Conclusion

The Moral Economy of Humanitarianism

After a fire partially destroyed Notre Dame Cathedral on 15 April 2019, more than one billion euros were pledged in two days to rebuild it. The support came from French business leaders and philanthropists, as might be expected; but other prominent individuals around the world, such as the chief executive of Apple, also rushed to publicly announce their contributions. In the days after the fire, stories circulated in the media of schoolchildren sending their spare change from abroad to repair Notre Dame, along with other small bequests, following a familiar pattern.[1]

Philosopher Peter Singer was one of many commentators who rebuked this outpouring of charity in support of a landmark building.[2] Academic critics and humanitarians were quickly joined by a transnational digital outcry on social media that described the huge corporate contributions as a sign of the exorbitant profits made by those businesses and pointed out the unsuitability of their immediate pledges of aid while children were dying of hunger in Yemen. Despite the famine there being qualified by United Nations (UN) officials as rapidly becoming the worst in living memory, the international response to this catastrophe has been muted.[3]

Making and publicising donations, whether large or small, as opposed to questioning their propriety, or weighing more pressing concerns, reflects alternative moral economies. All are within the wider landscape of charity, of which humanitarianism forms a part. However, actual commitment may work at cross purpose to another cause's claim to greater urgency as long as the concrete circumstances of the alternative remain vague. In the case of

[1] 'Notre Dame Fire: Tycoons and Citizens Pledge Hundreds of Millions', *Times*, 16 Apr. 2019; 'British Schoolgirl, Nine, Sends €3 to the Fund to Rebuild Notre Dame', *Daily Mail*, 26 Apr. 2019.

[2] Peter Singer and Michael Plant, 'How Many Lives Is Notre Dame Worth?', available at www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/notre-dame-restoration-opportunity-costs-by-peter-singer-and-michael-plant-2019-05 (accessed 29 June 2019).

[3] 'UN and Partners to Hold Conference Seeking Urgently Needed Funds to Save Millions in Yemen from "Horrific" Plight', UN News, 24 Feb. 2019, available at https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1033401 (accessed 29 June 2019).

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Notre Dame, the logic of an earlier thought experiment by Singer (that was supposed to illustrate the lunacy of channelling donations in aid of museums rather than reducing human suffering) was subverted by the wave of private donations.[4] The emotional connection people worldwide feel for Paris and Notre Dame, a building that receives fifteen million visitors every year, evoked for many a greater moral obligation to assist than did the famine then raging in war-ridden Yemen.

Apart from the perceived distance, the religious background and conflict-related character of the crisis in Yemen, the thinly veiled support of one party by the US president, and the questionable impact of humanitarian action under extremely difficult conditions all remained an obstacle to any large-scale relief effort. In accordance with their current advertising strategy, Save the Children's fundraising slogan for Yemen was open in calling for contributors to focus on the afflicted, not the context: 'See the Child. Not the War.'[5] However, donors are generally not content to ignore facts on the ground, and donations tend to dry up as moral dilemmas mount. The lack of a humanitarian space in which transparent aid allocation is plausible is as discouraging for moral economic reckoning as turmoil is for calculations in the economy proper. Although obstacles to compassion were present during the famines in Ireland, Russia, and Ethiopia, donors weighed the moral economic variables involved and responded, at least temporarily, with considerable support.

Moral Economic Structures

Historian Cormac Ó Gráda, who has written extensively on famines, begins a recent book with the observation that 'no two famines are the same, yet, superficially at least, most have a lot in common'.[6] Similarly, the historical parallels we identify in Irish, Russian, and Ethiopian famine relief are neither incidental nor trivial. Understanding them may be clearer if one views humanitarian efforts as an outcome of moral economic considerations. This approach is consistent with the recent recognition of the links between humanitarianism and capitalism. It can be traced back to Thomas L. Haskell's influential argument that the rise of the modern market economy in the late eighteenth century went along with a shift in cognitive styles and perceptions of moral responsibility. These forces, in turn, shaped a new sensibility and readiness to lend assistance to distant people.[7] Others have suggested that humanitarian

[4] Peter Singer, 'Good Charity, Bad Charity', *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 2013, available at www.nytimes.com/2013/08/11/opinion/sunday/good-charity-bad-charity.html (accessed 29 June 2019).

