

# Transnational Humanitarianism

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## Abstract

This review traces anthropological studies of humanitarianism starting in the late 1980s, when humanitarianism began to take shape as a particular moral and political project through the formation of transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It follows both the evolving relationship of anthropologists to humanitarianism—initially as allies, then as critics, alternately embracing and challenging their conjoined humanist legacy—and the growing field of the anthropology of humanitarianism.

## INTRODUCTION

Humanitarianism is not easily defined: It is, among other things, an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government. In its dominant characterization, humanitarianism is one way to “do good” or to improve aspects of the human condition by focusing on suffering and saving lives in times of crisis or emergency; for instance, humanitarians provide temporary shelter, food, and medical care during wartime or immediately after disasters. Historians have debated what humanitarianism is and how long it has been around; some have argued that humanitarian sentiment came into being in its modern formation with the rise of capitalism in the eighteenth century (Haskell 1992), others, that it has been shaped by eighteenth-century technologies of science and medicine that made visible the details of suffering in the individual body (Laqueur 1989). This review is limited, however, to anthropological studies of humanitarianism starting in the late 1980s, when humanitarianism began to take shape as a particular moral and political project through the formation of transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Anthropological scholarship on transnational humanitarianism has proliferated, racing to keep up with the increasing importance of humanitarianism around the world. This article traces both the evolving relationship of anthropologists to humanitarianism and the growing field of the anthropology of humanitarianism. In particular, it defines three moments in anthropological scholarship, each of which also exemplifies a particular relationship between anthropologists and humanitarianism. First, by looking at how the fields of legal and medical anthropology come together in the study of humanitarianism, I describe a turn from a concern with anthropological difference to a focus on universal suffering, where anthropologists see their work in alliance with the moral project of humanitarianism; second, I trace a shift from alliance to critique of humanitarianism, as anthropologists reveal its unintended consequences; and third, I cover newer studies that question humanitarianism as a clear field or object of study. The review ends with directions for future scholarship.

## JOINING LEGAL AND MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGIES: THE TURN TO SUFFERING

Humanitarianism responds to problems by enlisting the help of a diverse pool of actors and experts, many of whom are from the medical and legal fields: doctors, nurses, psychologists, lawyers, bureaucrats, policy makers, and public health officials. Otherwise stated, humanitarian responses to suffering and emergencies are structured as combined medical and legal interventions—not as political events. For this reason, anthropological work on humanitarianism brings together the field of legal anthropology with that of the anthropology of medicine.

Legal anthropology came to humanitarianism through a study of the effects of violence and conflict in a globalizing world. Traditionally concerned with forms of law, order, conflict, regulation, and crime in non-Western societies (Comaroff & Roberts 1981, Gluckman 1955, Nader 1990), legal anthropologists shifted in the 1980s to studying their home societies (Greenhouse 1986, Merry 1990); they also shifted away from a case study method to explore law as a form of power (Starr & Collier 1989). Part of this shift involved examining law’s distribution and transmission, including at the international and transnational levels (Merry 1992). Legal anthropology changed, that is, from an interest in how other people imagine law to a focus on different types of domestic and international law.

Although scholars dispute how far back international law goes—some argue 400 years—it really came into its modern form in the post–World War II era. The United Nations (UN) was formed

in 1945, replacing the League of Nations, and the UN Convention on Refugees was signed in 1951 in response to a reconfiguration of the globe that left many people stateless (Arendt 1951). These developments, combined with movements for decolonization and the concomitant formation of new nation-states, brought to bear the concern with new forms of international order, conflict, and displacement worldwide and in anthropology specifically.

On the legal side, then, anthropological work on the topic of humanitarian intervention was initiated by studies of international refugees and displacement (Harrell-Bond 1986; Malkki 1995, 1996). Here, the focus was on political conflict and the international legal and bureaucratic institutions, such as the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), that create and mediate spaces such as refugee camps. For example, Harrell-Bond's 1986 book *Imposing Aid* explores the Ugandan refugee assistance program in southern Sudan. The book analyzes bureaucratic procedures and institutional rivalries and looks closely at the relief establishment itself, calling it to task for not listening to refugees, who were progressively understood as victims, unable to fend for themselves.

