



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)*

Michel Agier

Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development, Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 2010, pp. 29-45
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hum/summary/v001/1.1.agier.html>

Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)*

At one of the weekly meetings of representatives of the nongovernmental organizations, national institutions, and United Nations agencies intervening in the refugee camp at Tobanda, in Sierra Leone, in November 2003, I found myself next to the field coordinator of Doctors without Borders (*Médecins sans frontières*, MSF). At the time I was conducting research in the camp. I told her that the camp's managers—members of the Lutheran World Federation under contract from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees—had recently replaced a refugee chosen by some of his peers to represent them with another, younger, and uncharismatic figure, who was known to the administrators for being especially “docile.”

The MSF coordinator mentioned these facts to the fifteen other participants at the meeting and asked the camp's director to explain himself. He offered a response that lacked nothing for clarity: “The camp does not need democracy in order to function,” he said in a tone combining mockery and some irritation. In a sense, these were the words of a governmental authority, one who made decision based directly on his political intuition and whose word was law. But behind this clarity, it raised for us a provocative question, and the most essential issue in this situation: democracy threatened the order of the camp, could lead it to unravel, like an uprising can topple a government. It is in order to inquire into the order and disorder of the camp, and more generally the relations between politics and humanitarianism, that I revisit the scene here.

Before defining what I mean by “humanitarian government” and explaining the necessity of this concept for anyone who wishes to take up the question of power and politics in humanitarian spaces, I must begin by situating humanitarian projects in the different contexts that make it possible—global and local, symbolic and geopolitical.

Striking with One Hand, Healing with the Other

I have designated the role that humanitarian projects play on a global scale as the left hand of empire.¹ This “left hand” acquires meaning at that very general level in that it follows on the heels of and smoothes over the damage wrought by military intervention, the latter conceived of as a “police” operation enacted simultaneously in different places on earth. This global police exercises control over extreme crises that regularly rock the various parts of the world considered poor or “vulnerable,” or over weak-intensity conflicts; and if necessary, it engages in armed intervention. Striking with one hand, healing with the other. In one sense, this can be understood as a global

and consensual apparatus that takes imperial form in that all political opposition is denied. In this system, there is only one world order, with dissenters cast as violent, criminal, or rogue, whether they are states, organizations, or individuals. Then again, there are acts of care based on a vision of humanity as unique, and uniquely put to the test in the figure of the absolute victim, which is also the *raison d'être* of humanitarianism. The latter is caught in the web of a “secret solidarity” with the police order.² And since it is seen as everyday, permanent business all over the world, the hand that heals requires a durable system—an organization, budgets, personnel—which has grown in size over the last several decades and which combines a discourse of saving and emergency in a powerful and enduring apparatus. We saw this in a glaring manner with the two military interventions, conducted by the Americans and their allies, in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003: the aerial distribution of medicine accompanied the dropping of bombs; the evaluation of potential survivors and orphans to feed; the precise, mapped location of future camps for a certain number of displaced persons; the set-up of tents and the delivery of thousands of blankets, all anticipating the effects of military operations.

This function of humanitarianism overlaps with and contributes to the end of politics, instantiated by the unchallenged rule of world police and the rescue of “victims.” Yet, as any other form of policing, it is “political” to the extent that it embodies a desire to control. The legitimacy and the success of this strategy depend upon a permanent and diffuse climate of fear in the cocoon of the wealthy world, whose media reflect the increasing political visibility of the poor countries, most of which are former colonies and express more or less aggressively, and sometimes violently, their resentment against the arrogant wealth and the social injustice that prevail at the level of the common world.³ These new fears of the “other”—whether she is the “foreigner” or the “Muslim”—are the engine and the motive for the armed violence and the politics of domination of the Western world over the regions of the planet previously called the “Third World,” “developing countries,” or the “global south.” In a context in which some sort of war is constantly brewing, the compassion and the care actually provided by humanitarian projects belong to a politics of “containment” of poor countries and of the migratory flows coming from areas that are politically, socially, or ecologically weakened.⁴ One can subscribe to Jonathan Benthall’s hypothesis of an opposition between the flows of humanitarian aid moving from the north to the south and the flows of undesirable migrants moving from the south to the north.⁵ This stand-off belongs to what some, in Europe, already call the “war against migrants.”⁶

Kinship Fiction, Humanitarian Fiction: From One Totalitarianism to Another

This situation, made up of multiple conflicts that seem to be disconnected from each other and entirely “contained” in space and time, along with the large-scale diffusion of humanitarian rhetoric and projects, and more generally of a fantasized representation of others as victims and/or culprits, partakes of a “moment” that Jacques Rancière has dubbed “politics in its nihilistic age.”⁷ This nonpolitics is characterized by an identity between the whole (represented by the state but also, little by little, by the institutions of the “international community,” or even by “the world” as a single

unit) and the sum of its parts, without remainder or excess. It reaches its fulfillment whenever consensus, the submission of the weak, or the “tolerance” of the dominant erases, stifles, or marginalizes any dissensus that expresses a “disagreement.” Whatever the means through which this consensus is forged, and whatever the shape of the totality represented, there is no longer any excess or outside party whose disruptive voice would threaten the consensus. In the absence of any “parasite” between the whole and the sum of its parts, each part of the whole considers itself to be in an immediate relationship to the whole, sharing the same destiny and coalescing around the same logos. It is a consensual system outside of which there is no remnant.

