in the late 19th century. Let it suffice to observe that some of the biggest NGO brand names (such as Oxfam, Care, World Vision, Save the Children) are mammoth organizations with financial power often several times that of small states.

When I asked some of the NGO's fundraising managers that they were being compared to “corporations *of the heart*”, they answered that their marketing strategies can raise more money and save more lives. And what about the negative effects of these strategies? Were they aware of the fact that NGO fundraising campaigns might be helping to create a widespread and erroneous impression that the “Third World” poor are hapless, hopeless, and even blameworthy? The answer is that alongside their fundraising strategies, NGOs promote campaigns to raise public and political support for the promotion and diffusion of global citizenship.

This is true: Campaigning, advocacy and lobbying are an important part of NGO work. Day by day, NGOs step up the implementation of global education viewpoint in early childhood education, at school, in major education, in teacher training, in science and cultural policy and social policy decisions. Nevertheless, conventional wisdom has it that bad news travels farther

than good news; public opinion seems more easily affected by one or two “horror stories” than by daily education (Carr, Mc Auliffe, Mac Lachlan, 1998). So, what do we actually get to know about global crises and the lives of people involved in humanitarian emergencies? What kinds of solidarity or citizenship are NGOs striving to promote? What vision of the world? What about the contradictions that characterize the political disorder of the world: the inequality of lives?

To those who consider themselves not only a “corporation *with* a heart” but also “doctors of the heart” it is hard to object to the fact that *more* is not always a synonym for *better*.

2. From Development to Emergency

Starting from the end of World War II, a hallmark of mainstream economic and political thought in the West is the optimistic view that development is a more or less steady, linear process towards a clear goal. But a combination of factors in the post-Cold War era has made the deviations from this narrative increasingly visible. For reasons that are discussed below, in the last two decades the status of development has become difficult to ascertain.

Although we can distinguish three main periods within contemporary humanitarianism (from the early nineteenth century through World War II; from 1945 until the end of the cold war; and from 1990 until today). This article focuses on the latter period. NGOs have become extremely popular players of the international aid community since the 1970s. However, it is during the past two decades that humanitarian organizations have been careening from one major emergency to another, occasioning growth of humanitarian intervention at unprecedented rates.

As pointed out in a World Bank Key Document “since the mid-1970s, the NGO sector in both developed and developing countries has experienced exponential growth.... It is now estimated that over 15 percent of total overseas development aid is channeled through NGOs.” That is, roughly \$8 billion dollars. Why have NGOs become increasingly important in the past two decades?

Without a doubt the end of the Cold War made it easier for NGOs to operate; there has been an increase of resources, a growing professionalism and more employment opportunities within the NGO community. Robbins (2002) suggests that NGOs have developed as part of a larger, neoliberal economic and political agenda. Shifts in economic and political ideology have lent increasing support of NGOs from governments and official aid agencies in response. For some analysts the term “humanitarian aid” is synonymous with “aid industry,” in which NGOs are viewed as effective tools or channels for donors to provide international development funds to

low-income countries. Conversely, they are seen as vehicles for privatizing foreign assistance, making it less accountable to either government authorities or local people because of NGOs' lack of clear internal governance structures (Rieff, 2002).

Far from the ideological criticisms traditionally aimed at humanitarian organizations, the author's perspective stresses that the multi-billion dollar humanitarian sector includes a diverse array of NGOs, international regulatory agencies, advocacy institutes, and private foundations whose focus varies from emergency relief to long-term development assistance, to human rights advocacy. However, what is problematic is that within this broad and diverse array, what is missing is a clear-cut definition, and therefore distinction between humanitarian and development aid. For instance, Browne (2006, p. 12) argues that "aid is developmental, but the term is imprecise. ODA actually includes resources provided to developing countries for relief, emergency and humanitarian (including refugee) purposes. In practice, the distinction between development and relief aid are often unclear".

Analyzing different data, Fearon (2008) highlighted how the rise of emergency response aid began in the early 1990s and still continues today. In the last thirty years, the increase in the size of emergency aid appears both in terms and as percentage of all official development aid. Why? There are different reasons to explain this wider shift from development to emergency aid. The point that needs to be stressed is that this shift is due to, among other factors, the increasing competition in fundraising initiatives and the consequent saturation of the actors holding a stake in "market of suffering". It is a competition that is closely linked to the "humanitarian narrative": the visual construction of human suffering promoted by Western media and NGOs marketing campaigns to persuade people to donate to aid projects.

As shown by official data, in the last decades private donations to humanitarian NGOs have increased twice as fast as contributions from the United States and the European Union governments. This trend is particularly evident in the U.S., where private money appears to have increased from \$1 billion in 1991 to about \$4 billion in 2003. Similarly, funding for the nonprofit sector by the Italian government has been slashed in recent years. Yet, global NGO "talking brands" such as MSF, Save the children, Action Aid, Amnesty International are still able to raise millions of Euros in private donations.

Alex de Waal (1997) suggests that increasing competition among NGOs has pushed them toward emergency aid and away from longer-term development aid, because it is easier to raise private donations for emergencies than for development projects. On the contrary, Fearon notes that the data do not support de Waal's conjecture because: "The growth rate of the total private

donations to NGOs whose top concern is coded as emergency relief or refugees is nearly identical to the growth of total private money reported by NGOs whose top concern is coded as development or health” (Fearon, 2008, p. 70).