[5] Save the Children, 'Fundraising for Yemen and Syria', available at www.savethechildren.org.uk/how-you-can-help/events-and-fundraising/fundraising-for-the-syria-and-yemen-crisis-appeals (accessed 29 June 2019).

[6] Ó Gráda, *Eating People*, 1.

[7] Haskell, 'Capitalism and the Origins'.

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action is driven by economic rather than moral interests, although they concede that such action may be altruistic 'in the sense that the people who are involved in this work believe . . . that their actions are moral'.[8]

There appears to be a substantial overlap between economic and moral motivation beyond what is commonly acknowledged and beyond what we conceive more narrowly as the moral economy of aid. Hence, the popular as well as academic notion that the economy is a zone devoid of moral foundation and content (the myth by which modern economics has established a technocratic hegemony) may be open to question. At the same time, rather than considering the moral idealistically, as that which is right and good, it may be more useful to see it in its social context, as a means of persuasion correlated to tangible interests. Along such lines, humanitarianism may be an expedient supplement to capitalism. It offers identity and a sense of community that can disperse international tensions. Despite its affinity to modern society, humanitarianism is a force that targets the blind spots of capitalism. Therefore, it cannot operate according to the principles of regular markets and prices, but needs to attract the voluntary contributions of a gift economy, develop its own criteria for the allocation of goods and services, and account for its actions with a focus on human interest and equitable disbursal in place of income and economic profit. For all of its parallels, a charity business across borders is based on discretionary spending, although partly influenced by codes of triage (i.e., humanitarian prioritisation and selection); it is, therefore, not quite business as usual.

This perspective may be best epitomised by the term 'moral economy', which E. P. Thompson has defined as an agreement on subsistence rights, underpinned by the threat of popular riots. Hence, we turn the term 'moral economy' on its head and broaden its perspective to address the moral subjectivity and altruistically clothed interests of donors. As interpreted by Marcel Mauss, gift giving is not the innocent endeavour it superficially appears to be; rather, it is full of moral implications. The case studies presented here, and humanitarian efforts-at-large, are characterised by an asymmetry that clearly delineates donors, as superiors, from beneficiaries, as subalterns, who are hardly expected to return what they receive.[9] Even when aid has been framed as the redemption of a debt or awarded as a loan, gratitude was most often the sole currency of return. It was not always forthcoming, especially when aid was given to ideological enemies, or when it sufficed for donors to simply presume such appreciation.

Donors and their organisations, therefore, have always dominated the moral agenda and economic practice of humanitarianism. They are the ones who shape aid appeals, who are accountable for humanitarian efforts, whose actions

[8] Dal Lago and O'Sullivan, 'Introduction', 7–8. [9] Mauss, *Gift*, 72.

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cause aid to materialise, and on whose terms aid is allocated.[10] The voices of recipients, who have their own moral economic concerns and claims, may sometimes enter this arena, and are sometimes amplified, but this only happens at the discretion of donors and as they see fit. There are many less prominent donors who do not exercise much power. Nevertheless, like citizen tax payers, donors have an important place in the humanitarian structure, and differences in their status are minimised by the moral quality ascribed to their support (or the 'sacrifice' that they have made). Thus, all contributions are valued, great or small, relative to the contributor's means. The term 'donor community', although overused, can designate all those who support a particular moral economic cause.

While the moral economy of ordinary people is generally confined to their local area, charitable giving has frequently extended beyond the borders of the nation-state. The result, at times, has been conflicts of interest between the 'home crowd' and their representatives, on the one hand, and humanitarian organisations and their preferred beneficiaries abroad, on the other. An example is the fund to rebuild three historically black churches in Louisiana that were destroyed by racially motivated arson in the spring of 2019. The building fund had difficulty getting started, but grew dramatically after journalists, celebrities, and politicians compared it to the huge outpouring of donations for Notre Dame that same week, urging donors not to forget their 'neighbours'.[11]

However, the moral economy of the crowd at home can also work in reverse and encourage aid for distant strangers. In 1847, public pressure forced the Catholic bishop of London to revise an appeal that at first combined Irish relief with local charity, to one exclusively benefitting Ireland. Rising standards of living and the mechanisms of expressive humanitarianism have probably increased this willingness to extend one's compassion beyond borders, as efforts during the Biafran War or the famine in Ethiopia suggest. Public opinion put humanitarian organisations and national governments, as well as the UN and the European Economic Community, under considerable pressure to become engaged in long-distance charity.