This identity, as a generalized system of transparency, takes on the name of “humanity.” Like the god Janus, humanity has a *double-sided identity*, which, however, does not express any alterity (no “other” is allowed in this bounded and total representation). Its double is only the reflection of a wounded, suffering, or dying humanity. It becomes the “absolute victim,” who is nothing else or other than absolute and essentialized humanity when it is suffering. This figure of humanity, both unique and split—absolute humanity vs. absolute victim—dominates contemporary thought: the representation of a world generally treated as a totality, with no representation of *difference*, is the foundation of our present as a humanitarian age, a world of nameless victims whose identities do not differ from the common humanity (a world in which one sole common identity, immediately upon injury, creates victimhood “regardless of sex, religion, ethnicity, political opinion”). It is a world in which each person plays his role—even overacts it, as one says of performers—and thus without representation of any *disagreement* or contention. This reference to the absolute victim, recurrent and obligatory as it is, determines the meaning given to the space of the camp itself insofar as it is created and run according to the specific rules of humanitarian government, as I hope to show below.

Just as the privileged informant of the anthropologist is believed to incarnate the coherent totality of his or her society or culture, there is a humanitarian picture of the human, ideally a suffering woman or child, that is to say, a representation that requires acceptance by exhibiting a doubly “naked” life: pure life in the most profound biological relationship of a mother and child on one hand, but also life *stripped bare* in the degradations of suffering on the other. These unified images of personhood, kinship-based or humanitarian, are often rendered visible in academic conferences, “exoticized” films and books, or even in cultural tourism. The exoticism expected from the spaces of war and humanitarianism now rivals ethnic exoticism, particularly in some African countries.⁸ This mechanism of “individuation” (reification of a culture in an individual, and more generally of the whole in the part) characteristic of both the realms of kinship and humanitarianism is the symptom of the same impossibility of the political. In the case of kinship, it is because the individual is caught in the constraints of social power and meaning (which includes him and in which his whole existence is summarized), because he is born into, and has no exit from, the terrorizing web formed by the power of leaders and the interpretation of shamans, that we can speak, as does Marc Augé, of “totalitarian kinship.”⁹ In this sense, rebellion has no place since the only possible response, historically, has been to escape. In Africa during the years of decolonization (1950–70), the departure for cities and

urban peripheries was synonymous with emancipation (literally, the search for the “air of freedom”) before it became, for many, the discovery of places of abandonment.

Thinking of individuation in the context of kinship, up to and including its extreme of totalitarianism, offers support in the anthropological realm to a strong thesis of political philosophy, according to which the political is impossible in the kinship, clan, or household realm, where only “power”—and not “politics”—exists.¹⁰ Hannah Arendt located the possibility of the political in a (non)place which was neither abroad, “where one could not be free because one was no longer a citizen,” nor in “the private household, where one could not be free either, because there one had no equals.” It was only the gathering of equals that constituted the space of freedom and the possibility of the public.¹¹ The impossibility of the political extended then to a society that was completely *kinship-based*, as in the repressive and depoliticizing model that Augé describes. The impossibility of the political is founded on the fiction of the totality, which in turn presupposes the absence of an outside, and furthermore, on the essential emptiness of all “thought from the outside.”¹² There is no redemption beyond this world, in this vision. Such totalitarian thinking translates very concretely in the life of every inhabitant into the impossibility of an alternative understanding of what being an “individual-in-the world” means within this very world. The totalitarian hold of kinship or of the household corresponds to the absence of an alternative, which in turn produces the “whole” of humanitarianism. A simple change of focus and register will demonstrate as much.

The humanitarian world is based upon the fiction of humanity as an identity and conflates universalism and globalization. On the one hand, it operates on the basis of a universalistic type of thinking: it deals with humanity as unique, and in particular with its extreme embodiment in the problem raised by the unmediated, nameless victim, who is not an “other” recognized through her own voice but the *very same* humanity who is abused and whose human qualities are diminished, incomplete, or unexpressed. The assessment of these degradations generates different degrees within a same identity, according to categories that seem at first natural even though they immediately pave the way toward social and normative principles of classification: child, handicapped, wounded, unsuitable, illiterate, retarded, underdeveloped, etc. The different categories of “vulnerability” can then find their place within this human classification.¹³

The humanitarian world is also a globalized apparatus: a set of organizations, networks, agents, and financial means distributed across different countries and crisscrossing the world as they herald a universal cause, the only and exclusive *raison d'être* of humanitarian projects. Here and there, the fiction becomes real for a limited period of time and takes the form of a “moving sovereignty” implemented by various organizations and agents—people who often happen to be “committed,” trained in the disciplines of human rights, social and political science, or in the professions of health or humanitarian logistics.¹⁴ An organizational globalism thus mirrors the universal message of humanity as an identity defined by “equality”—an equality whose opposite is not inequality (and even less so contested inequality) but the suffering of silent victims, whom the humanitarian world designates as its true beneficiaries or, to put it in terms of economic strategy, its targets.