Doubts exist as to whether we can effectively distinguish between NGOs providing emergency response and development aid. I am not so sure that a definitive distinction can be drawn between NGOs that deal with emergency relief from those engaged in development. To better explain this doubt, let me tell you a short story: A few months ago, I organized a conference in Bologna on the topic of humanitarian emergencies and communication. I invited the communication manager of one of Italy’s most famous and most influential NGOs, called Emergency. The communications manager accepted my invitation but told me, “You should know that we do not deal with emergency, but rather than with development and health.” As you can read on their website, Emergency is “an independent NGO, founded in Italy to provide high quality and free of charge health care to the war and poverty victims.” As they stressed to me before and during the conference, their concern is not emergency. Indeed, having consulted their Statute I was to realize that out of the Association’s eleven founding objectives (Article 6), only two deal directly with the provision of relief and aid to the victims of natural disasters, whereas the remainder are written in much more general terms, broadly addressing the organization’s concern with guaranteeing primary health care, providing training to local staff and advocating for human rights and a culture of peace and solidarity. So, why did they decide to name their NGO Emergency?

I believe their choice (consciously or not) reflects the way discourse in the humanitarian space has increasingly come to describe global problems as “emergencies”. So, it is not rare that even when an NGO concern is not coded as emergency, the imaginary it shapes with its communication it is, using Calhoun's (2008) terms, an “emergency imaginary”.

The construction of “emergencies” in terms of a social imaginary that gives characteristic form to both perception and action is one of the most important factors that have contributed to nourish the growth of humanitarian organizations. We can call it an “emergency imaginary” that shapes the definition and rhetoric of emergencies, the ways in which they are produced and recognized, and the organization of intervention. Thanks to the affirmation of this framework NGOs and, more general, interventions into “complex humanitarian emergencies” have become a central part of global society.

In the words of Fassin and Pandolfi (2010, p. 15), the “contemporary states of emergency” constitute a sort of “no-man's land between public law and political fact, and between the

juridical order and life”. In other words, a form of “globalized biopolitics” (Foucault, 1977). On the one hand, many people have lost faith in both economic development and political struggle as ways of trying to improve the human lot, so humanitarianism flourishes as an ethical response to emergencies. On the other hand, the “humanitarian narrative” shaped by the fund raising appeals, is playing an important role in shifting our attention from development to emergency assistance. Watching most of the humanitarian appeals, we find ourselves living in a world of constant emergencies. Nowadays, issues of human rights, governance, social injustice, gender inequality, conflict, and poverty are all packaged and sold to us as humanitarian emergencies to the point that emergencies are not the exceptions but rather the norm.

Among the different factors that have contributed to create this “emergency imaginary”, the communications advances, especially the Internet, which have helped create new global communities and bonds between like-minded people across state boundaries. I am referring not only to a world as a “global village” as theorized by McLuhan (1967), rather than to the new role for the imagination in social life (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). Adopting the framework proposed by Appadurai, it can be assumed that the “emergency imaginary” within NGOs finds its *raison d’être*, because it is driven by the relationship between “mediascape” - the images of the world created by the media - and “ideoscapes” - the ideological Western views of democracy, welfare rights, and sovereignty.

In the words of Barnett and Weiss, “the terrain on which humanitarians walk is nourished by the forces of destruction, production, and salvation” (2008, p. 15). What the authors call the “forces of destruction” include how media imagery has increased public awareness, which, in turn, has created a demand that something be done in the face of conscience-shocking suffering. In response to the action of the so-called “forces of destruction”, in the last several decades we have seen the configuration of the so-called “forces of salvation”, which concern moral discourses, religious beliefs, ethical commitments, and international norms that generate an obligation to help distant strangers. Finally, the so-called “forces of production” include capitalism and the global economy, the neoliberal ideology regarding the state's role in society, and the funding environment.

To understand how the “emergency imaginary” is interconnected with the forces identified by Barnett and Weiss, and how difficult it is nowadays to distinguish between development and relief aid, you are invited to have a look at the website of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) from the United Kingdom. The DEC is an umbrella organization for 13 humanitarian aid agencies. As they wrote in their website: “At times of overseas emergency, the DEC brings

together a unique alliance of the UK's aid, corporate, public and broadcasting sectors to rally the nation's compassion, and ensure that funds raised go to DEC agencies best placed to deliver effective and timely relief to people most in need”.

Pay attention to the fact that among the DEC members we find NGOs, such as Oxfam, Action Aid, World Vision, Save the Children, among the others, whose top concern is development or health care and not emergency relief.

To understand how “Thanks to the generosity of donors (we) have raised amazing amounts of money which has helped save lives and rebuild communities devastated by disasters” (as they quote on their website), I invite you to watch two short videos that are part of their “national fundraising appeal to finance urgently needed humanitarian relief” (dec.org.uk/item/200; dec.org.uk/item/372).

