Humanitarianism has become such a central feature of international politics over recent decades that we are in danger of taking it for granted. Yet not only is humanitarianism an increasingly popular, and by no means unproblematic, way in which Western citizens are invited to respond to the world around them; its ready purveyance of moral absolutes—we shall do something—is no less useful to their governments. There is a distinctly liberal moral geography at work here: emerging power humanitarianisms having neither the public airs nor quite the moral precepts attached to the endeavour in the West (though see Hirono and O’Hagan, 2012). But even if the dominant Western form of humanitarianism may constitute no settled doctrine itself, it does present a consistently fertile way of framing political issues in a moral vernacular and vice versa (for a helpful recent overview, see Collinson and Elhawary, 2012, pages 5–6; see also Barnett and Weiss, 2011).

Such developments have generated sustained interest over the past two decades in a variety of academic disciplines. But Humanitarian Studies seems to be fast becoming a discipline of its own. In 2009 the International Humanitarian Studies Association was founded. Meanwhile, research centres devoted specifically to humanitarian issues are cropping up everywhere, from Harvard’s Programme on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research to the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (with an affiliate office in Ethiopia). There are even journals such as *Humanity* and the *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, in which humanitarian concerns are problematised, in the main, by anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and international relations scholars.

It is timely, then, that over the past year what will surely number among this field’s defining monographs have also been produced. *Empire of Humanity*, by the American political scientist Michael Barnett, offers what historian Bertrand Taithe describes as “the political history against which every other account of humanitarianism will have to be measured”. In *Humanitarian Reason* the French medical anthropologist Didier Fassin offers, by contrast, a Foucault-inspired account of the form of power/knowledge which lies concealed within humanitarianism’s will to care. And in *The Least Of All Possible Evils*, the Israeli architect and social scientist Eyal Weizman turns the houses of both reason and morality against themselves to explore the violence that is too regularly, and too knowingly, unleashed in the name of saving lives.

Each of these three books is an important work, the product of many years’ research and many smaller studies brought together pleasingly on the page. Each is written from a different disciplinary background, albeit with surprisingly little convergence in the literature upon which they build (a point to which I will return). And each has a distinct intellectual focus. It pays to read them together, however, for the connections between them are revealing of what, following Fassin and Weizman, we might term our humanitarian present; a present that the reader is prompted throughout all three works to contemplate with Hannah Arendt’s warning of the dual-edged nature of the ‘passion for compassion’ very much in mind.

Humanitarian faith: there are worse things in life than being duped

It is with Barnett’s book that one ought to begin and end. His treatment of humanitarianism is a periodical one, in both senses of the term. It is firstly a division of the history of humanitarian endeavour into three ages (of imperial humanitarianism, covering roughly the late 18th century to the early 20th, of neohumanitarianism, covering the post-Second-World-War era, and of liberal humanitarianism, covering the post-Cold-War period to the present). It is also an act of classification within this, since across these three ages he charts the parallel histories of two distinct forms of humanitarian endeavour. The first of these Barnett refers to as ‘alchemical’ humanitarianism (characterised by the transformative, salvational ethos of those seeking to change the world, in the manner of abolitionists or development actors). The second concerns the dominant ‘emergency’ form of the liberal will to care (characterised by a presumed more impartial relief of symptoms, and motivated by public concern over the violence of war, as epitomised by the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement).

Insofar as periodisations ever fully hold, Barnett’s makes good sense: imperial humanitarianism was shaped in relation to the colonial impetus of civilising discourse; neohumanitarianism was a creature of a Cold War world of nation-states and developmental modernisation; and today’s neohumanitarianism is undeniably of a piece with the era of globalisation and human rights. The division of humanitarian endeavour into emergency and alchemical forms is also helpful, with one or two caveats. We gain a clearer sense of the logics and values underpinning the varieties of what we might call the humanitarian will to care in each of these periods. It also enables one of the better explanations for the predicament (that we shall come to in greater detail later) of humanitarian complicity with state violence today, since Barnett has the work of the emergency responders and the do-gooders fundamentally converging in the neohumanitarian era. But some things are also occluded by this.