The anthropological individuation of the person in the kinship system—for which the submission of the younger brothers or the “circulation of women” are the classical figures in ethnographic studies of the village—is thus echoed by the silent subjection of the absolute victim, who finds in the humanitarian camp the paradigmatic space of her survival and confinement. As Jacques Rancière has written, “The eligible party pure and simple is then none other than the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible.”¹⁵ In both cases, in both the social order of kinship and that of humanitarianism, that of the village and that of the camp, there is no excess residue, and no alternative open to description. At best it is there as an absence, the locus of desire, and the destination of flight. And in both cases, the permanent dualism required by every identification with the social order—which both affords resources and imposes constraints—is the condition for the possibility of subjection without apparent violence. Thus, the figure of the *person* is the sign of social recognition of the individual in its proximity (to family or neighbors), before it is dissolved in the extreme oppression of the domestic or “communitarian” group; so it is that the humanitarian *victim* can find crucial assistance in the refugee camp before realizing that her voice has no meaning: she is as undesirable as she is vulnerable and can be forced to stay or go from day to day, even to see “her” camp disappear, according to just as incomprehensible a good will of international organizations as had led to its creation.

In this way, belonging to the totality and consensus, subjection itself, are premised on the most basic belief that there is no alternative, and no life besides what is being lived. There is in this totalistic way of thinking about the political world (which is potentially totalitarian in political terms) the figure of a silent and invisible elsewhere that is always absent from all visible places and audible discourses. Both empty spaces make up the external frontiers of this closed world or, more exactly, of this lonely world stranded in a desert: “The outside never yields its essence. The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence—as something inwardly illuminated by the certainty of its own existence—but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible, receding into the sign it makes to draw one toward it (as though it were possible to reach it).”¹⁶

In this moment of lurching toward the limit of power over life, the humanitarian world becomes a totalitarianism, which has the power of life (to make live or survive) and the power of death (to let die) over the individual it considers the absolute victim, just as the world of kinship exercises its totalitarianism over the person by dictating identity, heritage, and duties in absolute terms.

In short, as social world and regime of thought, humanitarianism arises from a totalitarian fiction that takes place in two stages: first, the fiction of the unity of the human (humanity as identity) with no place for inequality; and second, the transparency between ideological universalism and organizational globalization. Experiencing the fiction “as reality” may be a painful experience. The unwanted return of refugees to their “homes” (an added displacement) or the human or economic problems which push the closure of a camp that is ten or fifteen years old, are lived as an act of aggression, a form of violence which is added onto the violence already

experienced by the beneficiaries of humanitarianism. At each step of their trajectory, refugees and displaced people discover, side by side, the personnel and the white vehicles—SUVs and trucks, cars and tanks—of UN agencies, blue helmets, and the humanitarian organizations whose function, while technically distinct, tends to merge in everyday life into the manifestation of a single international, and totally sovereign, force.

Humanitarian Government

Let us return now briefly to the formation of this globalized apparatus, which has allowed humanitarian government to crystallize. While not a unique or homogeneous institution either socially or spatially, humanitarianism exists on the global level in terms of action and representation. The principle of the apparatus prevails: its network-like shape takes it into many spaces, dispersed across the globe with more or less density depending on the continent; thus Africa, the Middle East, and Asia are the regions with the most humanitarian investment. In evoking an apparatus (and especially the apparatus of camps as one of its most meaningful versions today), we can rediscover the legibility of the humanitarian world, though it is often lost from sight when globalized phenomena are discussed. However global it may be, this world only and always exists in the local form that we can cross, describe, and analyze, even if none of these spaces is outside of reach of the network. Moreover, far from involving only nongovernmental organizations acting in the humanitarian field, it includes all the actors—private and public, governmental, intergovernmental, nongovernmental or affiliated with the UN—who use the label of “humanitarianism” in order to secure recognition, distinction, or legitimacy for their actions on the ground. The fact that all these organizations cooperate—whether willingly or not—within the same parcel of the global space is another proof that the apparatus acts as a whole as a means of control as much as of care.

Humanitarian government does not operate on the basis of a genuine and organized coordination at the worldwide level, although such coordination is not impossible to imagine, if it is not already partly imagined. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) now plays a leading political and economic role. It “outsources” its operations and contracts them out to numerous NGOs that target the refugees it has under its care: more than 500 NGOs in 2000 and 575 in 2007 (of which 424 were national and 151 international NGOs). The creation of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) within the UN in 1992 was an attempt to coordinate humanitarian action across the different branches of the apparatus. In 1999 and 2000, jurisdictional conflicts between the UNHCR and the OCHA appeared here and there, in particular in Africa, as in the case of the management of internally displaced persons. Since 2005, the encampment of internally displaced persons has been placed within the purview of the UNHCR. Similarly, the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) created in 1992 occupies a key position in the financing and thus the steering of European NGOs, in particular of the vast constellation of small NGOs that are financially dependent. The apparatus also includes the big international NGOs. Some have evolved out of local or national organizations that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century; others were created in the 1970s.

But for all of them the 1980s and the 1990s were a crucial period in the move toward global intervention. One could name Save the Children, founded in Britain in 1918, and internationally in 1997; the International Rescue Committee, created in the United States in 1942; Oxfam, created in Britain in 1942, and as an international entity in 1995; CARE, created in the United States in 1945, which became an international network in the 1970s; MSF (founded in France in 1971), or Action contre la Faim (founded in France in 1979). A dozen INGOs (international NGOs) control 90 percent of the total funding of humanitarian NGOs and a few of them even have larger budgets than the UNHCR.¹⁷ All of these organizations attempt to coordinate the projects of their different national constituents, and more rarely to outline campaigns or stake out common positions internationally. Finally, in 2006, the Global Humanitarian Platform was founded, in order to unite and coordinate the three parts of contemporary humanitarianism: NGOs, the Red Cross (and Red Crescent), and the UN with its subordinate parts like the International Organization for Migration. The goal was to achieve a more fluid and harmonious relationship among these different enterprises as well as to better integrate small national NGOs into the “platform.”¹⁸ The same year, the UN inaugurated a so-called cluster strategy to shape the coordination and division of labor of the different but overlapping UN offices.²⁰ There is thus in formation a strange and exceptional “glocalization,” which is at the same time more and more current and ordinary: the rapid creation of a global order which inevitably results in local tensions among international actors that clash with one another in local circumstance, and with the multiplicity of local actors too.