Diachronic Perspectives

We have outlined how nineteenth-century ad hoc humanitarianism was superseded by organised humanitarianism around 1900, which was in turn followed by expressive humanitarianism after 1970, and how this affected the moral rationale of humanitarian efforts. Our reference to distinct periods is based on a

[10] Malkki, *Need to Help*.
[11] Katie Gagliano, 'Fundraiser for Burned St. Landry Churches Hits $1.8 Million Goal after 36-Hour Push', *Acadiana Advocate*, 17 Apr. 2019.

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holistic interpretation of historical data, rather than on any formula. It may be understood by analogy to Max Weber's triad of tradition, bureaucracy, and charisma. The major trends that shape the moral economies of their time are not unique features of their respective periods. Spontaneity and status-orientation were especially prominent in the era of ad hoc humanitarianism; scale and efficiency typified organised humanitarianism; and self-reference and spectacle characterised expressive humanitarianism. Nevertheless, these different aspects of humanitarian action were always intertwined.

The humanitarian field has been characterised by such remarkable diversity that it defies easy generalisations, even within the periods we have identified. There were forerunners, latecomers, and hybrid efforts incorporating the logic of other sectors of society, such as the state or business; there were co-operation and competition; there were headquarters, facilitators, teams, and individual fieldworkers on the ground; there was advocacy, interference with long-term development, and overlapping with other issues; there was uncertainty, risk-taking, and bias; there were competing worldviews, languages, and iconographies. All these factors influenced the moral economic considerations that shaped humanitarian efforts in unique ways.

The basic structure of a disproportionate gift economy permeates all humanitarian causes, engendering many parallels, despite the rapid socio-economic and technological transformations of the past 200 years. The asymmetry in the benefactor–beneficiary relationship, and the symbolic status recognition and tacit strings attached to 'gifts' were already realised by commentators at the time. Suspicions regarding the 'true' intentions of aid organisations and their donors are as present in our case studies as are misgivings concerning the diversion of funds or resources and the negative effects of aid. Integrity and creativity on the part of recipients, and trust and control on that of donors, were crucial for establishing a positive working partnership, even though relations often remained strained.

Efficiency, another central issue, may have found its best expression in the Taylor-inspired approach typical of the early and mid-twentieth century. The same applies to the persistent tension between deontological and utilitarian understandings of humanitarianism, that is, the difficulty of finding a balance between 'doing the right thing' and 'doing things right'. Such conflicts, especially regarding advertising and allocation, are noticeable on different levels of the aid chain in all three cases we have examined. However, the businesslike provision of relief in the era of organised humanitarianism made such dilemmas more obvious.

Despite the prevalence of a universalistic humanitarian rhetoric, by the mid-nineteenth century, ad hoc humanitarianism was dominated by the moral implications of special relations, such as imperial hierarchies, kinship ties, and religious affiliations. The alleged entitlement of beneficiaries was often

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derived from their previous conduct, feelings of belonging to a group, and the idea of reciprocity. Elements of such a moral economy based on in-group mechanisms have survived. For example, Hoover's Commission for Relief in Belgium aided allies; the Near East Relief supported fellow Christians; and the Workers' Relief International was based on class solidarity. However, organised humanitarianism tended to broaden its clientele beyond the confines of such connections, establishing an effective altruism based on accessibility, business principles, and economies of scale. Still, the legitimacy of providing aid to distant strangers had to be defended regularly, and the credibility of beneficiaries, whose entitlement was not always evident to the 'home crowd', was a controversial topic.

Expressive humanitarianism maintained many features of its predecessors, but put increased emphasis on donors, celebrity fundraising, and voluntary organisations as morally and materially involved agents who buy and sell humanitarianism as part of a lifestyle or brand. Asserting historical or future reciprocity was no longer part of this moral economy, nor was the idea of reconciliation (although there were, at times, tinges of postcolonial guilt at play, and a sense of ecological liability for the plight of others has been a rising concern since the 1970s). Paradoxically, while the overall tendency towards greater universality widened the circle of beneficiaries, it made the same beneficiaries matter less, and limited their agency in the moral economy of aid. As philosopher Alain Finkielkraut has put it, 'Save lives: that is the global mission of the global doctor. He is too busy feeding rice to hungry mouths to listen to what these mouths are saying.'[12]

Whither Expressive Humanitarianism?

