



# THE IRONIC SPECTATOR

SOLIDARITY IN THE AGE OF POST-HUMANITARIANISM

**Lilie Chouliaraki**



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*In memory of my mother, Thomais*

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LILIE CHOULIARAKI

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# 1 Solidarity and Spectatorship

## Introduction: 'Find Your Feeling'

'Get involved. Feeling inspired? ActionAid's supporters experience incredible feelings of happiness, warmth and pride all the time. There's no limit to the scale of amazing feelings you can get by getting involved. To discover what your feeling might be, take the ActionAid interactive quiz today.'<sup>1</sup>

'Find Your Feeling: How Could ActionAid Make You Feel?' is a 30-second quiz that invites us to explore what our 'true feeling' towards this major humanitarian brand might be by clicking on a number of questions: which picture moves us most, for instance? The child 'next door' happily swinging away? A group of protesters in Latin America or a couple of women hugging and smiling at the camera? Depending on our choice of emotions towards these distant others, we are offered a certain self-description: we might be 'warm and fluffy' or 'inspired and excited', and, having been in touch with our emotions, we are then invited to 'click on the link' and 'find out more about ActionAid'.

It is the relationship between 'how I feel' and 'what I can do' about distant others, so clearly thrown into relief in the ActionAid appeal, that concerns me in this book. There is no doubt that emotion has always played a central role in the communication of solidarity, yet, I argue, there is something distinct about the ways in which the self figures in contemporary humanitarianism. This is obvious when we consider earlier Red Cross appeals, for instance, where the question of 'what can I do?' is raised through shocking images of emaciated children, or Amnesty International ones, where the question is answered through a call to personalized letter-writing for the liberation of prisoners of conscience. Neither of these two examples returns the imperative to act on vulnerable strangers to ourselves, asking us to get in touch with our feelings in order to express our solidarity with them.

Taking my point of departure in this new emotionality, I explore the ways in which the communication of solidarity has changed in the course of the past four decades. A crucial period for humanitarianism, the 1970–2010 time-span, is characterized by three major, seemingly unconnected but ultimately intersecting, transformations: the instrumentalization of the

aid and development field; the retreat of the 'grand narratives' of solidarity; and the increasing technologization of communication. Whilst each transformation has been extensively explored in its own right, the co-articulation of the three and, importantly, the implications of this co-articulation for the changing meaning of solidarity, have remained relatively untouched.

In drawing attention to the new emotionality of the 'Find Your Feeling' appeal, then, what I propose is that the meaning of solidarity today should be approached as simultaneously defined, or overdetermined, by the branding strategies of ActionAid, by a generalized reluctance to accept 'common humanity' as the motivation for our actions and by the interactive possibilities of online media. It is, I argue, only when we examine solidarity as a problem of communication, that is, as a moral claim seeking to reconcile the competing demands of market, politics and the media, that we can better understand how the spectacle of suffering is subtly but surely turning the West into a specific kind of public actor – the ironic spectator of vulnerable others.

Irony refers to a disposition of detached knowingness, a self-conscious-suspicion vis-à-vis all claims to truth, which comes from acknowledging that there is always a disjunction between what is said and what exists – that there are no longer 'grand narratives' to hold the two together (Rorty 1989). Whilst irony is often translated into 'postmodern' postures of cool cynicism that reject moral attachment in favour of playful agnosticism, the spectacle of vulnerable others, I argue, complicates this posture in that, by virtue of confronting us with their suffering, it continues to raise the question of 'what to do' – it continues to call upon us as moral actors. The ironic spectator is, in this sense, an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical towards any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer. How has, then, the ironic spectator emerged through the communicative structure of solidarity, across time? And how does this twilight figure manage today to negotiate and resolve the tensions (political, economic, technological) of solidarity that our times press upon us?

The story of this book is, in this sense, a story of the communication of solidarity in the West at a historical turning point. This is the point when the expansion of the field, the end of the Cold War and the explosion of the media came together and ushered a paradigmatic change in the ways in which we are invited to perceive ourselves as moral actors. Even though the West cannot be regarded as a homogeneous sphere of safety, just as the global South cannot equally be seen as one single sphere of vulnerability, my use of these terms preserves nonetheless a historical and political distinction that is crucial to my story: the global division of power that, in unequally

distributing resources along the West–South axis, reproduces the prosperity of the former whilst perpetuating the poverty of the latter. In the light of this division, the communication of solidarity becomes simultaneously the communication of cosmopolitan dispositions – public dispositions towards vulnerable others shaped by the moral imperative to act not only on people close to ‘us’ but also on distant others, strangers we will never meet, without the anticipation of reciprocation (Calhoun 2002; Linklater 2007a,b).