Camps as Spaces of Power over Life

In 2008, the UNHCR ran over three hundred refugee camps around the world, of which several dozen housed more than 25,000 persons each, and a few up to 100,000. About six million statutory refugees—half of them in Africa and one third in Asia—live in these camps. In Middle Eastern countries, there are 60 camps for Palestinian refugees managed by the UN Relief and Works Agency (the authority created for them after their 1948 displacement), in which approximately a million and a half persons live, of something more than four million total Palestinian refugees. Finally, there are camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), which are at once the most numerous and the most informal of camps. There are an estimated 600 such sites, and the Darfur province of Sudan alone has 65 where almost two million displaced persons were living in 2008. The Gereida camp, sheltering 120,000, has the dubious honor of being the largest displaced persons camp in the world. Outside Sudan, four other countries—Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, and Uganda—were in 2008–9 the main countries with large concentrations of internally displaced people, with scores, if not hundreds, of camps. So there are in total more than a thousand camps in the world where twelve million—refugees or displaced persons—live.²⁰ And this figure does not count the very large number of ephemeral or invisible encampments that coalesce on their own, nor the 250 retention centers and holding areas in Europe whose inhabitants fluctuate in the tens of thousands all the time. What counts is the European Union’s authorization in December 2008 to prolong the duration of retention up to eighteen months, instead of the thirty or sixty

days (depending on the country) as before. This is a radical change since it presupposes, or rather confirms, a logistical point of view that, by building more retentions centers and holding areas, seeks to guarantee a minimum of humanitarian assistance.

Four types stand out when we try to address the inventory of camps and to ask about what links these different forms of encampment today.²¹ The first type of this possible inventory are the camps that are self-installed and self-organized. These represent the very basis of refuge, the shelter that we create in a hostile environment without a politics of welcome; these are established in the absence of hospitality. Nevertheless, they remain under surveillance, either under the gaze of humanitarian organizations which help them occasionally, or under the control of territorial, international, or police organizations, which either monitor, destroy, or transfer these populations to other types of camps.²²

The second type, represented by the retention centers in Europe which are a group of “sorting offices,” are located at the borders themselves and serve as a form of lock on the movement of different types of migrants and refugees, whom they are designed to channel, retain, deport, or redirect: transit centers, way stations, retention centers, camps of foreigners, holding areas. From this limit case of borderline encampment, we can list several common characteristics: immobilization, the waiting and the constriction of daily life into a restricted space with multiple constraints; the juridical hole which makes spaces of exception become ordinary; the registration of people with files, cards, and fingerprints; the difficult access to these places, which are remote and isolated, controlled by public service or private police; and the violence committed inside, which is rarely mentioned.

The third type is the more traditional refugee camp, managed by UN agencies and by UNRWA, or by their contracted representatives. These represent the most standardized, planned, and official form of the lot. They come in different shapes and sizes: camps composed of individual or collective tents, ones stabilized through the construction of buildings made up of bricks or dirt, refugee villages, or rural settlements. The current trend is toward the “miniaturization” of camps, smaller camps being easier to control and monitor. But the horizon of this third figure is represented by the city-camp. It finds its most vivid model in Palestinian camps that are already several decades old, urban centers maintained in an informal and precarious state.

Finally, the fourth type is represented by those camps of internally displaced persons that are essentially unprotected human reservations. They are the most numerous, as the increasing restrictions placed upon international mobility fuel their development. As a result, they can become urban areas often blending into the urban periphery of big cities (Monrovia, Freetown, or Khartoum, for example).

What allows one to associate the refugee camps, unanimously considered as humanitarian spaces that keep alive the most vulnerable, with the other types of camps, waiting areas, and detention centers that belong to the administrative management and policing through which undesirable strangers are retained, sorted, or expelled? In response, as much to suggest the continuity and contemporaneity of these phenomena as to define the terms of a comparison among them, I would emphasize more the forms of governance of these spaces as they are implemented and experienced than their causes and categorization.

The encampment apparatus operates as a network: knowledge and practices circulate as much as individuals do. As far as the latter are concerned, I am referring of course to those who are “currently displaced” and “encamped” somewhere along the path of their displacement, moving from one camp to another according to their status (internally displaced, refugee, asylum seekers, clandestines) and the country in which they find themselves. But I also have in mind the employees of UN or humanitarian organizations who intervene simultaneously in these different places (MSF, Médecins du Monde, or the International Rescue Committee, for instance) and whose careers as expatriate professionals involves the rapid shift from one “mission” to another. Different kinds of know-how, a specific lifestyle, an international lingo, a particular conception of the human person as a “beneficiary,” and so on, thus circulate with them from one place to the next.