Malkki was another forerunner in the field; in the 1990s, she worked with Hutu refugees from Burundi living in Tanzania and similarly indicted an international humanitarian order for silencing refugees. She examines the legal category of refugee and its relationship to moral identity, but she also tracks the category of humanity, suggesting that anthropologists might be best suited to both question and reimagine the practice of humanitarianism owing to anthropology's historic imbrication with "progressive liberal politics" and its proponent, universal humanity. Indeed, at this time, the field of law was becoming increasingly concerned with the category of humanity; as legal scholar Teitel (2011) argues, "humanity's law"—a combination of international human rights law, the laws of war, and international criminal law—came to play an important role in the post-Cold War period. That is, whereas the "laws of war" inscribed humanitarian sentiment into law in the late nineteenth century, limiting the effects of armed conflict on civilians, they took on new weight in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with other forms of law and political action that were creating and protecting the category of humanity. The study of refugees and of the category humanity—both key figures in humanitarianism—were thus part of a move in legal anthropology to the study of transnational processes.

Similarly, medical anthropology shifted its focus to the transnational with the study of humanitarianism. Changing both object and scale, it moved medical anthropology from the cross-cultural study of health and well-being to universal forms of experience, with an emphasis on universal suffering. Medical anthropology had been concerned primarily with the cross-cultural understandings of health and sickness and the pluralistic practices of healing and medicine; Kleinman (1988) famously distinguished "disease" from "illness" by noting that illness was "the subjective experience of symptoms and suffering," whereas disease was a biomedical diagnosis based on the symptoms of an illness. And actually it was a concern with suffering, not disease, that drew medical anthropologists to the study of humanitarianism.

With its primary focus on health and bodily integrity in situations of emergency—often in distant locales (Boltanski 1999)—humanitarianism centers attention on the suffering body. Medical humanitarianism as we know it was founded in the nineteenth century with the Red Cross movement, which developed alongside the laws of war to humanize warfare, providing medical care for wounded soldiers. But contemporary humanitarianism is perhaps best epitomized by the Nobel Prize-winning humanitarian organization, Doctors Without Borders or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). MSF was founded in 1971, galvanized by the global political movements of 1968 and yet ultimately shaped by the movements' failure to really transform society. Although MSF was initially guided by a belief in a universal humanity grounded in equality and solidarity, after the failure of anticolonial revolutionary Marxist movements in the 1970s, MSF leaders turned

away from engagement with what they thought of as politics and instead embraced the belief that one could ultimately only address individual suffering. In this sense, they attended to what they conceived of as a universal humanity composed of suffering victims (Ross 2002, Vallaeys 2004). As former executive director of MSF-USA, Nicolas de Torrente (2004) wrote, “humanitarian action’s single-minded purpose (is) alleviating suffering, unconditionally and without any ulterior motive” (p. 5).

Medical humanitarianism grew and took on new prominence in the face of global political events in the 1980s and 1990s—from the famine in Ethiopia to the Rwandan genocide—and new forms of media and technology that made certain kinds of suffering hypervisible. As Malkki wrote in 1996, the suffering body of the refugee held particular importance in the camps because it was seen by humanitarians as providing a more reliable account of experience than a refugee’s stories or words; she also notes the importance of doctors in this process, whose medical diagnoses provided evidence for legal status while bypassing political histories of displacement. The role of the suffering body as the best and most legitimate source for claims-making and legal and political recognition has since been illustrated in multiple contexts (Allen 2009; Fassin 2001, 2011b; Fassin & D’Halluin 2005; Feldman 2004; Kelly 2011; Ticktin 2006, 2011a,b).

Both legal and medical anthropologists followed this increasingly prominent focus on the suffering body in the media and international institutions, taking suffering itself as an object of investigation. Medical anthropologists shifted from a well-established focus on different understandings and expressions of illness and health to think about suffering in a larger, even existential sense, or what Kleinman et al. refer to as “social suffering” (1997). In what are known as the three “social suffering” volumes (Das et al. 1997, 2001; Kleinman et al. 1997), the authors address an assembly of human problems under the rubric of suffering, and they are approached through various lenses, from phenomenology and social experience to political economy. In a move echoed by other work of the moment (Bourdieu 1999), the three volumes insist that suffering is an experience shared across social classes and divisions and across local and global contexts.