If I look at humanitarian communication as the main carrier of this imperative, this is because humanitarianism has successfully incorporated into its self-description a series of distinct altruistic claims, from the religious tradition of *agape* or care towards the stranger-in-need to the secular requirements to save lives or protect rights, which, despite their differences, have managed to create a relatively coherent moral order that defines our times as an ‘empathic civilization’ (Rifkin 2009). Instead of understanding humanitarian communication in a narrow manner, as institutional appeals strictly emanating from the field of international organizations, however, I treat it as involving a range of popular practices beyond appeals, such as celebrities, concerts and news. I consider these practices to be humanitarian to the extent that each uses its distinct aesthetic logic, for instance the personifying power of celebrity, the enchantment of the rock concert or the professional witnessing of the journalist, so as to confront us with the spectacle of distant sufferers as a cause that demands our response. In so doing, these practices form part of a dispersed communicative structure of cosmopolitan ethics that mundanely acts as a moralizing force upon western public life – what, in chapter 2, I introduce as the ‘humanitarian imaginary’.

In following the mutations of these communicative practices across time, the story of the book is essentially a story of how changes in the aesthetics of humanitarian communication are also changes in the ethics of solidarity. It is a story about how the move from an objective representation of suffering as something separate from us that invites us to contemplate the condition of distant others towards a subjective representation of suffering as something inseparable from our own ‘truths’ that invites contemplation on our own condition, is also a move from an ethics of *pity* to an ethics of *irony*. This is an epistemic shift<sup>2</sup> in the communication of solidarity, I contend, in that it signals the retreat of an other-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about our common humanity and asks nothing back, and the emergence of a self-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about ‘how I feel’ and must, therefore, be rewarded by minor gratifications to the self – the new emotionality of the quiz, the confessions of our favourite

celebrity, the thrill of the rock concert and Twitter journalism being only some of its manifestations.

Whilst all ethics of solidarity involves an element of 'egoistic altruism', ironic solidarity differs from other versions in that it explicitly situates the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action, thereby rendering solidarity a contingent ethics that no longer aspires to a reflexive engagement with the political conditions of human vulnerability. The decline of grand narratives has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of the ironic disposition, but, as I show below, this contingent ethics of solidarity has a more complex history that forces us to examine all three dimensions of its emergence – not only the political, but also the professional and the technological. In telling the story of humanitarianism's four key communicative practices, I, therefore, choose to focus on the various ways through which appeals, celebrities, concerts and news have, in time, come to accommodate the tensions of the field by increasingly relying on the marketing logic of the corporate world as well as the digital technologies of media culture – and, in so doing, they have also come to respond to the political collapse of narratives of common humanity with the celebration of a neoliberal lifestyle of 'feel good' altruism.

At the heart of these aesthetic and ethical transformations, I conclude, lies a fundamental mutation in the communicative structure of humanitarianism. This is the retreat of the theatrical structure of solidarity, where the encounter between western spectator and vulnerable other takes place as an ethical and political event, in favour of a mirror structure, where this encounter is reduced to an often narcissistic self-reflection that involves people like 'us'. Any radical alternative to this dominant ethics of solidarity, I propose, needs to start by reclaiming the *theatricality* of the public realm, the sense of the world beyond the West as a really existing, albeit different, world, which confronts us with the uncomfortable but vital questions of power, otherness and justice and, in so doing, keeps the possibility of social change in the global divisions of our world alive.

But first things first. In this introductory chapter, I set the scene for the exploration of solidarity as a problem of communication by introducing each of the three key dimensions of this communication: the *institutional*, where I discuss the implications of the increasing expansion and concomitant instrumentalization of the aid and development field; the *political*, where I address the end of grand narratives and the ensuing rise of individualist morality as a motivation for action; and the *technological*, where I show how the new media have facilitated an unprecedented explosion of public self-expression, thereby also changing the premises upon which solidarity is communicated. It is, as I have said, only in the light of these three dimensions that we can begin to make sense of the shift from the objectivity of the



theatre to the new emotionality of the mirror as a paradigmatic shift in the very meaning of solidarity.