Geographically speaking, for example, it is remarkable that these twin forms of compassion (and here Barnett reminds us of Arendt’s injunction directly) each correspond to particular sorts of spaces. Barnett acknowledges this in passing, when he says that these alchemic and emergency varieties “[b]oth had a transnational orientation, but the emergency humanitarians tended to limit themselves to Europe, while those in the alchemical camp expressed a truly global perspective.” As to Europe this is surely correct. But what the aspirational ‘global’ really means here in the context of the 19th century is actually the colonies. And for all that he does talk of colonialism as a political–economic system, he declines to push home the importance of the structural interrelation between metropole and periphery as a constitutive element of humanitarianism itself (cf Lester, 2002). This interrelation is important, moreover, for it presents less a historically cumulative process of growing compassion (something Barnett himself is well aware of) than it does the emergence of distinctive and geographically enframed logics of humanitarian endeavour (something Barnett is also otherwise at pains to recognise): a moral economy of suffering that emerges in Europe and America, and a political economy of need that surfaces outside of this regarding the colonies (cf Nally, 2011).

Yet as mentioned above, if aid workers are more regularly targeted today, and if humanitarianism is more regularly accused of being too muscular, then that is because something has changed in the post-1989 era. Quite what has changed is usually drawn between the failure to act in Bosnia and Rwanda and the not unrelated overreaction in Kosovo: in short, the point at which humanitarian discourse was taken up as the secular argument super omnes for intervention by the international community, no longer acting in the name of civilisational mandates, but in the name of human rights. This repoliticisation of humanitarianism concealed the perhaps more fundamental change, which was increasing desire of states and international nongovernmental organisations to do more than simply offer ‘a bed for the night’. If anything, this occurs post-Biafra as much as post-Berlin, but it was in any case, in the apt phrase of Hugo Slim, a case of “ethics creep” (cited in Barnett, page x) as much as mission creep.
Certainly it was not primarily about—and Barnett avoids plucking the low-hanging fruit here—a grab for money and resource. It was about changing humanitarian identities. Above all it was about the intrusion of human rights into humanitarianism from the end of the 1970s onwards. And while Barnett is right to hold the two apart, for humanitarians of every stripe and hue saving lives was increasingly no longer enough. Despite the protestations of some to the contrary—a chastened Rony Brauman of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) singing primum non nocere among them—that remains the case today.

The greater feast that Barnett reaps by avoiding the easier explanation soon becomes apparent. Because this ‘reformation’ in the sphere of humanitarian values, marked above all by the entry of politics into humanitarianism, sparked off its own ‘counterreformation’: the emergence of a form of ‘antipolitics’ in which humanitarians sought to contain and control the moral Hydra that they had unleashed by a compensatory drive to professionalisation and systems management. But while this may have helped organisations to modernise, it also came with a catch. For “[t]his machinery, built in the name of the victims, … increasingly removed decision-making power from them”, as it “swelled the power of those whose intentions were always good over those who could not be assumed to know any better or act in their own best interests” (page 196). There is a slippage here between care and violence about which Weizman has rather more to say. But already we see the seeds that will grow into the dilemma that confronts humanitarianism today: that it has become ever less accountable to those it seeks to help, while increasingly finding itself in hock to the upstream constellations of donor agencies, audit trails, and the need to find an expanding market share of suffering that can support this growing weight of administrative bureaucracy.

Barnett concludes, however, that for all that this may be a machinery spinning out of control, it spins still on an underlying axis of faith. Because without faith, he insists, no humanitarianism, morally compromised or otherwise, would be possible. He cites William James as saying: “I have … a horror of being duped; but I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world” (cited on page 238). Barnett would have us see the Kantian imperative at work here: “I am not sure if progress exists”, says Brauman, also cited on this page, “but it is good to act as if I believe it exists”. Against those who see humanitarianism as a part of the driving force behind modern secular morality, Barnett here concurs with historians such as Nicolas Guilhot and Samuel Moyn: Guilhot, who suggests that humanitarianism may in fact represent a return of faith, one “that comes to the surface when the structures of the modern, secular nation-state fail to alleviate the tragic condition of modernity” (2012, page 90); and Moyn, who provides a political genealogy for the same, correlating the rise of humanitarianism with the decline of a secular world’s own Gods of political utopianism from the 1970s (Moyn, 2010).