In the first video-appeal, showing strong images of desperate people crying, they present the situation in Pakistan, where “20 million people are believed to have been affected by the floods”. In the second one, where you can see very similar images, they depict the situation in Gaza, where “thousands of people are struggling to survive”. Two different crises, both part of the “emergency imaginary”. As the compassionate voice recites in the first appeal, DEC “is not political. It is a charity and delivery care to the millions who lost everything. Your generosity... your donations is vital... immediately!”. The same voice, in the second appeal, affirms: “It is not about the right and wrong of the conflict... These people simply need your help”.

Although we can accept the floods in Pakistan as a natural disaster (we could question how NGOs compensated for the absence and subsequent failure of the state's Disaster Management Agency), how can we accept that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is termed an emergency after half a century?

As you can see watching the two videos, the visual construction of human suffering has to be abstracted from any wider conflict over political aims and, above all, has to amplify the gravity of the situation or selectively report the worst aspects in order to arouse a sufficient awareness and action to raise a response. There is the belief that we are more moved by acute crises than by chronic crises, and that images must play to this.

What are the humanitarianism's relations to politics? It is implied in the idea of neutrality, humanitarian space as a space of innocence? Victims are represented only in abstract terms, denying agency to those who suffer, the crises is amplified in a way that boost fundraising, and stories of suffering are presented without political or historical context. As stated by Polman

(2010): extreme suffering depicted by humanitarian narrative leaves no room for political speech.

The claim of DEC to be “not political, only charity” assumes that humanitarianism is a space free of army and politics. However, isn’t the very claim to have a right to decide over people’s life and death already deeply political? I am not sure it is neither possible nor desirable to separate humanitarianism’s relations to politics, because the humanitarian act, adopting Orbinski's terms, has the most profound of political implications.

It is clear how the term emergency became a sort of counterpoint to the idea of global order. In the two videos, the narratives implied that: things usually worked well, but occasionally went wrong, so we must intervene to restore linearity (Calhoun, 2008). This normalization of the emergencies reflects a wider shift from the development optimism (intended as a global moral engagement) to humanitarianism as a need of intervention to solve emergencies and restore linearity. We can define this shift as a post-developmental strategy that reflects “the unmaking of the Third World” (Escobar 1995), that is, the failure of development. I do not use post-development in Escobar's term, as “resistance to modernization”, a kind of “the Rest saying not to the West”. I use the term post-development differently, recognizing the ongoing failure of the development project, driven by the major international institutions of the so-called Washington Consensus, but also identifying humanitarian actors as low cost managers of exclusion on a planetary scale. Moreover, considering the high percentage of private donations in within the total budget of many NGOs, we can describe humanitarianism as a “citizens response to political failure”.

3. The inequality of suffering

The two previous videos mentioned expressed how competition plays out in both fundraising activities and in the so-called “market of the suffering.” They represent only a sample of how the game is played in fund-raising competition and pressure for sharing the so-called “market of suffering”. With their demand for immediate action, appeals of the kind just discussed shape our perception of humanitarian action with a sense of urgency. As Calhoun (2008, p. 86) has written: “The very term “emergency” and the discourse to which it is central naturalize what are in fact products of human action and, specifically, violent conflict. They represent as sudden, unpredictable, and short term what are commonly gradually developing, predictable, and enduring clusters of events and interactions. And they simultaneously locate in particular settings what are in fact crises produced at least partially by global forces and dislocate the standpoint of observation from that of the wealthy global North to a view from nowhere”.

Thanks to the skillful use of multimedia technologies, the “emergency imaginary” successfully manages to send out a powerful message to the viewer, who is turned at once into a witness to remote events. This is how human suffering enters our conscience. In this “philanthropic gaze” bodily pain and suffering are shepherded into specific narratives that justify humanitarian ends. As a consequence, people increasingly feel cognizant of and implicated in the plight of the distant other.

As in the two video of the DEC, images tell a story of suffering bodies and an aid organization with the means to intervene. Here we find what Chandler (2002) calls a moral ‘fairy story’, composed by three components: first, the hapless victim in distress, portrayed through film of the worst cases in the worst areas; second, the villain or the disaster that cause the crises; and third, the savior, the aid agency or institution, an external agency whose interests are seen as inseparable from those of the deserving victim.

The media’s ability to inform more people about global problems leads to increased awareness where the public may demand that their governments take action of some kind. In other words: media technologies have enabled large-scale humanitarianism precisely because they challenge the notion of distance. Transporting the image of the starving stranger from the catastrophe to the spectator’s doorsteps, geographic distance, as well as social and cultural (or ethnic) distance is canceled. Mediascape influences not only our awareness about global disasters and distant suffering, but also our moral universe, our sense of responsibility, or even of culpability. We cannot say I didn’t know. We must show concern for the “other”, usually a starving child or a desperate woman (Kennedy, 2009).

Peter Singer (2002) has most famously claimed our responsibility to do something for the world's poor. As he has argued in many books, contributing to helping to make the world a better place is something that actually is more important to us having a good life than the various luxuries that we might have spent that money on. Suggesting to donate only 1 percent of our income to world poverty, the philosopher argues that we can raise something like \$500 billion: A very sizable sum of money, enough to meet the Millenium Development Goals. But to achieve this ambitious goal, we should be able to empathize with complete strangers, because we (might) have moral obligations to help those suffering from famine, even when they are 10,000 miles away. If it is in our power to prevent something very bad happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it: This is how the moral obligation is formulated.