But forms of knowledge circulate and are diffused in the apparatus too. Thus, from year to year, the organization of the camps has become more and more complete, structured, and complex, just as logistical knowledge has accumulated and a *culture of templates* now allows for responses to vital questions of provisioning of water (through wells, pipelines, plastic cisterns, or tankers), public roads, and sanitation. Emergency shelters are erected according to schemes of “urbanism” designed in technical departments of the UNHCR. Some topics have been studied with particular care, and the manner of addressing them has changed over the past few years in INGOs like CARE, Merlin, and Peace Wind Japan as well as in national agencies like the German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) or UN offices such as the UNHCR or the International Organization for Migration. Some examples include the security and speed of truck transport and the assembly of sets of refugees (or asylum seekers or “returnees”); or the monitoring of convoys and the points through which they travel (from relocation camps to way stations to transit camps); or the meticulous counting of those being transported; or the quality of the plastic tarps for emergency shelters (on which mosquito-repellent products are sometimes tried out in hopes of counteracting malaria); or the ideal size of the camps, which is now being made smaller, for example to 5,000 occupants for refugee camps, and certainly not over 10,000, so as to better control the space and make it more livable and manageable, and finally to allow any explosive situation like riots or outbursts to be anticipated. The fear of riots is omnipresent and adds to the authoritarian attitude of camp directors, as soon as any refusal or collective complaint interrupts the compassionate and technical consensus that gives the camp meaning for its promoters and managers alike. By “technical” I mean the biopolitical everydayness of life in these camps, dominated as it is by the organization of screening, and assignment of their residents in space and according to categories, and the division of labor among the NGOs on site. The humanitarian benevolence toward undesirable populations shows best (it is even dramatized) in refugee camps; but the wish to avoid scandal or “humanitarian crisis” is also visible in Europe itself in the most advanced governments, in their control and rejection of undesirable foreigners, and the increasingly significant reliance on retention centers goes hand in hand with a more “humanitarian” way of proceeding. Thus, today there are retention centers in Europe whose construction is looked after by private enterprise

with the aim of making them meticulously medicalized sites, as in Ukraine, for example.

More generally, in the context of refugee camps in Africa or Asia, and in the context of policing of foreigners in Europe and North Africa, the humanitarian apparatus is deployed in an ambiguous manner: it is called upon to manage—as the principal or secondary tool depending on the case—situations of exception which might have been created by an emergency, a catastrophe, a state of war, the arrival en masse of a population in distress. But it is also involved in the deportation of undesirable foreigners, the hunting down that illegal immigrants experience by the police, and the confinement or retention of asylum seekers.

In short, there is still a way to compare all these camps, if we consider the disorder that blurs the order presented above, that is at once symbolic and social. This disorder takes two forms. On the one hand, it is the discretionary power that the extraterritoriality of camps gives to “administrators” of spaces of exception. Moreover, the violence that takes place in a retention center in Europe can happen elsewhere by virtue of its invisibility—for example, in transit zones annexed to the most stable and monitored camps of the UNHCR in Africa. In fact, some contemporary camps do not present us with a moral or social framework, organized and run according to humanist principles transmitted by public UN or humanitarian messages as they might appear in the communication and fund-raising instruments of donor countries, but rather with situations characterized by micropowers of exception. The abuse of power, sexual or other, the hijacking of food rations, the creation of networks of clandestine workers are the normal, daily lot in the majority of refugee and displaced persons camps that I was able to observe in Africa. They require the attention of the employees who govern the camps and hold power over the life of refugees. What we can compare, in these cases, are practices in situations of exception.²³ On the other hand, and without necessarily challenging the above, another type of disorder corresponds to the emergence of “forms of resistance” to the imprisonment, whether it is resistance as daily survival (minor negotiations against constraints, traffic in refugee cards and food rations, corruption of policemen to circulate or work outside of the camps, etc.), or more full-blown political action.

The continued importance of camps, the development of waiting areas on the borders or “internal asylum” areas (IDP camps) in the countries of the south, are only one part of a broader political process that secures a more important position for humanitarian action in the world at large, and not only in UNHCR camps. For if camps are the most developed example of this contemporary governmental reality, it expands over a number of situations that it defines according to the same triptych: extraterritoriality, relegation, and exception. These three characteristics must be conceptualized in more nuanced ways in the study of each case, yet it is clear that together they identify a “space” at the global level where the humanitarian apparatus is deployed logically, with its own modes of intervention, legitimation, and government. They comprise a flexible apparatus that is so mobile and evanescent that it seems to be “liquid”; it features “on demand” deployments of human and material resources; and its camp spaces are experienced by their inhabitants as a never-ending present: it is in the entanglement of these uncertain “places” and moments that the

humanitarian government takes a concrete form, aimed at managing all those who then face an uncertain present and an uncertain fate.²⁴ This set of organizations, networks, agents, and financial resources distributed in various countries is deployed smoothly and institutes its own spaces of exception for a given time.

This is how “humanitarian situations” are generated: situations in which the humanitarian element defines and dominates the entire spectrum of experience, including the political space; situations in which the victim and the perpetrator, the refugee and the fake refugee, the vulnerable and the undesirable person monopolize the representation of the human person, as the death knell of the citizen and his unconditional voice. Everything is ready for a governmental humanitarianism to assume its share of the “government of the world.”²⁵ One should then go back to and take up again Paul Virilio’s comment about the creation of a *ministry for emergency situations* in Ukraine, twenty years after Chernobyl: “It seems it’s not a matter of opening political ministries anymore there. Instead the State of Emergency sets up its administration.”²⁶ And the fact of bringing together all the misery and all the “disasters” of the world—whether “natural,” epidemiological, social, or political—in a single regime of thought and government that is emergency-driven and exceptionalist inaugurates the time and the spaces of humanitarian government.