**Humanitarian Reason: a capacity for being surprised**

Enter, at this point of doctrinal risorgimento, the anthropologists. Fassin’s book stands out from the other works reviewed here in part because the author has himself, as a former vice president of MSF France, been engaged in the practice of humanitarianism. Fassin’s work is but one of a series of important collections from anthropologists: including Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield’s (2010) *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics*, Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi’s (2010) *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, and perhaps the most interesting of all these, Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin’s (2010) *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*.


---

*Notes and References*
largely abandons the history of humanitarian practices and institutions altogether in favour of what he terms “a moral history of the present”: a reading of Barnett’s counterreformation as epochal epiphenomena, perhaps. Fassin wants in any case to demonstrate that a new moral economy of suffering is at work in our humanitarian present. And this new moral economy represents not simply a way of relating to suffering, but a mode of governing it also.

It is this book’s narrative, steady in time but mobile across space, that allows Fassin to transect this moral present and to record its base flow and its irregularities accordingly. He takes to this in the manner of most Foucauldian analyses of governmentality, identifying both the procedures by which a form of moral government is enacted and the sites at which it is produced. Beginning with the management of compassion towards the marginalised and the disadvantaged in France (from psychiatric outreach programmes in the Paris banlieues to the migrant detention centre at Sangatte), he moves out to examine the response to natural disaster in Venezuela in 1999, the politics of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, and the psychological state of Palestinian youths in the Occupied Territories. In each case, Fassin reveals how the claims of humanitarianism are produced in and through particular spaces: physical, as in the migrant processing centre, and institutional, as in the French governmental bureaucracy.

But above all what links these various settings and actions, and what lies therefore at the heart of our humanitarian present, is the book’s titular notion of ‘humanitarian reason’. Understood as a distinct “mode of governing”, humanitarian reason, Fassin explains, takes as its object “the victims of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and exile, as well as of disasters, famines, epidemics and wars—in short, every situation characterized by precariousness” (page x). There is a nod to Judith Butler here, though curiously it is left mostly to a footnote to explain his actually quite distinctive reinterpretation of this work (one could pick similar quibbles with the notions of moral economy that he takes from E P Thompson, and political theology from Carl Schmitt).

In showing how humanitarianism is not just something where good intentions become something else, but something that is itself a governmental logic, Fassin’s ethnographic work here quite literally, and effectively, traverses the fine line between Barnett’s underlying (though not uncritical) optimism, and Weizman’s (as we shall see) irrevocable despair. Above all, Fassin shows, humanitarian discourse has itself become a form of triage (cf Redfield, 2008): by admitting people to our countries on humanitarian (rather than legal or economic grounds), for example, we acknowledge them with a kind of secondary citizenship only. They are permitted but not necessarily welcome. Humanitarian discourse enables us to acknowledge these contradictions without necessarily addressing them. There is a clear geographical edge to Fassin’s thinking here. Humanitarian reason and action are obviously shot through with an uneven imaginative geography: globally we speak of suffering populations; locally, in rich countries, we speak of individuals in need (page 253). But Fassin is making a more subtle point too: hardened borders are moralised borders too, he seems to say, such that the movement of individuals from one moral zone to another may be discouraged by the very logic of altruism itself.