Singer's idea that the feeling of humanity doesn't evaporates in embracing all mankind (as Rousseau observed) it is related to Haskell's "recipe". Exploring the origins of the humanitarian sensibility and its relationship with capitalism, Haskell (1985) has shown the power of technologies of imagery to bridge distance and attract support. In order to explain how the rise of humanitarianism is linked to media imagery, he proposed the concept of "recipe": humanitarian images offer a specific sequence of steps we can take to put in action our responsibility for the distant other.

When engaged in fundraising, humanitarian organizations offer the prospective donor a veritable menu for intervention: the donor can disburse \$25 to secure survival to an African family; \$1 per day to bring about the change in the world, so on, so forth. This type of *à la carte* intervention has become a standard fundraising practice for most humanitarian agencies.

The basic message is: open your heart, open your mind, and thus open your wallet. But, in doing so, humanitarian organizations must bridge distances, transporting the distant stranger from the South to the donor's doorsteps. And the distant stranger has to be a victim less fortunate, materially, than the donors themselves. As Zucker and Weiner (1993) suggest: The more poverty is perceived as under control of the poor themselves, the less it evoked sympathy and intention to help. Humanitarian aid should be allocated to genuine victims of circumstance, not to those who can help themselves. Better if our donations go to the victims of some disaster relief than to someone who will invest in a more socially equitable world, because from the vantage point of a personal belief in social justice, "one is able to feel more comfortable about life's social inequities, such as poverty, by attributing them to the natural order" (Lerner, 1980). Attributions concerning fate, chance, or situations beyond human control might extent the possibility to raise more donations. Better if, in turn, the "gift" has the potential to enlighten Western donors, namely by giving them some insight into the "fatalistic" perspective of the poor themselves.

A UNHCR ad that could be found in Italian magazines as of last year provides a telling example (photo 1). The smiling woman is Margherita Buy, a famous Italian actress, and the headline says: "It takes so few to become an Angel. It takes so few to make a miracle. With only 8 Euro per month you can protect, help and even save the lives of a family of refugees. Become an Angel of the UNHCR you too. A whole African family is waiting for this miracle".



(Photo 1)

Although humanitarian narrative is often the mirror of a secular view, here is evident how Christianity and Christian faith-based organizations have (had) the most significant influence on contemporary humanitarian action. The reference to the “Good Samaritan” is explicit. If we usually find the characterization of the humanitarian as a hero (often a doctor), in this case the hero becomes an Angel, who makes Miracles. Moreover, within the neoliberal capitalistic logic, the donor is a sort of a God who can, thanks to its own money, save the life of a whole African family. The contrast between the holy smile of the proud white actress and the expression of waiting of the voiceless black family reproduce a particular social hierarchy: Humanity is split into victim and rescuer. Where the former is a passive recipient of aid, and the latter are the Angels who donate their money to give the chance to the heroic aid organization to make miracles. As in the whole imagery of humanitarian work, it is here impossible to distinguish the desire to help others from the desire to amplify the self, to distinguish altruism from narcissism (Boltanski, 1999).

Focusing humanitarianism as a “politics of life”, Fassin (2007) underlines the complex ontology of inequality unfolds that differentiates in a hierarchical manner the values of human lives. What he calls “politics of life” are politics that give specific value and meaning to human life. In the case of these fundraising campaigns, the ontological principle of inequality finds its concrete manifestation in the act of assistance through which individuals identified as victims are established. They are those for whom the gift cannot imply a counter-gift, since it is assumed that they can only receive. They are the indebted of the world.

It is from these representations of suffering that media apparatus and humanitarian marketing strategies generate a matrix of indistinct stereotypes, prejudices, and theoretical elaborations to form a gallery of performances that have now become part of the collective imagination of Western societies. NGO fund raising posters have been a major user of images of the poor, which alongside general media news footage of disasters and poverty can frequently reinforce the perception of Africans as helpless victims. On the contrary, Western donors appear as heroes, elevated by the ability of their money to solve the problems of the poor, needy and passive, as well as patients awaiting the advent of the *deus ex machina* that resolves all threat to health and safety. This representation of a victim in a non-place is detached from its historical causes, from international economic mechanisms. It is a process that essentializes the victims: against the thickness of biographies and the complexity of history, it draws a figure to which humanitarian aid is directed.

As Easterly (2010) suggests: “Development establishment has a double standard: rights for the rich, and not for the poor”. The humanitarian agencies find it more convenient to speak of development as an apolitical and technocratic problem. So continues the long history of double standards of accountability and individual rights for rich and poor countries.

What matters – the medium or the message?

As many videos with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt or George Clooney, this image establishes a moral geography of the world. It portrays the rich Western culture as a “supranatural” source of civilization intervening in the poor South. Evidence shows that such images, aptly projected and replicated thanks to multimedia technologies, have been internalized by the Western consciousness, because Western movies contribute to nourish what Diawara (2010, p. 77) has called the “humanitarian tarzanism”, which depict Africans as helpless and voiceless: “Tarzan is alive and doing well as a philanthropist program coordinator in Africa, a USAID manager, a director of the Centre Culturel Francais, or simply as the President of an NGOs fighting corruption or HIV [...] What we need most is a clear understanding of European and American interests and policies in Africa”.