## The instrumentalization of humanitarianism

The 'Find Your Feeling' appeal is informed by an emphasis on 'inspiration' that, as Richard Turner, ActionAid's ex-head of fund-raising, put it, focuses on making people 'feel great if they give, but [doesn't] make them feel rotten if they don't'.<sup>3</sup> Leaving the needs-based iconography of poverty behind for inducing negative feelings of guilt, the inspiration-based approach is about inducing positive, warm feelings and, in so doing, aims at motivating longer-term support for the organization's cause: 'we'd like to think', as Turner continues, 'that the kind of supporters we attract are likely to give to us for longer and give more than if we'd increased our response rate with hard-hitting, more needs-based advertising'.<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting a general tendency in the aid and development field, this is the language of corporate communication that, instead of traditional strategies of dissemination, prioritizes the strategy of branding: the cultivation of a deep emotional attachment to a particular commodity, the NGO brand, with a view to guaranteeing customer loyalty to this brand. Whilst the emotional focus of branding deprives humanitarian communication of an argumentative rationale for solidarity, an issue I explore in chapter 3, what concerns me here is the broader point that our moral encounter with human vulnerability is now cast in a particular logic of the market.

Humanitarianism has, of course, never been antithetical to the market and has, in fact, been theorized as a quintessentially liberal idea born out of capitalism, for instance as the benign face of the expansion of labour markets beyond the West (Friedman 2003; Bajde 2009). Yet, the contemporary articulation of humanitarianism with the market is a rather recent development that reflects a shift within capitalism from, what Boltanski and Chiapello call, a classical liberal to a neoliberal conception of public morality (2005). In the light of this shift, we may argue that, whereas modern humanitarianism was grounded on the crucial separation between a public logic of economic utilitarianism, applicable in the sphere of commodity exchange, and a private logic of sentimental obligation towards vulnerable others, applicable in the sphere of individual altruism and increasingly in institutionalized philanthropy, late modern humanitarianism, what I here theorize as *post-humanitarianism*, increasingly blurs the boundary between the two. In so doing, it manages both to turn the ever-expanding realm of economic exchange into a realm of private emotion and self-expression and,

in a dialectical move, to simultaneously commodify private emotion and philanthropic obligation.

Starting in the 1980s and gaining full momentum in the early 1990s, two developments have brought about this shift towards what Cheah (2006) calls the *instrumentalization* of the aid and development field – that is, the subordination of the other-oriented aims to save lives and change societies to the self-oriented imperative of profitable performance in the humanitarian sector itself. These are the *marketization* of humanitarian practice and the *production of administrative knowledge* in the discipline of Development Studies.

The *marketization of humanitarian practice* is a consequence of the explosion of international organizations (IOs) and international NGOs (INGOs) in the aid and development sector. Aid agencies, for instance, expanded their operations by 150 per cent in the 1985–95 decade whereas, in the USA alone, their numbers rose by a hundred in the 1980–90 decade (from 167 to 267) and almost doubled in the subsequent one, 1990–2000 (from 267 to 436).<sup>5</sup> Marketization has, in this sense, emerged from these organizations' strong competition for survival in a sector that has not only become more densely populated<sup>6</sup> but has also come to depend primarily on project-based funding by transnational intermediaries and state donors. In the 1990–2000 decade, to give an example, funding levels rose nearly three-fold, from \$2.1 million to \$5.9 million, reaching more than \$10 million by 2005–6, whilst the distribution of these funds has increasingly shifted to depend on bilateral aid and state budgets' earmarking, thereby rendering strong state interests a key criterion for INGO fund-raising (Smillie & Minear 2004: 8–10, 195; Barnett 2005: 723–40; Barnett & Weiss 2008: 33–5).