The study of humanitarianism was centrally involved in shaping this new interest in universal suffering; it participated in, if not prompted, shifts in these subdisciplines from studies of cross-cultural difference to a concern with the universal, global, and transnational—all brought together by a focus on suffering. Yet as Robbins (2013) argues in a perceptive and provocative piece, this attention to suffering also represented a larger disciplinary shift in anthropology. In particular, Robbins (2013) calls this a move from the “savage slot” to the “suffering slot”—from an engagement with the Other, and with difference, to one with “the figure of humanity united in its shared vulnerability to suffering” (p. 450). Of course, this disciplinary shift reflected changes in the world. The decolonizing movements in the 1960s and 1970s and the various postcolonial critiques of anthropological and other representations of Otherness threw the field of anthropology into a form of crisis and self-doubt. The turn to the “suffering subject” in the 1990s responded to this crisis, giving anthropology a new, politically and ethically acceptable object of study, while simultaneously responding to and reflecting the growing presence of discourses and institutions that represented and protected a universal, “global humanity.” Looked at through this lens, the study of humanitarianism plays a central role in the direction of anthropology, giving it new life.

A different sort of anthropological engagement and a different epistemology accompanied this focus on universal suffering. Generations of scholars have explained how the field of anthropology, intent on the study of difference, was complicit with colonial missions. While fully acknowledging this, we can nevertheless note that the earlier anthropological work relied on an epistemology and methodology of analytic distance and critical comparison, with the presumed end goal (for some) of creating a better world. This was imagined to be possible through discovering other

ways of living (different legal systems or systems of healing). New anthropological work shifted its approach from analytic distance to empathetic connection with one's research subjects through experiences such as trauma (Fassin & Rechtman 2009, Robbins 2013); rather than reinforcing different worlds, the end goal was ultimately the realization of a shared humanity. That is, while powerfully critiquing phenomena such as the commodification of suffering (Kleinman & Kleinman 1996), this work largely demonstrates a belief shared with medical humanitarians in a universal humanity, grounded in a moral orientation to suffering. This affective—and often, moralized—connection to one's research subjects engaged anthropologists in a moral imperative to intervene, to try to make the world better; we see attempts in both the legal and medical anthropological scholarship to provide a more nuanced understanding of suffering and its multiple components and causes in order to intervene more effectively (Bourgois 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1992, 2000). This work tracked legal, political, and moral categories and institutions, while also proposing to help reconceptualize, and in many ways reclaim, the humanitarian project. Farmer (1992, 1996, 2003) perhaps best exemplifies this tendency, as anthropologist-doctor-hero. In this sense, for anthropologists, the study of humanitarianism—with its focus on suffering and humanity—paved the way for a new type of intellectual-moral engagement, one which relied on a particular kinship between the role of anthropologist and humanitarian.

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF HUMANITARIANISM

Although a good number of anthropologists continue to join their scholarship with what they hope will be better forms of intervention, seeing humanitarians and anthropologists as working side by side (Abramowitz & Panter-Brick 2015, Bourgois & Schonberg 2009, Delvecchio Good et al. 2010), in the 2000s others nonetheless moved away from empathetic engagement to greater and more severe critiques of humanitarianism—critiques that often suggested that humanitarianism should be entirely abandoned or dismantled. For instance, de Waal's (1997) *Famine Crimes* delivered a powerful blow to the aid regime in the face of famine in Africa, focusing on places such as Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. He argued that “the humanitarian international” stopped the articulation of political solutions to famine by making it seem like a technical—not a political—problem. With the idea of an “antipolitics” of the disaster relief industry, de Waal's work echoes that of Ferguson's now foundational critique of the development industry (1994).

Yet because both humanitarianism itself and the anthropological study of humanitarianism involve deep (often conjoined) moral commitments, it was not clear on what ground these critiques could stand. That is, what moral position does one occupy to critique a morally driven movement? Some of the questions associated with humanitarianism were untouchable, beyond debate (Fassin 2011a,b). For instance, one could not question that suffering should be stopped or that one should care about it. So, without abandoning the set of moral positions related to suffering, anthropologists engaged with and critiqued humanitarianism according to its own self-professed principles, examining the effects of these principles ethnographically and often denouncing their failures.