The videos of DEC are not so different from other advertising campaigns. "When you're starving, anything looks appetizing", says this ad of the UN World Food Program (Photo 2). "Refugees would like to have the same problems you have", is the headline of the other one (Photo 3). Both photos reiterate the message given in the WFP official video broadcasted in Italy (<http://it.wfp.org>).



"When you're starving, anything looks appetising."

Advertising Campaign for the UNWorld Food Programme

30 *Living in Emergency: humanitarian images and the inequality of lives*

As we can see in both the photos and the video, it is not clear where humanitarian responsibility is located. Images are bold, dramatic, fueled by inspiration and compassion more than information, because compassion, piety and a sense of guilt move people to give their money away. The distant humanitarian event is thus characterized by abstractness and physical distance. It is abstract because we do not know names, faces, or anyone personally.

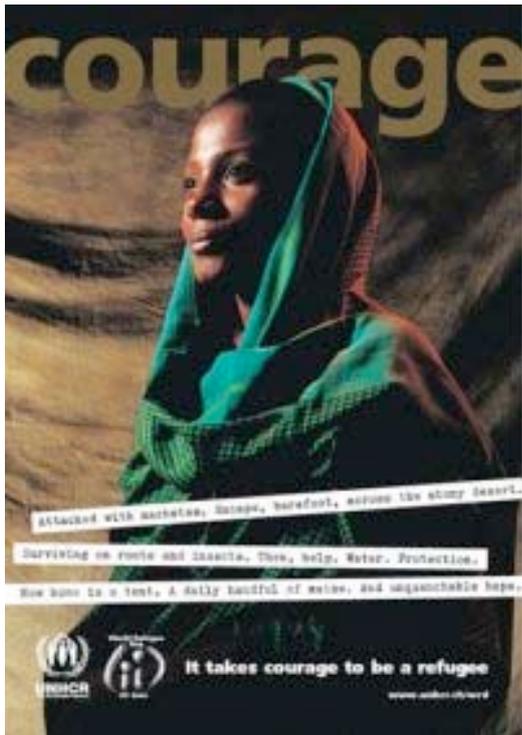
Could the situation be any different? Can we conceive of humanitarianism without images of the sufferers invoking for compassion of the saviors? As one refugee puts it: “Why not publicize our energy and our power to help ourselves? We talk about UNHCR and we talk about NGOs, but we forget the refugees themselves. We forget the power they have to help themselves” (Kennedy, 2009).

To reflect about the modern humanitarian enterprise and the social hierarchies on which it rests, a look at a following pictures is worthwhile: the outdoors of the Cordaid’s campaign *People in Need* (photos 4 and 5), the prints of the Amref’s campaign *The future of Africa is black* (photo 6), and the posters of the UNHCR campaign *It takes courage to be a refugee* (photos 7 and 8).





(Photo 6)



UNHCR Refugee campaign: takes courage to be a refugee

<http://www.unhcr.org.au/Ittakescouragetobearefugee.shtml>

Observe the face, the looks, the posture of the characters of these campaigns: what is the message they are communicating? What is the feeling we experience staring at their proud faces?

The first campaign, which won awards for outdoor advertising grappling with global poverty, aims at making people aware of the poverty of people in Africa while contrasting it with the luxurious spending habits elsewhere in the world. The Amref advertisements, playing with the dual meaning of “black”, show African people as skilled and smiling individuals engaged with their context, proposing a positive message of courage and perseverance in overcoming adversity and building a better future for themselves, as demonstrated by millions of African citizens. In the same way, the UNHCR campaign *It takes courage to be a refugee* shows refugees as ordinary people, except that through no fault of their own, they find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. In their faces you can find hope and pride, determination and “courage to start a new life against daunting odds, eventually to become contributing and enriching members of society once more”. However, UNHCR won’t likely raise the sums it needs through these posters alone.

Another interesting campaign to be mentioned is *Miss Landmine* (<http://www.miss-landmine.org>). It is a beauty competition for landmine victims, created by a Norwegian theatre director and funded by the Angola government, the UE and Norway’s Arts Council. With the motto “Everyone has the right to be beautiful”, the beauty pageant is designed to restore self-esteem in women who have been isolated and marginalized. And in the photos, the “survivors” (and not “victims”) who participate to the context appear fiercely proud and independent, without a shred of self-pity.

Is the production of social ignorance around humanitarian narratives to be blamed on television campaigns and mass media more generally? Or is this a problem of fund-raising campaigns in a way that is not related to the media used by the organization to diffuse the message? Are there differences, or at least more chances for humanitarian organizations, in the new social media?

The global media landscape is evolving fast. Nowadays, new interactive technologies put the user in the centre of media content production and force the development of new theoretical models that relate these patterns of use to associated social and consumption contexts. An analysis of the potential of the internet to reinforce social participation highlights the emergence of new media which involve a new consumption environment where some of the old principles no longer apply (Lievrouw, Livingstone, 2006). Our objects of study should include acts of

collaborative and participatory media-making and the consequences these acts have upon the communities and individuals that conduct them, through relating media, society and participation with the consequent re-conceptualization of how the audience is to be studied.

