

Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. xvi + 336pp. ISBN: 9780520271173.

The world of today seems to be perceived as steeped in all kinds of crisis—moral, political, economic, ecological and humanitarian—and as an uncertain place increasingly experienced through notions of risk, deficiency, suffering and injustice. Concomitantly, people understand themselves and their prospects in life through ideas of managing risk. Increasing numbers of individuals and institutions across the globe are organising themselves systematically to provide help in the aftermaths of great natural or man-made disasters. Overcoming one's own precarious situations and, through acts of solidarity and compassion, helping others in similar situations seems to be held up not merely as a moral but also a political imperative. But what does it mean to be moved by other people's predicaments, and to feel obliged and entitled to offer them help in the 21st century? How do the ideas and practices of humanitarian action exert themselves? Can humanitarian actions deliver justice? What does it mean to live and work under various forms of humanitarian governments?

Didier Fassin's *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, aims to offer some answers to these important questions. Fassin's book is a precise and rich depiction of the moral landscape charted by contemporary humanitarian ideas, practices and policies. It analyses how the global order of humanitarianism works in situations of crisis—how it effectively and affectively deals with humanitarian actors, both aid workers (medical specialists, humanitarian bureaucrats, armed forces, etc.) and those that aid workers are trying to help, i.e. victims of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, exile, natural disasters, famines, epidemics and war.

Nine nuanced ethnographic case studies situated in France, South Africa, Venezuela, Palestine, and Iraq analyse a range of social contexts tainted and structured by emotions of shame, empathy, frustration, consciousness of the tenuous and by different struggles for justice. The first part of the book is devoted to a detailed political analysis of a specific French relationship with humanitarianism – a relationship shown to be morally and altruistically inspired, politically ambiguous and deeply paradoxical. Fassin looks at various institutional sites and social settings where public morality regarding the management of crisis is being constituted and rehearsed. The book thus contextualises situations where the workings of humanitarian government are most palpable. We read about how the government has set up “listening centres” aiming to reach the underprivileged of the country; how it helps the economically disadvantaged through allocating governmental resources; how it calibrates immigrant status and rights to individuals' physical and mental health statuses, and even sometimes creates special extra-legal structures, such as asylum centres and “waiting zones” to more easily deal with asylum seekers. The second part of the book traces the dissemination of principles of humanitarian government around the world: ethnographies here again dissect various categories of morality and help as applied to, for example, the politics of victimhood of AIDS orphans in South Africa, disaster victims in Venezuela or traumatised adolescents in Palestine.

Analysing various narrative, medical, corporeal, military and bureaucratic renderings of humanitarianism, this book has a stake in the enrichment and complexification of humanitarianism as a concept. Fassin questions the wider reasons that have given form to certain kinds of emotional responses to humanitarian interventions, as well as to their practical effects. The book's central insistence is that humanitarian reason occupies a key position in the contemporary moral order. Moral sentiments have become an essential force in contemporary politics, whose discourses and practices are nourished and legitimised by humanitarian morality. Fassin sets on to depict and analyse various strategies through which people in everyday situations attempt to produce, provoke and mobilise emotions of empathy and the moral sentiments required for a humanitarian action. It is in this tension between compassion and repression that the researcher seizes and locates the morality being articulated together with politics.

Fassin demonstrates something more than the political deployment of emotion, exploring how the empathy towards others that results in humanitarian work belongs to a constructed, politicised, and morally charged order. Humanitarian reasoning and its practices are never disinterested or unprejudiced. Carefully but revealingly, the book documents all kinds of moral, ideological, and bureaucratic contortions as these warp and structure humanitarian interventions.

The book thus questions the often-elicited fantasy of a global moral community that humanitarianism is said to support, and points to the expectations built in the notions that empathy and solidarity have redeeming powers (p. xii). In an analytical fashion that does not minimise the altruistic engagement or reduce the charitable efforts of the individuals, organisations and governments involved in the care of injured, threatened, or jeopardised, the book delves into the tense, unequal, unstable and ambiguous relationships between the help providers and the sufferers. The collection again and again insists that it is problematic to evoke so fluently, in such tragic *mises-en-scènes*, those places where western generosity and altruism is celebrated for the sake of its effect on the poor.

Humanitarian Reason is an extraordinary accomplishment – scrupulous, attentive, and well thought-out. The book further intervenes in a most timely way into the causes and consequences of the often disappointing modern history of peace-building. Carefully examining the moral, juridical, ideological, and economic conditions that allowed military and legal interventions to be understood as humanitarian aid actions, the book challenges the already difficult relationship between humanitarian moral categorisations and their associated political judgements. These complex relationships become even more excruciated, putting in question the conventional attitude of seeing humanitarian intervention as beneficial.

This book should be an essential reading for any anthropologist and social scientist dealing with the issues of humanitarianism or the aftermath of conflict or cultural trauma. Equally, it will be a seminal reading for anyone reflecting on problems faced in medical anthropology, the anthropology of bureaucracy, and engaged anthropology.

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