Anthropologists were not alone; scholars and journalists from various disciplines were already increasingly offering critical analyses of humanitarian interventions as depoliticizing or dehistoricizing (Barnett & Weiss 2008, Calhoun 2008, Kennedy 2005, Rieff 2002), and humanitarians with first-hand experience working for NGOs began doing the same (Terry 2002, Weissman 2004). In this context, anthropologists have used their position of being “on the ground,” while also having a (varying) measure of independence from the humanitarian process itself to trace the effects of good intentions. Fassin (2011a,b) describes this position through Plato's allegory of the cave, as on the threshold or border, attending ethnographically to people's own accounts of

their lives while maintaining a distance from their interpretations to show hidden motivations or interests; this anthropological position is a difficult and fraught balance between being critical and yet accepting the principles of justice that drive humanitarianism. By situating themselves at this threshold, anthropologists have offered some of the most potent analyses of the often unintended or unexpected consequences of humanitarian interventions.

Much of this work is shaped and informed by a few key theorists, namely, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's *Homo Sacer* came out in English in 1998; his theories of "bare life" and the camp as the "nomos of modernity" spoke directly to the themes of an increasingly dominant global humanitarian regime and shaped an impressive body of scholarly literature as well as a series of political responses: Activists in many places took up his theories to explain the predicament of immigrants and refugees, the network of detention centers, and the lives of the most marginalized. *Homo Sacer* brings the theories of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault into dialogue; although Foucault's (1978, 1991) work had already guided and framed anthropological work for quite some time, *Homo Sacer* brought new analytical attention to Foucault's concepts, such as biopolitics, biopower, and governmentality. Similarly, Arendt's work (1951) was reexamined for its prescient account of the relationship between the human and the citizen, as well as its account of statelessness.

Below, I address three areas where anthropologists have most extensively explored the unintended consequences of humanitarianism, and then I point briefly to what this work has enabled theoretically. These areas include humanitarian spaces, the people associated with and touched by humanitarianism, and the events that lead to humanitarian intervention.

## Spaces

This literature considers spaces of exception created by humanitarian intervention, perhaps best embodied by refugee camps. Camps, as quintessential humanitarian spaces—that is, set apart from the ordinary spaces of life (Agier & Bouchet-Saulnier 2004)—temporarily address basic needs such as food, water, shelter, and medical care for people fleeing violence or disaster, and as such, they are conceived of as exceptions in both space and time. These camps are supposed to be zones of peace in the midst of conflict, and they are made to last just for the time of emergency. However, anthropologists have shown that camps are not necessarily exceptions in time or space and do not hold all in abeyance: They are complex places, the sites of new forms of politics, nationalism, rivalry, and entrepreneurship, as well as new forms of sociality, violence, and suffering (Agier 2002, 2008, Feldman 2011, Malkki 1996). Indeed, anthropological scholarship has shown that sometimes these spaces are less safe than conflict zones; indeed, camps produce the misery of meaningless lives. Anthropologists have nuanced and questioned the idea of the "camp" itself, detailing the differences between its many instantiations, including detention centers (Coutin 2010, De Genova 2007, Kobelinsky & Makaremi 2008, Ticktin 2005), liberation camps (Williams 2012), and zones of social abandonment (Biehl 2005).

This work builds on and challenges theories of the state of exception from Agamben (1998), Schmitt (1985), and Benjamin (1986), filling out empirically what a state of emergency looks like. In so doing, it points to gaps in both the political theories and the ideas purported by humanitarians. For instance, this literature demonstrates that although the state of exception might be classically defined as a suspension of the law, instituted by a sovereign in the name of a threatened public order, in fact it may be desired and called into place by a broader public, as in Venezuela after the natural disaster of 1999 (Fassin & Vasquez 2005). Additionally, this scholarship implies that the relationship between the law and the police is different in each of these states and spaces

of exception—the police do not always replace the law but sometimes actually prompt the law’s remaking or rewriting.

## People

The people involved in humanitarian interventions include those being helped (often thought of as the “victims”) as well as the humanitarians themselves (those who “save”).