Many NGOs adopt participatory media as an exploration tool to educate and engage people, as well as to fundraise for their projects. Internet activism (also known as ‘electronic advocacy’, ‘cyberactivism’, ‘E-campaigning’, and ‘E-activism’), for example, is essential for humanitarian organizations to run pioneering campaigns, to report human rights violations, and more in general to denounce atrocity to the outside world, as well as to engage in cause-related fundraising, community-building, lobbying.

Amnesty International has been among of the most innovative in creating non-conventional media campaigns, as you can see in the commercial titled *Promises Don't Feed*, which was released in 2010 by DDB Budapest advertising agency, to push politicians to keep up with their commitments (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smuNZL1SnkI>). Even more successful was a digital and interactive campaign produced for Amnesty International by the same agency: *Slow Download*, which won the 2011 Silver UN Advertising Award. It calls for continued pressure on world leaders to deliver on the promises of the Millennium Development Goals. Stressing how in the digital age we can't wait more than a few seconds to get our daily portion of entertainment, the campaign invites users to download videos (they created 25 different videos with very promising titles), and then prompts a loading icon bearing the message , “Impatient already? It only took 15 seconds. Imagine waiting 15 years for food”. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imXBSjHODDc&feature=related>)

Cross-media communication (a media property, service, story or experience distributed across media platforms using a variety of media forms) enables NGOs to communicate with individuals in an inexpensive and timely manner. But, overall, it could be an innovative tool to give voice to the victims and to go beyond the passive attitude of spectator. Cross-media communication is a medium in which the storyline encourages the receiver to cross-over from one medium to the next.

As Castells (2009) points out in *Communication power*, in the new network society of “mass self-communication”, moving from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional communication (from one-to-many to many-to-many), cross-media communication turns the level and depth of involvement into more personal and therefore more relevant and powerful commitment. Moreover, through the many forms of citizen-produced media - blogs, vlogs, podcasts, digital storytelling, community radio, participatory video and more, which may be distributed via

television, radio, internet, email, movie theatre, DVD and many other forms - audiences can also become the agents of such media using the different resources offered, and so can the victims, who are found in turn to be no longer voiceless.

Gaza Sderot - life in spite of everything (<http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/?lang=en>) is an original project broadcasted by Arte.tv reporting on the life of common men, women and children in Gaza (Palestine) and Sderot (Israel), insisting on their day-to-day struggle for survival. As the Israeli and Palestinian teams who shot the short chronicles show, under difficult living conditions and the threat of air attacks and bombings, people do keep on working, loving and dreaming. The stories were aired via the Internet and users can have a personal, interactive and non-linear access to these contents on the site ARTE France which includes the videos, blogs, forums, links, etc..

A similar approach is adopted by Stefano Strocchi for his web documentary *fromzero.tv* (www.fromzero.com). On a global web platform the director follows the ordinary daily life of people slowly making a new start after the earthquake that shook L'Aquila (Italy).

It is also worth mentioning *Out of my windows* (<http://highrise.nfb.ca/>), the interactive web documentary from the Highrise project, one of the world's first interactive 360° documentaries. Delivered entirely on the web, it explores the state of our urban planet as it is told by people who look out on the world from high-rise windows.

Following a sequence whereby a chronologically linear narrative is replaced by one in which the end of the story is pre-determined by the filmmaker, these web documentaries provide a viewer with the experience of moving through the story via clusters of information. The integration of this mosaic of information, graphic design, imagery, titles and sub-titles conveys visual clues to the viewers as to what sequence they should follow through the web documentary.

The three examples are remarkable not only because they differ from more traditional forms, such as video, audio and photographic ones, by associating a multimedia complement, but also because they highlight the ordinary life of people, giving them the chance to tell about their stories, and portraying them not as helpless and voiceless victims of war or natural catastrophes, but as citizens in their context, with their dignity, force and hope.

As pointed out by one of the managers of Good Pitch (http://britdoc.org/real_good/pitch/) “[a] documentary is an excellent medium for conveying important social messages to individuals and the wider community. Films can get people to think differently and encourage people to take action and make a positive change”. Good Pitch is the one-day live event created

by the Channel 4 BRITDOC Foundation to connect filmmakers with NGOs, foundations, philanthropists, brands and media around leading social issues – to forge coalitions and campaigns that are good for all these partners, good for the films and good for society.

The Foundation is a new social entrepreneurship organization created in 2005 and supported by Channel 4 in the UK with the mission to help the third sector to respond actively to a changing media landscape by becoming involved in content creation. Moreover, the project helps charities, foundations, brands and companies with CSR agendas to join the commissioning editors, partnering with passionate directors and producers and together forging new models for funding, distribution, outreach and participation.

In spite of the potential of the new social media to give voice to the people, to be honest, I am not convinced that the emotional simplification of what is at stake in humanitarian narratives can be found a solution to/a better alternative to only by resorting to different media. The internet and cross-media communication can surely move beyond self-referential, over-simplified messages, but we ought not confuse the medium with the message. We often forget that the message is what matters, and not the medium that the message is delivered through. Without any doubts, the new social media offer a variety of opportunities to inform and engage the public opinion, but the problem is that it is not easy to move beyond the emotional urgency of humanitarian narrative.