Since the 1980s, expressive humanitarianism has evolved in numerous ways. By the 2000s, the celebrity-endorsed methods of participatory fundraising embodied by Band Aid had emerged as the standard response to major humanitarian crises around the world – and to domestic incidents, too.[13] Those who cloned this model, however, have had to contend with its reduced impact. It has almost become more newsworthy when a major disaster does not herald a new charity record. Geldof himself organised re-recordings of 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' on three occasions, each time mobilising the latest generation of pop stars alongside some of the original cast. In 1989, he did this for a recurrence of famine in the Horn of Africa, in 2004, for the crisis in the

[12] Finkielkraut, *Name of Humanity*, 89.

[13] See, e.g., the charity single 'Lieber Gott' (Dear God) for the victims of the 2002 flooding in Germany or the cover version of 'Bridge over Troubled Water' for residents affected by the Grenfell Tower fire in the UK in 2017.

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Darfur region of Sudan, and in 2014, for the Ebola epidemic. While all the recordings were commercially successful, undercurrents of criticism about intentions and outcomes grew ever louder. In 2014, the recording was dismissed by journalists, academics, and musicians as 'insulting' to Africans and epitomising the 'white saviour' complex; several celebrities publicly turned down the chance to appear on the single.[14] In similar ways, as charity television broadcasts became more commonplace, coupled with the rise of commercial television and, later, on-demand viewing platforms, telethons have struggled with reduced relevance and declining income.[15]

Humanitarianism's cultural imprint and mechanisms have remained relatively stable over the past decades, but political changes since the end of the Cold War have had a significant impact. The new latitude of the UN Security Council and the amplified power of the USA have reinforced an already ascendant human rights discourse, promoting 'military humanitarianism' and a UN-endorsed 'responsibility to protect' (R2P).[16] The area in which the expressiveness of humanitarianism has advanced the most, therefore, is the resort to power, and the bold disposition to intervene on behalf of others. However, waiting for powerful governments to take responsible action rather than conjuring up humanitarian arguments to justify the USA's and UN's own agendas – as in the Iraq War of 2003 or the 2011 intervention in Libya – may be futile.[17] The lack of duty-bound action in favour of the population of Yemen at the time this book is being published also raises doubts about the validity of any 'R2P', as does the degeneration of much of the discourse from the responsibility to protect to the coining of obscure acronyms.

Humanitarian action today tends to take place in the shadow of armed conflicts and political oppression, whereby aid organisations become the 'force multipliers' and 'trash collectors' of belligerent powers. The example of Yemen illustrates how large-scale food insecurity and famine conditions tend to be a direct consequence of aggression. Such was also the case in the most severe famine of recent decades: Somalia in 2011–12, although food shortages due to drought did play a role. Despite effective monitoring

[14] Robtel Neajai, Pailey Interview BBC Radio 4, 18 Nov. 2004; Haroon Siddique, 'Lily Allen: Band Aid Is Smug', *Guardian*, 23 Nov. 2014.

[15] Bettina Kreusel, 'Das Fernsehen als Spendengenerator: Eine Bestandsaufnahme auf der Angebotsebene', in *Massenmedien und Spendenkampagnen: Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart*, ed. Jürgen Wilke (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), 311.

[16] Thomas G. Weiss and Karl M. Campbell, 'Military Humanitarianism', *Survival* 33, no. 5 (1991): 451–65; International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001).

[17] Jeremy Moses, Babak Bahadorand, and Tessa Wright, 'The Iraq War and the Responsibility to Protect: Uses, Abuses and Consequences for the Future of Humanitarian Intervention', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 5, no. 4 (2011): 347–67; Debora Valentina Malito, 'The Responsibility to Protect What in Libya?', *Peace Review* 29, no. 3 (2017): 289–98.

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mechanisms, up to one-quarter of a million people died from famine. Because of the difficulty of operating in a failed state and having to deal with terrorist-affiliated authorities, the catastrophe did not receive a timely, coordinated response of the magnitude required.[18] A study of Swedish fundraising for Somalia found that aid organisations made only limited efforts either to praise donors or to entitle beneficiaries. These organisations set themselves up as branded enterprises that offered donors something beyond individual acclaim, namely, shareholding in larger efforts of doing good.[19] Nonetheless, their overall impact remained limited.