These comments enframe a wider argument about the politics of inequality inherent to all humanitarian endeavour. Such a politics emerges in his recounting of the tortured debate within MSF over the group’s initial decision to stay in Iraq prior to the invasion of 20 March 2003, followed by their almost immediate withdrawal after two of their team were kidnapped by Iraqi security forces. The inequality here is a basic one between those whose lives are deemed to matter, and those whose lives are not. “In contemporary societies”, Fassin says,

(2) A fuller critique of the latter than there is space for here can be found in Guilhot (2012).
“this inequality is perhaps both the most ethically intolerable, in that it concerns the sense given to life, and the most morally tolerated, since it forms the basis for the principle of humanitarianism” (page 231). One has at times to read between the lines, but it is precisely these sorts of tensions, between inequality and solidarity, and between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, that constitute the form of power that humanitarian reason can produce. This opens his analysis to biopower: not only in terms of the biopolitical logic of contingent sovereignty that underpins humanitarian interventions, but also via the production of moral economies at home in relation to suffering others.

Though he professes to be uninterested in making judgments, Fassin therefore appears to see humanitarianism as a product of the Western, liberal order. And in a manner that echoes Barnett, he is at pains to remind us why such reason remains for the most part “morally untouchable”: it is untouchable because taken to be self-evident and it is self-evident because it is taken to be good. But it is precisely here, Fassin concludes, that, rather than a renewal of faith, or a caterwaul of despond, “a capacity for surprise needs to be maintained” (page 244). We may well be tempted to cynicism when the US military drop aid parcels at the same time as bombs, he says. But such misuses of humanitarian reason “should not divert us from its deeper significance, which may be no less troubling” (page 252), namely, the power that humanitarian government holds over us too.

**Humanitarian Violence: we will do everything to keep you alive, probably**

It is here that Fassin leaves us, pondering the unavoidable paradoxes of humanitarian endeavour, while leaving certain questions as to its non-Christian and non-Western forms open. It is a site of privilege and perhaps complicity that Weizman would drag us away from, and the sooner the better. For while Fassin is concerned to hold the moral claims of humanitarian reason itself up to the light, Weizman wants to understand how such claims are themselves taken up by other actors, in the name of decidedly inhumane objectives. Weizman’s book could in some ways not be more different to *Empire of Humanity* or *Humanitarian Reason*. It is visually illustrated, polemical, and shot through with the kind of urgency with which humanitarians themselves are more usually associated. Weizman’s “humanitarian present” is hence not one of a government of precarity, but of a rather more specific “collusion of [the moral] technologies of humanitarianism and humanitarian law with military and political powers” (page 4). And while his real targets are those military and political forces themselves rather than humanitarians, he is in no doubt either that humanitarians largely stand by and watch as their words are twisted and used against them. In place of Fassin’s ethnographic assessment of humanitarian claims to good health, Weizman thus offers us a moral autopsy of the “degrees, negotiations, proportions and balances” (page 4) that he believes have already poisoned it.

This immediately raises the problem of the lesser evil, upon which Weizman’s earlier book, *Hollow Land* (2007) ends. Humankind, Weizman reminds us, has long been interested in an economy of virtue: “it is for this reason that [people] ceaselessly seek to develop and perfect all sorts of technologies and techniques that allow them to calculate the effects of violence and control its consequences.” Add to this the spatial practices and social apparatuses described by Barnett, and we have before us the means by which the humanitarian will to care bleeds into the politics *du pire* of state violence and death. For Weizman this results in the central problematic of our humanitarian present, “violence in its moderation and minimization” (page 3). And he sets out to explore this fateful problem through three primary investigations: firstly into the practical forms of complicity that the delivery of aid sometimes requires, secondly into the calculative optimisation of decisions over life and death applied by Israel in the Gaza Strip, and thirdly into the absorption of new forensic forms of testimony in Bosnia. His analysis of each of these situations does not make for comfortable reading: aid-giving can enable killing to go on; international humanitarian law can end up justifying
anything it does not explicitly outlaw; the use of forensics and other systems for calibrating and testifying to violence can not only remove testimonial agency from the actual victims but can ultimately be used against them.