In a world where borders of the Global North are zealously guarded, and inequality between North and South is growing, immigrants and refugees have become some of the key populations served by humanitarians. Ethnographic work has revealed the often unexpected consequences of involving medical experts such as doctors and psychiatrists in the immigration or asylum process as a humanitarian measure; this involvement creates a focus on the suffering body as a locus of moral legitimacy, which in turn requires immigrants and refugees to foreground their scars, injuries, illnesses, or traumas in order to be granted rights. Anthropologists have demonstrated how this practice often ends up favoring certain kinds of people and injuries over others for historical and political—not necessarily medical—reasons; for instance, certain forms of torture, HIV/AIDS, sexual violence, and posttraumatic stress disorder are among those given recognition (Fassin 2001, 2011b; Fassin & D’Halluin 2005; Fassin & Rechtman 2009; Kelly 2011; Nguyen 2010; Ticktin 2006, 2011a,c). Humanitarian practice—and the need to enforce a certain bureaucratic procedure—can be involved in other unexpected or unplanned ways to determine who qualifies as a refugee, citizen, or native (Feldman 2007a,b) and to discipline people once they acquire refugee status (Besteman 2013, Ong 2003).

Conversely, anthropological scholarship on humanitarians includes studies of MSF (Allen & Styan 2000, Fassin 2007, Redfield 2013), the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) (Malkki 2015), CARE International (Feldman 2011), and World Vision (Bornstein 2005), and it examines the multifaceted aspects of humanitarians’ institutional lives, from their bureaucratic process to how their ethical principles play out. Anthropologists demonstrate the complexities and aporias of humanitarian principles in practice, teasing out the often contradictory and unstable meanings of key concepts and practices such as neutrality, crisis, engagement, and witnessing (Fassin 2011b; Redfield 2005, 2006, 2013). These accounts also shed light on why people become humanitarians, which, as Malkki (2015) suggests, contrary to popular belief, is not necessarily to save lives; she argues that the Finnish ICRC workers just want to be good professionals. Indeed, humanitarians often choose their careers to help themselves (as forms of self-care or as fulfilling their own needs) as much as for those whom they purport to help (Feldman 2007b, Malkki 2015). These ethnographies reveal the often-uncomfortable positions in which humanitarians find themselves: as gatekeepers to resources (Feldman 2007a) and as those who must practice triage (Nguyen 2010, Redfield 2013) despite a commitment to saving lives and to promoting the equality of all lives. Some work also explores the differences and inequalities between humanitarian workers: ex-pats and locals (Fassin 2011b, Redfield 2012b).

Much of this literature on the people involved in humanitarian action explores the meaning of “humanity” in practice: Rather than take universal humanity as a moral foundation or an underlying premise for action, it asks what kind of human is protected and rescued by humanitarianism, how this determination builds on humanity as both ethical relation and biological species, and what the relationships are between government and humanity (Feldman & Ticktin 2010). Both drawing on and critiquing Agamben’s idea of “bare life” and Arendt’s notion that being stateless deprives one of one’s membership in the category humanity, the literature on those who receive aid shows that while the humanity protected may appear to be minimal (Redfield 2005, Ticktin 2006), it

is never simply outside of politics. And the studies of humanitarian institutions demonstrate that a hierarchy of humanity is always at work, valuing some lives over others (Asad 2003, Fassin 2007).

## Events

A range of events elicit humanitarian intervention. Three of the most prominent include conflicts, epidemics, and disasters.

First, I address conflict. Anthropologists have shown how humanitarian intervention in conflicts tends to unexpectedly naturalize or neutralize war, where aid to victims works to overshadow the historical or political interests underlying practices of violence (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010, Pandolfi 2008). Furthermore, anthropologists argue that humanitarian interventions in conflict zones actually restructure the political order rather than keeping the status quo, as humanitarian principles would suggest. For instance, Mamdani (2009) claims that in places such as Darfur, humanitarian intervention works to turn citizens into wards and dependents, creating a two-tiered global system. Fadlalla (2008) demonstrates how humanitarians get conscripted into broader political and especially neoliberal agendas in Sudan, a point on which Clarke (2010) builds in suggesting that conflicts in Africa have created a “humanitarian diaspora” that participates in new forms of neoliberal governance. Both Ferme (2004) and James (2012) show that the aid apparatus (in Sierra Leone and Haiti, respectively) can exacerbate the very conditions of instability that elicited military and humanitarian interventions in the first place.