This Save the Children campaign (see: <http://thelotteryoflife.co.uk>) provides an excellent example of originality in using cross-media communication and in creating a different kind of campaign to those traditionally associated with aid agencies and NGOs. The campaign - developed at Lowe Brindfors, in Sweden - was honored for public service advertising during the 2011 UN Advertising Awards. However, I am not so convinced of its actual ability to move the Western general public beyond being “cognitive misers”.

The *Lottery of Life* campaign is an integrated advertising campaign inviting people to imagine themselves in the shoes of people born elsewhere. They split the campaign into different components: printed and outdoor advertising to disseminate knowledge on the campaign, a video clip and an interactive website where one can play the “game”.



(Photo 9)



(Photo 10)

As you can see from photos 9 and 10, the images of the campaign billboards are very powerful, each set displaying an unambiguous theme: child soldiers, natural disasters, conflict and refugees. Each is juxtaposed to peaceful scenes of Western lifestyles made of fishing, swimming, jogging and camping excursions. There is no text in those prints, exception made of the website address. It allows the architecture of these visuals to create the desired effect aimed at the audience. The name of the website – which is also the name of the campaign – simply streamlines the message contained in the photographs. At the *Lottery of Life* website your life ticket gives you a chance to see how your life might have looked like if you had been born in another country, with information on the country's challenges. An assigned spot enables the user to send friends a pledge to contribute to the work of Save The Children. And so are the odds of getting the same education, health care and other social factors. The interface is very simple and engaging, with clean images and simple text.

Although I think it is a very effective, innovative and visually appealing campaign, it still troubles me for a number of reasons.

The billboard campaign simplifies and de-contextualizes very complex situations. Reducing the (dis)order of the world to “developed” versus “developing”, the visual message is based on the dichotomy of “lucky” versus “unlucky” people.

In the same way, the video adopts the traditional approach to fundraising. Flashing images and words associated with poverty, hunger, conflict and disasters: all elements aiming to stop apathy and disinterest in others, activating the same sense of guiltiness, a psychological malaise of our lack of compassion and kindness. Moreover, at the end of the clip the narrator seems to ask you to help the one person you care about the most: yourself.

The main message of the campaign revolves around the idea of chance. It is through chance and randomness that you are where you are and who you are. One should note that the graphic design of the “game” reminds of the Bhavacakra or “the wheel of life”: a symbolic representation of *samsara* (or “cyclic existence”), one of the most recurrent themes in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Focusing on self-gratification, the campaign does not seek to change people’s attitudes, but rather reinforces old ones. On the one hand, the representation of victims is different. No more “pornography of poverty”, no more images of helpless children, the campaign gave up the direct appeal to one’s sense of compassion. On the other hand, this campaign picks up on and gives life to the idea that generosity is an exercise to make us feel better about ourselves. The person you care about most is yourself.

As usual when an organization is trying to get donations, there are only basic statistics and images that might perpetuate handy stereotypes and perhaps reinforce preconceptions the public may already have of poverty and conflict. As with most fund raising-campaigns, these advertisements are implicitly offering us trust, expertise and easy solutions.

The “emergency imaginary” and the fundraising strategies focused on the spectacle of suffering are at the basis of the contemporary humanitarian narrative. “By recognizing emergencies and organizing attention to problems around the world as emergencies, we—especially citizens of the world’s richer countries—tacitly reinforce the notion that the normal world of globalization is one of systems that work effectively, that shore up the world we inhabit, rather than destroying it, and that can be counted on to work in predictable ways” (Calhoun, 2010, p. 393).

As the “emergency imaginary” focus only on the immediacy of short-term efforts to afford problems, which are depicted as diseases to be treated, humanitarian marketing strategies create a gap between short-term (to raise money) and long-term (unintended) effects. Not only does

this representation of the emergencies not allow disclosure on the causes of the disparities between spectator and victim, but it also increases the distance between “us” and “them”. Focusing the attention only to the immediacy of short-term efforts the fundraising campaigns impede longer-term attention to social change, inequality, and reconstruction.

Conclusion

The controversies around the mass production of social ignorance have been going on since the mid 1970s, after the Congo and Biafra horrors. Early 1990s UK NGOs started to develop their own guidelines for image use: Words like “dignity, reality and empowerment” were found in their voluntary codes. In 2006 the General Assembly of European NGOs adopted a new “Code of Conduct: Images and Messages relating to the Third World”. Nevertheless, upon analysis of a number of fundraising appeals, one is left under the impression that not much has changed since the early beginning of humanitarianism (Manzo, 2006).

This representation of the victims is close to what Hannah Arendt (1963) wrote about the “Politics of Pity”. Firstly, she made the distinction between those who suffer and those who do not. She also wrote that ‘seeing’ and ‘looking’ are considered as different concepts because sufferer and observer are physically distant – despite the closeness that modern media brings. In this representation of the victim there seems to be a relationship of unequal power that is one of neo-colonial “trusteeship” towards the other, who is in an inferior position (Mbembe, 2001).