Even though the proliferation of humanitarian agencies has been hailed as contributing to the cosmopolitan ethos of global civil society, in that INGOs 'breed new ideas, advocate, protest, and mobilize public support', as Mathews argues, and, in the process, further 'shape, implement, monitor, and enforce national and international commitments' (1997: 52–3), we can clearly see that such proliferation entails a major risk. Insofar as it takes place within an economy of scarcity, where many agencies bid for limited funding, the competition for resources inevitably tends to foster compliance with the rules of the western donor market rather than with real priorities in the global South. Indeed, despite the expansion of the field and the provision of 'more aid than ever before', as Barnett and Weiss claim, 'the bulk of resources [are] controlled by a few donor countries that [are] more inclined to impose conditions and direct aid towards their priorities' so that, they conclude, 'the least fortunate [are] getting the least attention' (2008: 34).

The aims of humanitarianism, to provide relief and secure sustainable development in the global South, are thus made possible by a regime of economic relations that simultaneously subjects these aims to the priorities of western entrepreneurship – sustainable funding and renewable contracts for the organizations themselves. This paradox at the heart of the field, the ‘inhuman conditions’ of humanitarianism, ultimately serves to reproduce rather than change the economic relations of subordination between the wealthy West and the poor South: ‘while a degree of mass-based cosmopolitan solidarity has arisen in the domestic domains of Northern countries,’ Cheah argues, ‘it is unlikely that this solidarity will be directed in a concerted manner towards ending economic inequality between countries because Northern civil societies derive their prodigious strength from this inequality’ (2006: 494).

Despite, therefore, its benign objectives of maximizing efficiency and increasing accountability to donors, the financial regime of the aid and development field ultimately legitimizes a neoliberal logic of governance that turns the cosmopolitan aspirations of humanitarianism into the corporate aspirations of the West and, in so doing, not only fails to serve the ideal of global civil society but delivers harmful effects on vulnerable others. Drawing on three different case studies of INGO project implementation, for instance, Cooley and Ron (2002) persuasively demonstrate how ‘agency problems, competitive contracts, and multiple principals generate incentives promoting self-interested behaviour, intense competition, and poor project implementation’ (2002: 18); the competitiveness built into this system, they conclude, is ‘deeply corrosive’.

If the instrumentalization of humanitarianism is enacted through institutional practices on the ground, it is primarily legitimized through the *scientific knowledge produced in the field of Development Studies*. Born in the 1960s as a response to the need to study the processes of decolonization and the evolution of the new states, Development Studies has always been marked by a key tension between normative theory, showing what ideal societies or states would look like, and best practice, making concrete policy recommendations that are applicable in the here and now (Schuurman 2009). Even though this has historically been a productive tension that propelled critical research in the field, there has recently been, according to theorists, a definitive tip in the balance towards policy rather than normative theory (Biel 2000; Kothari 2005).

This means that Development Studies is today largely abandoning the critical perspectives of political economy, which thematized inequality as a systemic cause of underdevelopment and linked inequality to non-economic issues – thus further connecting Development Studies to the

disciplines of Politics, Sociology or History and Anthropology. Instead, what today dominates the field is what Fine (2009) calls ‘new development economics’: the neoliberal economics of the (post-)Washington Consensus, which favours micro-economic, rather than macro- or structural economic, approaches to development, and methodologically positivist, rather than critical reflexive, research designs.

The former, micro-economic approaches, favour an emphasis on the logistics of capital circulation within specific markets, whilst ignoring ‘big picture’ questions of injustice and redistribution that are specific to the contexts of development. In treating the market as a ‘universal’ language of science that can be variously applied to particular states, ‘new development economics’ not only sidelines non-economic factors that affect development but further subsumes all development under a specific brand of administrative research – one that focuses on ‘individual incentives’ as responses to ‘market failures’ (Krueger 1986: 62; Mansell 2001, 2002).

The latter, positivist research designs, come to rely almost exclusively upon quantitative methodologies of measuring impact and assessing outcomes at the expense of more qualitative approaches that emphasize the histories, contexts and actors of development. Even though the academic field of Development Studies is admittedly complex, with voices such as Amartya Sen’s on economics and moral philosophy (1999, 2009) or Joseph Stiglitz’s (2002) on critical economics seeking to articulate more holistic alternatives to the economic reductionism of the neoliberal approach, the fact remains that dominant methodologies have imposed a purely technocratic agenda in the field. In so doing, they have marginalized the moral and political content of development: ‘neoliberal thinking’, as Schuurman puts it, ‘is having a growing influence on determining the research agenda of development studies, making it increasingly difficult to maintain a critical research tradition’ (2009: 832).