Next, turning to epidemics, in the years since humanitarianism has come of age, HIV/AIDS has been the pandemic of primary global concern. Much of the anthropological work around HIV/AIDS has emphasized the structural violence that makes some people more susceptible to infection than others (Farmer 1992, 1996). For instance, a focus on the figure of the child (innocent, abused, or orphaned) is used to bring attention to the epidemic in places such as South Africa and to elicit compassion, yet this reifies children as victims and erases the role of poverty and exploitation (Fassin 2011b). Other unexpected effects of humanitarian responses to the epidemic include the creation of new markets for testimonials by people with HIV/AIDS and a transmission of confessional technologies from the West to places such as the Ivory Coast. Nguyen (2010) argues that this emphasis on confession is because testimonials are seen as indicators of success and keep money flowing to programs. Humanitarian organizations, pharmaceutical companies, and governments have ended up working together not simply to help, but ultimately to govern populations infected with HIV/AIDS (Biehl 2007, Nguyen 2010). For example, anthropological work has shown that HIV/AIDS catalyzed a change in MSF’s understanding of itself, shifting its mandate from emergency to more long-term response, as MSF began a campaign for access to medicine (Redfield 2013).

Finally, I turn to disasters. Whether these are natural or man-made, humanitarians have taken disasters as a key part of their mandate; indeed, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 has been cited as a formative moment in humanitarianism’s history (Redfield & Bornstein 2011). More recently, anthropological work demonstrates the imbrication of humanitarianism with other forces such as militarism and capitalism in disaster response, despite the humanitarian principle of neutrality (Brauman 2004). These overlaps with other types of intervention open the way for transformations of society after disasters, either through greater militarization (James 2012, Pandolfi 2003, Vasquez Lezama 2010) or through encroaching forms of privatization and neoliberalization (Adams 2013); incidentally, the latter cultivate competition rather than cooperation between NGOs in relief work (Stirrat 2006). Petryna’s classic book (2002) on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster illustrates these transformations; she shows how suffering becomes a resource when the state can no longer



provide for its citizens, and a mix of humanitarian and state forces then create informal markets for disability by adjudicating which citizens are worthy of treatment and resources.

The literature on events illustrates one of the defining features of this body of work on unintended consequences: its focus on humanitarianism as a new form of government. Scholars have often used Foucault's concept of "governmentality" to think about how populations are governed in ways that exceed the state (Feher et al. 2007, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Ghosh 1994, Keck & Sikkink 1998). But the outsourcing of certain state functions to humanitarian NGOs has grown exponentially, giving it a specific character detailed by much of the literature just discussed: It is portrayed as a humanitarian apparatus deployed across many significantly different geographic and social contexts, which displaces a concern with systemic inequality to focus instead on individual suffering, transforms political violence into experiences of psychological trauma, and turns a concern for politics and justice more generally into an emphasis on emotional responses to victims (Guilhot 2012). Humanitarian government is depicted as a form of "mobile sovereignty" (Pandolfi 2003), as "the left hand of empire" (Agier 2010), and more generally, as the deployment of moral sentiments in the service of contemporary politics (Fassin 2011b).

## **BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMANITARIANISM**

These critiques both produce and respond to a particular idea of humanitarianism—as international order, as a regime of care and also violence, and as exclusion as much as inclusion. But changing empirical realities and new analytical developments have prompted a different vision. That is, as humanitarianism has expanded beyond its initial sphere of emergency relief—pushed in many ways by a popular belief that humanitarianism can better respond to injustice and suffering than can politicians, even if the reality on the ground is much more complex (Brauman 2004, Calhoun 2010)—it has bumped up against the limits of its technical abilities and political and ethical goals. In response to these changing geopolitical realities, as well as to the limits of critique and denunciation, new anthropological work has pushed back at diagnoses and condemnations of humanitarianism, as well as at anthropological sympathies with the humanitarian project. Instead, it demonstrates how humanitarianism as a project is morphing, for which we need new analytics. Without knowing what, precisely, humanitarianism is and where its boundaries lie, a different anthropological approach—focusing on ambiguities, limits, and constraints—has taken shape.

In trying to understand humanitarianism, earlier anthropological work attempted to distinguish between humanitarianism and other projects that want to "do good," such as human rights and development, even while showing that the boundaries are slippery and always being reworked (Bornstein & Redfield 2011, Feldman & Ticktin 2010, Wilson & Brown 2009). Human rights were understood to be about politics and justice, ultimately turning to the law to correct past violations; development was about improving economic well-being through long-term investments in the future, guided by a belief in progress. In contrast, humanitarianism was seen to exist in the temporal present, with no pretension to longer-term resolutions of inequality. But with the overwhelming growth of the humanitarian aid industry, including new geopolitical actors, these boundaries are being further broken down: Different forms of humanitarianism are being created, blurring the boundaries with older and newer political and ethical forms.