For Weizman, then, the real danger with humanitarianism lies not in its unavoidable slide to paternalism, as Barnett suggests, but in its prior, if not inherent, usefulness to other forces. This is not just a question of the physical overlapping of military and humanitarian missions in places like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. It is a more pervasive question of personnel, of operational and administrative systems, and of the technologies that they each use. And of all technologies, it is that most ancient device of the wall to which Weizman devotes particular attention. Through a rereading of Palestinian challenges to the intended location of the Israeli ‘separation wall’ and official claims as to its humanitarian purpose that were heard in the Israeli High Court, Weizman duly unpicks the logic of the lesser evil at work. It is a fine account and it represents the heart of his analysis.

What Weizman most wants to deconstruct in this is the principle of proportionality deployed by the Court as the appropriate criterion to reach a decision between the competing interests of Israeli security requirements and Palestinian livelihoods: a knowing attempt to treat nonequals on an equal (and so prejudiced) footing. These are, on the one hand, impossible calculations: “How many acres of occupied land, litres of olive oil, or hardship or wasted time could be balanced against the optimum visibility from a military vehicle taking a left turn, say?” (page 74). But on the other hand, what really matters is how the Court’s answer was prefigured within its framing of the proportionality principle: the potential good to one population, the Israelis, on one side of the wall, was to be balanced against the potential harms to the other, the Palestinians, on the other side. By taking the virtue of that calculation as a given, in just the manner that Fassin warns against, the Court thus becomes an instrument of occupation itself. By slightly alleviating the worst possible outcomes it gives the humanitarian green light to a more ‘moderate’ form of colonial architecture.

Weizman is quite right, then, that the wall gives “the principle of proportionality a material and spatial dimension”. He is surely also correct that humanitarian forms of reasoning thereby become complicit with the practice of colonialism. As he points out, “if the wall does ever come to designate the borders of a shrunken temporary Palestinian state it will be the first such border to have been co-designed by humanitarian lawyers” (page 78). More seriously it raises very complex questions for those humanitarians who would oppose the wall by engaging in such processes as the High Court proceedings. Are they not, at the end of the day, complicit with the forces that ultimately determine its material outcome? But the wall is more than a material outcome. It is a living technology itself: a networked assemblage

“of fortification, architectural constructions, … sensing technologies, automatic weapons, aerial (and in case of Gaza) marine systems that are operated by a multiplicity of institutions. … The organizations that operate the wall participate in the monitoring, control and modulation of everything that passes through it—nutrition, fuel, electricity, and medical aid” (page 80).

The wall thus personifies an important shift in Israel–Palestine relations from pre-2005 ‘physical occupation’ to a post-evacuation ‘humanitarian management’ exercised through physical enclosure. There is a double bind here. For while humanitarian logics have helped Israel to undertake this shift, for the Palestinians the declaration of humanitarian emergency is no defence against it (since Israel already uses the principles of proportionality to maintain food and aid provisions to an absolute minimum). In fact, the declaration of emergency further enables Israel’s close monitoring of Palestine on grounds of ensuring that the situation never descends into a humanitarian crisis (as defined by them, and on the basis of studies of the American-led sanction regime imposed upon Iraq); and that it never rises more than a fraction above it either. Seen thus, the 2005 disengagement is indeed better read
as a strategy of “controlled abandonment”, as the human rights researcher Darryl Li pointed out (quoted in Weizman, page 85; compare Duffield, 2007).

More than anything else, then, our attention is drawn here to the intersection of space with calculative strategies developed in the name of humanitarian ends along with their potentially violent outcomes. The same process is shown at work when Weizman examines the growing importance placed upon material evidence relative to human testimony in international law. Testimony has traditionally had a privileged relationship to the body and within the medicalised tint of humanitarianism the suffering body has always had particular salience. In Fassin’s terms, there is a moral economy to testimony that relies upon this figuring of the body: in France, you tell your story as a patient, you get some state welfare in return (see also Petryna, 2002); in Palestine, you conform to the subjectivity of victimhood that those witnessing on your behalf imagine, you get the aid relief they are lobbying for; in Bosnia, you get the international community’s support when you bring before it actual evidence of mass graves.