The dilemma that NGOs face is a double-edged sword: they want to raise awareness and educate people about an issue, but they also need to fundraise. Thus, for many NGOs, their educational arm competes with their fundraising objectives. Education is, amongst other things, about knowledge, the historical and geographical context and the awareness of different perspectives. Fundraising is less about education; in its double role as awareness-raising it is primarily about persuading the common people that they should give financially to alleviate a need. Considering this dichotomy, there is the risk that fundraising may impede education.

In my opinion, those images of poor and needy people in fundraising posters could have negative consequences for the country to which they are referring as for the social imaginary and the individual conscience of our western societies. I’m convinced that the long-term damage is deeper than the short-term gain. Promoting images of Africans as tragic and passive subjects is not a short term solution to collect money useful for them - as some fundraisers argue. The main result of this short term strategy is to reinforce stereotypes, leading to negative long-term impacts.

Observing how dominant media images are unable to tell the truth about the real causes of the problems facing us, we can affirm that there is a production of social ignorance: a promotion of emotion without understanding, of charity without structural change (Manzo, 2006). To use a term from Cohen (2001), a question should be asked: can the Western general public move beyond being “cognitive misers” and be educated to know the wider issues, the bigger picture, and all the complexities in any situations of need, plus, their own (or government’s) untidy role within it? Taking into consideration the NGOs significant influence in the visual media that informs people in different countries, I believe that continuing along the same path, using images uncritically, may not be a long-term sustainable nor ethical option. It doesn’t help public opinion to move from the position of visual power to a position of equality with their global neighbors.

The “emergency imaginary” serves an important function as a mirror in which we are able to affirm our own shaky normality. “Emergency” is a way of grasping problematic events, a way of imagining them that emphasizes their apparent unpredictability, abnormality and brevity, and that carries the corollary that response-intervention is necessary. Emergency, it is implied, both can and should be managed. It seems that, even though we live in a “risk society” (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992) we can no longer accept the capriciousness of God or some fates. Starting from the Reformation and the Enlightenment we don’t accept that the human world is related with the Great Chain of Being, that our destiny is deducible from a God-given *telos* at work in human society. Modernity has brought the expectation of effective action to stop such intrusions of fate into the world of human organization. We tend to think of disasters as in principle avoidable, even while we contribute to them and while the death toll grows. The idea of “intervention” is thus almost as basic as the idea of “emergency.”

Here the first paradox: on the one hand humanitarian interventions reflect the refusal to treat “disasters” as merely matters of fate, approaching them instead as emergencies that demand action. The notion of risk is immediately joined by that of risk management. But in doing so we are “condemned to repeat” (Terry, 2002), because we are not able to recognize that interventions into complex emergencies are not “solutions,” because emergencies themselves are not autonomous problems in themselves but the symptoms of other, underlying problems.

On the other hand, although in Augustinian terms, we broke all ties between the City of God and the City of Man, thanks to the humanitarian worldview, the “miraculous” is always present in the quotidian, even if elusively. In the appeals to sponsor a child as well as to help the victims of a disaster, there is a sort of “re-enchantment” of the modern world. Appealing to the

donors in terms of Angels and describing the humanitarian aid agencies as the modern missionaries, some ads reminds the indulgences become popular in the Middle Ages and the idiom attributed to Tetzels: “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs”. In other words: donating or sponsoring a family we can not only save human lives, but also expand our moral horizons, and even “save” our soul.

The second paradox is based on the division between safety and suffering as a fundamental aspect of the asymmetry in the viewing relationship of humanitarian campaigns. This is the asymmetry of power between the comfort of spectators-donors in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the screens (Chouliaraki, 2006). By becoming their spokespersons, humanitarian organizations introduce an ontological distinction into the public arena — the distinction between those who are subjects (the witnesses who testify to the misfortunes of the world) and those who can exist only as objects (the unfortunate whose suffering is testified to in front of the world).

As Fassin (2007) suggests, it is an ontological contradiction of the humanitarian project and effectively insurmountable within the value systems of Western societies, “particularly when considering the tension that exists between the claimed sacredness of life (which is no more viable in the context of wartime violence than in conditions of structural violence) and the expressed force of compassion (which makes it possible to maintain up to a certain point the thread of solidarity, even at the price of ontological inequality)”.

At the end, these images are used because they get results. Shock works. One might even ask whether it is ethical to sacrifice efficaciousness for a more “humanizing”, but perhaps less successful, advertising campaign. Such is the complexity of the issue. How an organization responds likely depends much on their own self-identity and ethical orientation. It looks like an intrinsic contradiction of the humanitarian project, which neither the NGOs marketing managers involved nor their usual commentators are sufficiently aware. It is a contradiction that may be seen, in Weberian terms, as a confrontation between an ethics of conviction, represented by adherence to principles (to raise more money for assisting more people) regardless of the cost (the long term effect on our social construction of reality), and an ethics of responsibility, more concerned with our moral awareness and consciousness about global (dis)order. The clash of the two ethics seems to be resolved in the final formulation of an “ethics in action”. A sort of “just do it!” that authorizes humanitarian organizations to adopt certain marketing strategies to raise money, keeping on giving us the illusion that solutions to world problems are affordable and not out of reach. On the contrary they are not so available.

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