Following the mainstream epistemology of their field, INGOs similarly adopt a *modus operandi* that depoliticizes questions of development in favour of a focus on ‘impact’ and ‘measurable indicators’: ‘humanitarian organizations’, as Barnett argues, therefore ‘define “impact”, specify their goals and translate them into measurable indicators, gather data in highly fluid emergency settings, establish baseline data in order to generate a “before and after” snapshot, control for alternative explanations and variables, and construct reasonable counterfactual scenarios’ (2005: 730). Development knowledge production remains, in this way, tightly linked to the managerial priorities of major IOs, such as the UN, IMF, and the World Bank, that, in regulating the traffic and distribution of project funding, also come to define the object and methodology of development

research: ‘the World Bank’, Fine says, ‘has both increased its influence on the social science of development and the influence of such social science (and economics within it) on development thinking’ (2009: 895).

This discussion clearly, albeit sketchily, illustrates the institutional logic of contemporary humanitarianism – a neoliberal logic of micro-economic explanations that ignores the systemic causes of global poverty and turns humanitarianism into a practice of depoliticized managerialism. What this discussion further suggests, however, is that, whilst substantial critical work on the instrumentalization of both the practice and knowledge production of humanitarianism already exists, there is little that has been said about the impact of instrumentalization on the communication of solidarity itself.

Grounded on the working hypothesis that the communication of solidarity cannot but participate in this broader process of instrumentalization, as the ‘Find Your Feeling’ appeal already shows, my aim is to address the question of *how* instrumentalization came to be enacted through a range of key practices of humanitarian communication and, crucially, *which implications* this instrumentalization bears on the dispositions of solidarity that become available in our public culture. There is, I propose, an ambivalent cosmopolitanism inherent in the communicative structure of humanitarianism today (Yanacopulos & Smith 2007) – one that both hints at the possibility of solidarity today and simultaneously undermines this possibility. Let me, now, turn from the institutional to the political dimension of humanitarianism in order to discuss how the meaning of solidarity itself has been changing as a result of the post-Cold War collapse of ideologies.

## Solidarity without ‘grand narratives’

The ‘Find Your Feeling’ appeal employs a branding strategy that aims at ‘inspiring’ solidarity. Its instrumental character granted, it is nonetheless committed to cultivating a cosmopolitan disposition among its publics – the moral disposition to act benevolently on distant others without asking back. Far removed from the heroic iconographies of the Good Samaritan or the comrade-in-arms, which traditionally portray solidarity as involving strong emotions or a self-sacrificial attitude, the ‘Find Your Feeling’ quiz illustrates, among other things, the plasticity of solidarity as a concept that can also be portrayed in terms of minor emotions and a ‘feel-good’ approach to virtue. What does this plasticity tell us about the historical mutations of cosmopolitan solidarity in late modernity? What are, in other words, the meanings of solidarity and how have they changed in time?

The idea of solidarity has a long and complex genealogy (Rorty 1989;

Boltanski 1999; Eagleton 2009). In its contemporary secular form, however, solidarity dates back to the eighteenth century 'culture of sympathy', when the rise of modern capitalism generated a new moral discourse on the inherent goodness of human nature and on the importance of treating distant others not as enemies but as 'cordial strangers' (Hutchinson 1996; Hyde 1999). The founding father of the economic liberalism of modernity, Adam Smith, is an instrumental figure in this discourse in that he both celebrated benevolence towards vulnerable others as a fundamental moral property of the human psyche, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and advocated the regulation of society by the amoral 'invisible hand' of commercial activity, in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776/1999; and see Shapiro 2002 for the 'Smith effect' upon western modernity).

Often referred to as 'the Adam Smith problem', this seeming contradiction between universal morality and amorality can, in fact, be seen as a condition of possibility for modern humanitarianism, insofar as it is precisely because of the violent dynamics of market circulation, exploitation and expansion that a theory of human goodness as constitutive of the moral tissue of social life becomes not only significant but also necessary in the legitimization of colonial modernity. Indeed, Smith's economic theory, far from being a purely mathematical matter, was, as Phillipson notes, 'deeply embedded in a system of moral philosophy, jurisprudence and politics', always seeking to link economic behaviour with 'the natural wants and demands of mankind' and their consequences 'for the progress of civilization and the human mind' (2010: 217). Even though, therefore, the moral emphasis in Smith's philosophical oeuvre remains undecidedly suspended between other-oriented sympathy and self-love, what is significant about this foundational discourse on western morality is that it situates the instability of solidarity at the heart of modernity itself.