Politics as Disorder for Humanitarianism

It remains to take up our initial question: How does political action enter onto this expansive “humanitarian stage” whose general characteristics within and beyond camps I have now surveyed—and in which politics is useless and inefficient?²⁷ The response that is called for is a political ethnography—and if possible, in the case of the camps, an urban ethnography to the extent that it is at the moment of the social and material stabilization of the camps, and their transformation into naked cities, that they also become spaces in which action and speech can disturb the order of things in the space of control and benevolence.²⁸

After all, if the right to live is, in the humanitarian fiction, attributed to a generic human just insofar as he is recognized, in doubled form, in the universal victim, then in practice this right is granted on the basis of belonging to assigned groups. In this way the refugee, the “displaced person,” the refugee woman, and the refugee child, all receive their survival kits to the extent they are recognized as belonging to these categories, and thus to the extent they are able to attest to this belonging (by stating their age or marital status, by showing their injury, or telling the story of a traumatic event). Inside the camps, the category of “refugee” is itself divided into several distinct subcategories of “vulnerability,” which end up creating a hierarchy of misery. The UNHCR distinguishes fifteen categories of “vulnerability” which include, for example, the “unaccompanied child,” the “survivor of violence,” the “single parent,” or the “single woman,” which play their role, if sometimes in the breach, in the management of each particular camp. This operation of division which is the way (bio)power is deployed is also a breach on the basis of which a refusal can be voiced. I will give two brief examples: the action of widows of the camp of Albadaria in southeastern Guinea in July–August 2003 on the one hand, and the emergence of leaders in the camp of Tobanda in Sierra Leone on the other.²⁹

In the first case, fifty women claimed recognition as vulnerable in a particular way, despite the fact that their condition was not recognized by a particular category; as “widows with children” they could only enter into the more general category of “single parent.” They demanded plastic tarps in order to protect their mud huts from torrential rain. In the face of a lack of response from the camp administrators, they occupied the main street of the camp, chanting “We want tarps!” and stopping European NGO volunteers under the rain for several hours, as they were blocking a Red Cross vehicle. They thereby established a face-to-face encounter between the world that these women largely perceived as that of the UN and the world of their beneficiaries.³⁰ The representatives of the NGOs were only released when the women had obtained a meeting with the Guinean government officials responsible for refugees. A delegation of four women was received by them, and a few days later, the women received their tarps.

This movement shows a repoliticization of the category of “vulnerable.” While it is associated with the figure of the victim in humanitarian discourse, this category becomes a word in an egalitarian discourse by which a political subject acts against the assigned identity of silent victim. These include boycotts of food rationing by the United Nations World Food Program; protests in front of the gates of humanitarian “compounds” to ask for more food or a return to one’s country of origin; the opposite demand, a more permanent set-up in the camp; or public protests against the bad living conditions for refugees.³¹ All social conflict in the camp is also a conflict over the meaning of the words of humanitarian discourse.³² This is not because the beneficiaries contrast their own words (“ethnic,” for example) to those of the “expatriates” or “Westerners” running the camps. Rather, it is because these actions put into play conflicting interpretations of the available words—“refugee,” “vulnerable,” “aid,” “UN,” and so on—and in this act, they repoliticize humanitarian discourse.

A few days before the protest in the Albadaria camp discussed above, the woman who was the head of the movement had received a plastic tarp for herself. Without refusing it, however, she had not installed it out of solidarity with the other women, suspecting the UNHCR of attempting to dismantle the movement of which she was the leader. She was herself in breach of the assigned role of “vulnerable” that she was supposed to be playing on the “humanitarian stage.” She distanced herself from this role and adopted an attitude of insubordination linked to her role as representative of a movement.

In the Tobanda camp of Sierra Leone, twenty individuals, more or less, emerged within a single year as “representatives” of the refugees of the area. Some of them started as “tent chiefs” (designated to represent people assigned to collective tents at their arrival), others as ministers or preachers in Pentecostal churches, NGO workers in the camp, or tradesmen. Although the expatriates working for humanitarian organizations did not like it, these representatives were usually among the least “vulnerable” refugees, both in physical and in social terms.

In one of the areas of the camp where I was seeking to meet with and interview refugees, it was a diamond trader, in good health and in charge of his “neighborhood” (the area of the camp where he lived along with five hundred people), who became the bearer of egalitarian values. “All refugees are vulnerable,” he told me, before he

started going through a long list of claims: the food is not sufficient, too few people had received the promised blankets, the same blankets were the object of trafficking, there were not enough lavatories, there were constant problems with the plastic tarps. He said: “You are white, you know the organizations, the UN, and therefore you must answer.” The approval from the swelling group of local residents that had formed as people came by his house, in front of which our discussion was taking place, made me think for a moment that a “democratic episode” had just taken place within the humanitarian space.

As in other camps when a perspective of permanent residence sets in, in this one too conflicts cropped up over who would officially represent the refugees within the administration of the camp. The election of a chairman representing and speaking on behalf of the refugees had been contested several times during the six months that had passed since the camp was first established. The first time, the election was indirect and the electorate had comprised a little over one hundred individuals, who were the tent chiefs of the first 1,500 incoming refugees. The second election was direct and took place when the camp reached a population of 5,000. Each adult cast her ballot in the box, but several instances of fraud had been reported. This election was cancelled by the camp administrators, not because of the fraud, but because the elected chairman was threatening social peace within the camp. Some suspected him of plotting riots, others of encouraging tribal feuds. The administration deposed him and appointed instead an acting chairman. It also postponed *sine die* any further election. In his thirties, this acting chairman—unlike most other young leaders—had little education, no experience of representation, and an attitude toward other refugees that was often aggressive and biased. An adamant supporter of Charles Taylor, he had enjoyed no active support among the refugees, but the administrators (for whom he was already working occasionally) saw in him a sufficiently docile collaborator who could help them control the camp.