For instance, scholarship on humanitarianism has focused largely on its secular forms, exemplified by MSF, the ICRC, and various UN bodies; these were the dominant form of humanitarianism globally. These organizations established humanitarianism as a social field with particular rules, principles, and a secular ethos, even as it had Christian origins (Taithe 2004). Religious institutions have always been involved in forms of charity and relief, but they are now occupying an increasingly important place in the aid industry. Anthropological studies are emerging to make

sense of them and their overlaps with Christianity and Islam as well as with other forms of charity (Benthall 2011, Bornstein 2012, De Waal 2007). This work reminds us about the different forms of aid, charity, and philanthropy, from Islamic zakat to Hindu dān; however, it also explores newer humanitarian organizations such as Islamic Relief or Mercy Malasia, which are constituted as hybrid forms, adapting humanitarian principles to fit Islamic beliefs. This scholarship explores the relationship between religious imperative and moral ambition (Elisha 2008). It also points to the different temporal orientations of aid in religious organizations, beyond both the emergency of humanitarian aid and the middle range of development (Scherz 2013).

Similarly, new relationships are being forged between humanitarian and human rights organizations and between humanitarian and development organizations by way of new NGOs that bridge these. Robins (2009) has pointed to the overlap between humanitarianism and human rights practices in the case of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in South Africa: The xenophobic attacks of 2008 prompted the TAC not just to provide basic needs to those affected, but also to fight for refugee rights. Other work demonstrates how organizations such as UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) have shifted from humanitarian relief to development work (Gabiam 2011); it also traces new forms of intervention that combine development, humanitarianism, and state-building all at once, even if haphazardly (Dunn 2012).

Indeed, much of this new literature builds on the fact that humanitarianism has been around for a while—that despite purporting to exist only in the temporal present, it has its own histories. As Feldman (2012) writes in the context of Palestinian refugee camps across the Middle East, we need to examine what it means to shift humanitarianism “from crisis response to condition of life” (p. 155), to think not just about “the politics of life but the politics of living” (p. 157). McKay (2012) too articulates the necessity of engaging with humanitarianism’s history, arguing that the afterlives of intervention in Mozambique shape the kinds of claims people make in the present; indeed, certain Mozambicans look back to a humanitarian past with a sense of nostalgia and use this—not a yearning for the state—to talk about the inadequacy of the present.

Other work has brought into focus the gendered and racialized elements of humanitarian intervention and how humanitarianism as a set of moral sentiments overlaps with and informs other gendered and racialized projects to save suffering victims, such as movements against human trafficking or honor killings or, more broadly, the movement against gender-based violence (Abu-Lughod 2013; Bernstein 2007; Fadlalla 2008, 2011; Hyndman & de Alwis 2003; Martinez 2011; Razack 1995; Ticktin 2011a,b; Volpp 2006). Not only does this work focus on the way that often exoticized or ethnicized forms of sexual violence have become a reason for humanitarian intervention—prompted by familiar representations of suffering brown women and, more recently, by LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) victims of homophobic violence—but it demonstrates that the human at the heart of the humanitarian enterprise is always shaped by gendered and racial histories. This work reminds us of the colonial histories and sentiments that figure in humanitarian discourses and practices, whether through repetition or difference (Hunt 2008; Stoler 2010a,b), and of the way that these histories shape the geography of humanitarian intervention in the present.