It is, I argue, this instability between humanity and inhumanity, between benevolence and violence, that has propelled the historical variations of the meaning of solidarity in the course of modernity. Two of these variations are relevant to my discussion on humanitarianism: *solidarity as salvation*, or the humanitarian solidarity of the Dunantean project, and *solidarity as revolution*, or the political solidarity of Marxian militantism. Whereas the former is associated with humanitarianism 'proper', in that it was born as a moral response to the atrocities of war and aspired to save lives and comfort suffering humanity, the latter is associated with a social critique of the conditions of suffering and aspired to change the social relations of economic exploitation that made suffering possible in the first place.

Even though both variations share a reference to the benevolent humanism of the 'culture of sympathy',<sup>7</sup> they differ in that solidarity as salvation

remains resolutely apolitical, grounding humanitarianism on the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence (Slim 1997, 2003; Barnett 2005), whilst solidarity as revolution is a profound radicalization of the 'culture of sympathy' that keeps the faith to human goodness but challenges the bourgeois benevolence of its capitalist roots, seeking to replace it with a new world order – one that is not regulated by self-interested markets but by the just redistribution of resources across social groups (Sen 1989; Nussbaum 1997).

Solidarity as salvation is reflected in a long tradition of humanitarian practice that today constitutes the operational infrastructure of aid in the global South. Prototypically expressed in the institution of the Red Cross (founded in 1862 after the Battle of Solferino) and subsequently the League of Nations and the United Nations (founded in 1919 and 1945 respectively), humanitarian solidarity has now come to encompass a diverse body of agencies that go beyond solidarity as relief from suffering so as to include sustainable development in their priorities (Barnett 2005; Calhoun 2009).

Solidarity as revolution, in contrast, follows a different trajectory of political struggle for social justice within and beyond the West. If solidarity in the West was institutionalized largely through the establishment of Marxist political parties and their networks of collaboration, notably the Communist International (or Comintern, 1919–1943) and the Socialist International (1889–today), solidarity beyond the West was reflected in the anti-colonial movements of the global South, in the post-WWII period up to the mid-1960s (Moyn 2010: 84–119). Articulating a political vision of emancipation from the West, which system of wealth accumulation relied on the impoverishment of colonies, the solidarity of revolution offered a powerful alternative to humanitarianism proper in that it thematized the demand for justice and hence the vision of a suffering-free humanity as an indispensable part of the moral imperative to act on vulnerable others.

Despite their profound differences, these two forms of solidarity, salvation and revolution, are nonetheless informed by similarly universal norms of morality. Humanitarian solidarity is informed by a morality of altruistic benevolence, which had both Christian and secular roots (Boltanski 1999), whilst political solidarity is informed by a morality of social justice, which relied on Marxian and anti-colonial theory (Calhoun 2009; Moyn 2010). Like all forms of universalism, however, neither of the two solidarities was ultimately able to avoid the accusation that its moral certainties were doing more harm than good to the societies they were applied to: 'solidarity', in Gilroy's words, became 'suspect' (2006: 70).

The solidarity of salvation, to begin with, has been accused of perpetuating the very suffering it sets out to comfort: 'Dunant's legacy', as Gourevich

puts it, 'has hardly made war less cruel. As humanitarian action has proliferated in the century since his death, so has the agony it is supposed to alleviate' (2010: 109). Two main reasons lie at the heart of this self-defeating diagnosis of humanitarian solidarity. The first reason has to do with political interest, namely that aid agencies, despite their neutrality principle, have all too often made inappropriate compromises with corrupt regimes in order to remain operational in specific world regions (Ignatieff 2001; Terry 2002); more recently, the resort to moral argument for the use of military violence in 'new humanitarian wars', for instance in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, has further profoundly challenged the integrity of humanitarian ethics (de Waal 1997; Duffield 2001; Wheeler 2003; Douzinas 2007).