In fact, pressured by several refugee leaders, the acting chairman found himself more and more bypassed. When for several hours the UN High Commissioner for Refugees at the time (December 2003), Ruud Lubbers, visited Tobanda, a meeting was held with the entire camp administration. About 200 refugees demonstrated in front of the “humanitarian compound” and, in the meeting itself, the acting chairman was not present. He had fallen ill and was replaced by one of the most active leaders of the refugees, who had read in detail the refugee demands that had been written in a kind of *cahier de doléance*. As the pastor of a church that he had himself founded in the camp, in his sermons he denigrated international action and mocked the arrogance of whites in their 4x4 vehicles, and he became a popular figure among the camp’s refugees.

Conclusion

Though this presentation of the humanitarian world and the contemporary space of camps remains too general, it nevertheless calls for a political choice in research or, to be more precise, in the construction of the object of research. It is a matter of deciding whether most attention ought to be accorded to *the political* or *politics*—to the always inclusive system that is reconstituted after the fact and is inevitably the companion of

triumphant logic of the instituted political, or to the political moment as a *breakdown* of a given order and as a dissonant and grating voice. This moment is one in which “a part of those who have no part” is expressed even when its own future is not transformed from politics into the political.³³ In that case, the stress must fall not on functionality and permanence—which would repeat a reassuring functionalism through a totalizing and externalized anthropological approach—but instead on conflict, tension, and dissensus as the bearers of a rupture or, at least, a discordant note *on the ground* among actors operating on the same terrain with other “cultures” and with different perspectives, even when they use the same international and humanitarian “language.” It is the false note of the refugee who will not play his assigned role, who no longer stays in his place, who does not keep silent. I align myself with this option, the hypothesis which involves engagement not to end inquiry but to continue it in the form of political ethnography. The unexpected and disconcerting question—what is politics in camps today?—forces us to go and find out. And it places in question the epistemological bearings of the researcher. I have elsewhere discussed the necessary displacements of the anthropologist in the field; it is never from a distance but very much within the object that he constructs and defines it in its permanence, even as he recovers the political unpredictability of every space and all “stages” in which he is implicated as he describes them.³⁴

It is therefore possible to reconsider the proposition according to which, in principle, “humanitarianism excludes the political.” We must reconsider this not because, or not only because, in the end, “everything is political,” or because the humanitarian apparatus fulfills certain political functions and not only moral ones. Instead, we must reconsider it *on the ground*, bringing our gaze to humanitarian spaces, to situations of collective mobilization, to the coming to voice and the emergence of leaders, however remote or in the minority they may be. We realize then that it is in the fault lines of the apparatus, in the failures of the humanitarian mission, where we see, so to speak, the “raw material” of injustice, contradicting the myth of the equal treatment of all who suffer. This raw material includes the unequal distribution of blankets, the disastrous quality or quantity of food rations, the insults and physical violence enacted on the “masses” asking for help, keeping people waiting interminably for plastic tarps or for relocation, decisions to forcibly repatriate in the name of “the best solution,” the return home. The political question that arises in this context, then, refers to a mystery shared by all those who cannot speak: how to move from a moan to a scream? How does one come to voice? In order for injustice to exist, it must be able to be spoken. In the spaces of the humanitarian apparatus, to be heard, injustice must be spoken in the language of the humanitarian vulgate, which is the only convention of speech locally audible. In this context, politics takes unexplored directions. This is a politics of limits, which foreshadows or perhaps opens the way to forms of political action that are apparently marginal, unorganized, and ephemeral.

The observation of the camps—considered here as the paradigm of a humanitarian space that is “total,” at least in theory—reveals a tension. To be sure, I have revealed an apparatus of power, profiling, recording, control, and enclosure that realizes itself locally, in a governmental space that “does not need democracy in order to operate.” The camp then becomes both the metaphor and the concrete fulfillment of the excep-

tional treatment of a human “waste” that has no voice and no place in this world, a way of managing the undesirables, in which humanitarian government operates, as it were, as a “subsidiary” form of the “government of the world.”³⁵ But the tensions that one can describe while observing the camps also suggest that camps are political spaces even as they approach total control. For as they become materially consolidated, they also become in a few months or two years at most relatively stable social environments, worlds of social relations shot through with injustice, violence, and frustration but also made up of encounters, survival strategies, as well as some forms of “voice.” As a way of managing the undesirables, humanitarian government can become the target of its own “beneficiaries”: thus, very concretely, the national and international employees of international and humanitarian organizations are endangered in the name of the very power they embody and implement, as the dramatic reversal of the perception of humanitarian action in the global south, as well as the resentment and the violence that it triggers and channels against humanitarian actors, have shown time and again in the past few years. Whether we like it or not, it has become necessary to question the humanitarian apparatus as a contemporary system of government and power, where control and assistance are entangled.

NOTES

* This text is a version of my presentation at the Colloque Jacques Rancière et la philosophie au présent (Cerisy-la-Salle, May 20–24, 2005). An earlier version was published in the proceedings “Le gouvernement humanitaire et la politique des réfugiés,” in *La philosophie déplacée: Autour de Jacques Rancière*, ed. Laurence Cornu and Patrice Vermeren (Paris: Horlieu, 2006). I pursue the topics in my book *Gérer les indésirables: Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), forthcoming in English from Polity Press.