But it would seem this may be changing and the function of testimony with it (see Givoni, 2011). For, as Fassin describes, humanitarian psychiatry has brought about an underlying shift from the visibility of suffering and its historical facticity to its emotional cadence and therefore its affective impact. At the same time, as Weizman explores, the growing use of forensic science in humanitarianism tends to disregard such individual stories that stand behind the body in favour of evidential artifacts that can speak to the collective plight instead. From the human colloid of precarious lives, then, humanitarian discourse has separated out and now acts upon, as if they were unrelated, the psychological and the material symptoms of violence. And just as in Fassin’s book we see how humanitarian psychiatry interpellates victims by reading their status back from their geography, so too does forensic science substitute human narratives for an aggregate tale derived from the experts’ own interpretation of the material evidence of site itself (page 105).

As Weizman shows, this has its consequences. When buildings are revisualised through the rubric of architectural forensics, they no longer remain just targets. The careful study of how they fall and who they injure turns them into weapons themselves (page 100). Such knowledge at any rate guides the Israeli Defense Force’s offensive ‘forensic’ deployment of D9 armoured bulldozers in Palestine. This particular convergence of moralised politics with brute power is at least as important as the more overt use of humanitarian cover by military forces that would turn to humanitarians as ‘force multipliers’.

**Conclusion: humanitarian politics**

Reading Weizman one finds few grounds to let up on the critique of Israeli militarism. There may, however, be some grounds to limit the extent to which he folds humanitarianism into the same argument. Speaking of the same Palestinian experience of Israeli aggression, Fassin shows that a consciously humanitarian deployment of psychology can be taken up by the victims in forming political subjectivities that do not merely come to terms with their treatment but actively resist it: “to make a demand for justice heard” (page 222). This is not to deny the uneven agency at work between humanitarians who provide the categories for victim status and the victims who must rework and reapply those categories, but it does at least mean that they are not fixed. To carry this over to Weizman’s more basic point, humanitarianism may be inherently capable of enabling state violence, but this is only necessary to the extent that we have given up on being able to do it better. Brauman may well be right, after all.

Politics is in any case key here, and it is politics that perhaps most separates these three illuminating books, since, for all that they do each echo Arendt, they also each suggest different responses to her. Politics enters Barnett’s work under the guise of religion and Fassin’s under the guise of reason, and ultimately it enters Weizman’s book as a failure of the imagination: the politics of the lesser evil. As one of the founding elements of Greek
tragedy, this politics of the lesser evil is predicated upon choosing between what are seen to be two suboptimal outcomes. But the range of choices is, in our world, fixed beforehand by political and economic processes and structural injustices, and what sets the parameters of ‘inescapable’ choice is not the whole story by a long way.

It is here, as Fassin points out, that critical social science becomes especially valuable, by showing that the present is contingent and that there are more possible futures than those we are routinely encouraged to see. It is also here that the history of human rights that Barnett rightly separates from that of humanitarianism might nonetheless be relevant to it in looking to the future. For as Moyn observes, as an increasingly generic argument for limiting the powers of the state, human rights have become—in their very ‘maximal’ approach, and as the ‘last utopia’ of a secular world—just the kind of antipolitics that Barnett diagnoses within humanitarianism writ large. They take on too much and in doing so they push real politics aside. On reading these books, it is hard to avoid concluding that the same may be true of our humanitarian present more broadly.

Simon Reid-Henry
School of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, England and Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Hansmanns gate 7, 0186, Oslo, Norway

Acknowledgement. This essay was written with the support of the Leverhulme Trust.

References
Bornstein E, Redfield P, 2010 Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics (School For Advanced Research Press, Santa Fe, NM)
Guilhot N, 2012, “The anthropologist as witness: humanitarianism between ethnography and critique” Humanity 3 81–101
Hirono M, O’Hagan J (Eds), 2012 Cultures of Humanitarianism: Perspectives from Asia-Pacific (School of International Political and Strategic Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra)
Weizman E, 2007 Hollow Land (Verso, London)