The second reason has to do with institutional inertia, namely that these agencies traditionally rely on organizational self-monitoring without external assessment and, therefore, tend to enjoy total immunity from accusations of failure – even in the face of evidence about their complicit participation in humanitarian catastrophes – for instance, the Congo (1993–2003) or Rwanda atrocities (1994). Insofar as all evaluations rely on their own accounts of events, no formal distribution of responsibility to aid agencies can take place: 'As far as I am aware,' Polman has recently remarked, 'no aid worker or aid organization has ever been dragged before the courts for failures or mistakes, let alone for complicity in crimes committed by rebels or regimes' (2010: 106). The consequence is, as Kennedy argues, that, despite its often harmful practices, 'humanitarianism tempts to hubris, to an idolatry about our intentions and routines, to the conviction that we know more than we do about what justice can be' (2004: xviii).

The solidarity of revolution, in a different manner, also turned out to perpetuate the injustice it sought to eliminate and, in so doing, it has also ultimately reproduced the structures it promised to change. Critiques of Marxism, on the one hand, focus on the ways in which its totalizing narratives of social change construe the non-West as a savage 'Other' and, thereby, reproduce the symbolic domination of the global South by its western 'saviours' – even as the latter claims to liberate the former (Said 1993, 2002). A reflection of broader scepticism towards Marxian universalism, this orientalist critique draws on postmodern sensibilities that celebrate difference and locality to challenge the ways in which Marxism becomes divorced from the particularities of non-western contexts and, in so doing, tends to impose rather than co-construct projects of change in the South: 'most Marxists', as Corbridge puts it, echoing the sceptical argument, 'trade an armchair understanding of development issues for a commitment to local development initiatives born of a participatory research framework' (1993: 454). Critiques of neocolonialism, on the other hand, similarly emphasize



the political violence inherent in revolutionary universalism but tend to focus less on the biases of Marxian theory and more on the failure of its emancipatory project itself and the continuing dependence of the South on the West. Their emphasis falls, in particular, on the ways in which the new regimes of the decolonized South perpetuate structures of western domination, whilst safeguarding the 'grotesque' power of the local sovereigns in these newly founded states (Mbembe 1992, 2001; Abrahamsen 2003).

Ultimately, what these critiques of universalism towards both forms of solidarity – salvation and revolution – problematize is the traditional relationship between politics and solidarity. The former, the critique of salvation, points to the fact that there can be no pure humanitarianism, in that all choices to save lives are ultimately political choices about which suffering is worth alleviating and who is to blame for it: 'the humanitarian act', as Orbinksi put it, upon receiving the Nobel prize for *Médecins Sans Frontières*, 'is the most apolitical of all acts, but if action and its morality are taken seriously, it has the most profound of political implications. And the fight against impunity is one of those implications.'<sup>8</sup> This politicization of the solidarity of salvation, echoed in MSF's 'ethics of refusal' to remain silent in the face of injustice but also reflected in the post-Cold War implication of armed conflict in humanitarian projects, has today undermined the moral certainty of humanitarianism as a pure ethic of salvation: 'humanitarianism's "politics" are now more visible', as Barnett and Weiss say, 'and the relationship between humanitarianism and power is now more complex' than ever before (2008: 38).

It is, at least partly, in response to the redefinition of the morality of salvation as ultimately a political morality that the field has sought to instrumentalize its institutional practices through scientific methodologies and, in so doing, to sustain the claim that its practices remain neutral, beyond political interest. Rather than succeeding, however, humanitarianism is today accused of a double compromise – not only of being 'undertaken in a variety of circumstances that challenge its moral clarity' but, as Calhoun observes, also of being undertaken 'in complex organizations that demand instrumental orientations to action' (2008: 96).

In parallel to this attempt to defend the depoliticization of the solidarity of salvation, there is a simultaneous marginalization of the politics of justice in the solidarity of revolution. Symptomatic of the post-Cold War decline of narratives of social change, the retreat from justice has its roots in the New Left, which, already in the late 1960s, challenged its 'Marxist predecessors' precisely for being 'guilty . . . of inhumane behaviour in the name of the revolution and the better society that awaits humanity in the far-off, distant future' (Rifkin 2009: 416). The significance of this position,