1. Michel Agier, “La main gauche de l’Empire: Ordre et désordres de l’humanitaire,” *Multitudes* 11 (Winter 2003): 67–77. I borrow the metaphor from Pierre Bourdieu, who called social workers of a nation “the state’s left hand” whose disaffection springs from the hopeless character of their work, involving as it does the never-ending response to the social and cultural damage done by the “right hand” of the state committed by policymakers applying the economic principles of cost-effectiveness and return on investment to public affairs. See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Abdication of the State,” in Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999). The same positional role, and the same disaffection, is to be found in the volunteers undertaking humanitarian action who embark to heal wounds on the other side of the planet.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 133.

3. Three recent essays describe these fears as well as the global scale and ghost-like nature of their concerns in similar terms, albeit in different contexts. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2008); and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

4. One “contains” the undesirable migrants just as one contains the movement of enemy troops. According to Judith Butler, containment is the territorialized form of extradition and its critical perimeter is constituted by the boundaries of the nation-state. See Judith Butler and Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London: Seagull, 2007), 12.

5. Jonathan Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (London, 1994).

6. See Migreurop, *Guerre aux migrants: Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla*, ed. Emmanuel Blanchard and Anne-Sophie Wender (Paris: Migreurop, 2007). See also Migreurop, *Atlas des migrants en Europe: Géographie critique des politiques migratoires*, ed. Olivier Clochard (Paris: Armand Colin, 2009).

7. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chap. 6.

8. Elsewhere I have evoked this strange experience, consisting of touring Freetown in a few hours, as proposed by taxi drivers to foreigners even several years after the war had officially ended in 2002. The tour covered the UN armed forces, the downtown destroyed by the war, and the amputee camps. See Agier, "La guerre," in *La sagesse de l'ethnologue* (Paris: Editions de l'Oeil Neuf, 2004).

9. Marc Augé, *Pouvoirs de vie, Pouvoirs de mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977).

10. Geneviève Fraisse, *Les deux gouvernements: La famille et la cité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 17.

11. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 170.

12. Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: Thought from the Outside," trans. Brian Massumi and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1987).

13. One only has to decipher the list of vulnerability types used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to convince oneself of the importance of this representation of humanity as an identity travailed by different degrees of alteration. See below.

14. See Mariella Pandolfi, "Une souveraineté mouvante et supracoloniale," *Multitudes* 3 (2000): 97–105; and "Contract of Mutual (In)difference: Governance and the Humanitarian Apparatus in Contemporary Albania and Kosovo," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 10 (2003): 369–381, where the author describes and analyzes the actions and the moral values of the organizations and actors who took part in the humanitarian interventions in Kosovo and Albania in the 1990s.

15. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 126.

16. Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot," 20.

17. Élisabeth Ferris, "Le dispositif mondial d'aide humanitaire: Une opportunité pour les ONG?," *Revue des Migrations Forcées* 29 (January 2008): 6–8.

18. As Ferris notes, "The large international NGOs have more commonalities with UN agencies than with national NGOs of the global south." *Ibid.*, 7.

19. See Cécile Dubernet, "Du terrain au droit, du droit sur le terrain?: Origines et trajectoires du label 'déplacé interne,'" *Asylon(s)*, Terra 2 (November 2007), available online at <http://terra-rezo.net/article670.html>.

20. See UNHCR, *La cartographie des camps de réfugiés à l'appui de la gestion et de la planification* (Geneva, 2007); Amnesty International, *Soudan: Les Déplacés du Darfour: La génération de la colère*, (Paris, 2008); and my *Gérer les indésirables*. The figure of 50 million is the generally agreed estimate for the number of victims of forced displacement in all categories.

21. I am summarizing here in broad strokes an inventory detailed in *Gérer les indésirables*, 59–95. I take the notion of *encampment* used by Barbara Harrell-Bond and Guglielmo Verdirame to designate at once the camp itself and the erection of camps as process and policy. See Harrell-

Bond and Verdirame, *Rights in Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

22. In Europe, the camps of Afghan refugees from Patras (in Greece) and in Calais (in France) are the best known examples of these types of self-installed and self-organized camps. Both were destroyed by the police in 2009.

23. See Agier and Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, “Humanitarian Spaces: Spaces of Exception,” in *The Shadow of Just Wars: Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action*, ed. Fabrice Weissman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 297–313.

24. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

25. Jean-François Bayart, *Global Subjects: A Political Critique of Globalization*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

26. Paul Virilio, *The University of Disaster*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 16.

27. On the humanitarian stage versus the democratic stage, see Rancière, *Disagreement*, 126.

28. See my “Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps,” (followed by a debate with Zygmunt Bauman and Liisa Malkki), *Ethnography* 3, no. 3 (2002): 317–66.

29. These cases are examined further in *Gérer les indésirables*, which my coverage here summarizes.

30. Representatives, in general, white people, from the international community.

31. Compounds are protected spaces near the camps where administrative buildings are located, and, in certain cases, where those who work for international organizations are housed.

32. These can take place in front of religious assemblies, or in a certain sector or block of the camps.

33. Cf. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 125.

34. Agier, “Places et déplacements de l’ethnologue,” *Pratiques: Les Cahiers de la Médecine Utopique* 46 (July 2009): 25–27.

35. Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), and Bayart, *Global Subjects*.