Finally, in a world increasingly dominated by paradigms of security and the War on Terror, anthropologists are tracing how humanitarianism intersects with forms of militarism and security. Despite the fact that not long ago, “humanitarian-war” would have seemed like an oxymoron, we have witnessed new formations that allowed George W. Bush to suggest that humanitarian assistance was the main reason to invade Iraq in 2003. Fassin & Pandolfi (2010) suggest that this seemingly contradictory pairing represents a new paradigm put in place in the 1970s and 1980s, grounded on the right to intervene—to put sovereignty aside in the name of the moral

principle of saving lives. They call this “military and humanitarian government”: a new version of “just war.” Indeed, another way to understand this overlap is by following how humanitarian technologies are being implemented in conjunction with military force and vice versa (Gilman 2012). That is, not only is the military delivering basic infrastructure and health care both in conflict zones and in the aftermath of disasters, but increasingly, humanitarians are relying on protection from military forces to deliver aid in zones deemed dangerous (Duffield 2001, 2010; Gilman 2012; Singer 2010). Finally, there is an overlap of humanitarianism with other regimes of security, including biosecurity, making humanitarianism and global health security into two sides of the same coin (Lakoff 2010).

## CONCLUSION: POLITICAL AND ETHICAL FUTURES

Although variants of each of these approaches endure, anthropological studies of transnational humanitarianism have in the main followed a particular genealogy: from embrace of the morality underlying humanitarianism to critiques and denunciation of humanitarianism and finally to more cautious, ethnographic examinations and descriptions of its complexities, limits, and boundaries. This trajectory has led to new questions about morality, politics, and humanism, some of which are already being tackled; others are ripe for exploration. I point to three particular paths.

First, as we have seen, anthropological studies of humanitarianism overwhelmingly deal with moral matters; although some anthropologists have explicitly chosen a morally positioned stance, and others more implicitly so, there has been little exploration of morality itself in the anthropology of humanitarianism: It is simply assumed. If, then, the anthropology of humanitarianism began with legal and medical anthropology, we might say that these fields have emerged into—and are out of necessity creating—a field of moral anthropology (Fassin 2011a, 2012). Not only does this emergent field explore anthropologists’ engagement with moral assemblages, but it also asks which other forms of morality are at work alongside, or against the moral issues raised by humanitarianism. Of course, the anthropology of ethics and morality is not new (Caduff 2011, Dave 2012, Faubion 2011, Heinz 2009, Laidlaw 2002, Lakoff & Collier 2004, Lambek 2010, Zigon 2007). However, new work about ethics and morality is emerging from the study of humanitarianism and/or human rights, which looks to forge an “anthropology of the good” that goes beyond the “suffering subject,” for instance (Robbins 2013), or to explore topics such as moral subjectivities formed through hope, love, self-interest, or even desperation (Zigon 2013).

Second, anthropologists and others have critiqued humanitarianism for depoliticizing structural problems of inequality and domination. Yet, if humanitarianism can be read as an ethico-political project, what might other competing political spaces and movements look like? This is one direction for anthropologists frustrated by the cul-de-sac of critique. The work that is beginning to emerge in this vein gains inspiration in part from philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004, 2010) and his idea of “the political” as a breakdown of a given social order, not as a regime that is already recognizable or in place. So far, this direction of research looks for new and emergent meanings of the political in and around humanitarian spaces (Agier 2010, Feldman 2012). Other potential avenues include new social and political movements and ways of becoming that go beyond a focus on suffering (Coleman 2011, Razsa & Kurnick 2012) and new approaches to the relationship between technology and politics that refigure the meaning of politics (von Schnitzler 2014).

Third, anthropologists have critiqued the category of humanity that undergirds the humanitarian project and the liberal humanist tradition from which it descends (Asad 2003). Many are wary of the moral engagement it compels. Finding new ways to study humanitarianism therefore involves taking on anthropology’s own humanist legacy. The insights from feminist science and

technology studies offer one way to think beyond moral positioning, while remaining committed to ethics and politics; they offer a different engagement with the idea of the human through the perspective of human and nonhuman assemblages, one that is sensitive to its histories of domination and exclusion (Barad 2007; Haraway 1991, 2008; Jain 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Scholars are starting to approach humanitarianism in ways that decenter the human: for instance, looking at biometric technologies that track refugees (Jacobsen 2010), as well as at the design and circulation of humanitarian objects (Redfield 2012a). Interesting new work is also looking at emerging humanity projects that are not traditionally humanist, but are based instead on forms of “biological humanism” (Rees 2014). These are just a few of the exciting new directions that are opening up and are ready for investigation.

Anthropological studies reveal and reflect the increasingly central place of humanitarianism in the world over the past 20 years. Yet this work also sheds light on the field of anthropology—and anthropologists’ changing and often ambiguous roles as moral and political actors—in a world dominated by “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2011b).

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