Although the present era is typified by warfare enveloping current humanitarian crises, there have been other cases, such as the famine in North Korea in the mid-1990s that resulted in a death toll of 250,000–400,000 people (other estimates claim the number is closer to three million). The UN World Food Programme played a key role in alleviating that emergency, which was a consequence of economic mismanagement. Due to North Korea's policy of secrecy and the lack of natural explanations for the famine, this did not become a popular cause, and international donors were forced to yield control over the relief that they provided to the North Korean regime. A number of organisations, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), eventually withdrew from the effort rather than continue to 'collaborate with Kim Jong-il in his triage between those worthy of food and those who were not'. The exploitation of aid for political purposes, which made North Korea 'the site of the most manipulated aid programme in the world', was mutual, however. Foreign agencies who chose to stay on pursued goals such as peace and geopolitical stability that went beyond the humanitarian agenda.[20]

Humanitarian efforts can take many forms. 'Consumer aid' or 'brand aid' continue to be on the rise, relief agencies have moved further towards storytelling, and journalists in the field concoct their own personal 'trade marks'.[21] Social media as a tool of humanitarian communication can bring ordinary voices and user-created content to the fore. However, the peculiar celebrity culture of social media – such as the ubiquitous 'influencers' – tends to reinforce the expressive character of contemporary humanitarianism. The entrenching of stereotypes about the Global South as a result of

[18] Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid, *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011–12* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4–5; Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Famine Is Not', *Eating People*, 180–4.

[19] Lindström, *Moral Economy of Aid*.

[20] Fiona Terry, 'North Korea: Feeding Totalitarianism', in *In the Shadow of 'Just War': Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action*, ed. Fabrice Weissman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 100, 96–7 (quotations), 101–7; Ó Gráda, 'Famine Is Not', 199–205.

[21] Glenda Cooper and Simon Cottle, 'Humanitarianism, Communications, and Change: Final Reflections', in *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*, eds Simon Cottle and Glenda Cooper (New York: Lang, 2015), 251, 257–8.

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celebrity-mediated disaster relief will persist – and there is little reason to expect an improvement in online humanitarianism. The scandal resulting from Oxfam's attempt to cover-up sexual abuse by relief workers in the aftermath of the 2011 Haiti earthquake revealed a disturbing trend of similar transgressions and sexual exploitation across global humanitarian agencies, including MSF, Save the Children, the Red Cross, and UN agencies.[22] Overall, a 'terrible paradox' emerges, for well-intentioned attempts to relieve distant suffering may not be enough, and may even bring about more harm where least expected.[23] Recipients around the world have long been suspicious of donor motivations and are now perhaps increasingly so, even to the extent of rejecting international aid.[24]

Throughout the history of humanitarianism, donors have preferred to provide in-kind relief to recipients of aid. Conversely, direct cash transfer has been regarded as an exception, to be cautiously applied as circumstances require. However, over the past twenty years, a remarkable shift has taken place, with 'monetisation' as the new mantra of humanitarianism. While this sea change may appear as a breakthrough of Amartya Sen's theory on effective entitlements and preference for 'pulling' rather than 'pushing' food for reasons of efficiency, we see it primarily as a sign of how neo-liberal economics has profoundly recast entrenched patterns in present-day society, not sparing the liberal dogmas of old. The new esteem for cash transfer programmes, although as yet far from being the dominant form of aid, correlates with the designation of beneficiaries as humanitarian 'customers', and reliance on the latter's digital equipment for the transactions. Rather than the intervention of organisations from abroad, what Sen had in mind was a substantial commitment on the part of the welfare state to its own population. Nevertheless, cash or vouchers are often appreciated by those who receive them. Such an exchange can externalise and marketise logistic problems of humanitarian organisations.[25]

Against a backdrop of growing doubts about the sustainability of our prevailing economic system, the progress of political demagogy, and the rise of artificial intelligence, as well as increasing evidence of compassion for animals and the imagination of an inanimate world's subjectivity, posthumanism has become a trend in academia. Parallel to this, a notion of

[22] *Inquiry Report Summary Findings and Conclusions – Oxfam* (London: Charity Commission, 2019).

[23] Franks, *Reporting Disasters*, 178.

[24] Jaspars, *Food Aid*, 86–7; Dalia Hatuqa, 'Why Some Palestinians are Shunning Foreign Aid', *New Humanitarian*, 14 May 2019, available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/05/14/why-some-palestinians-are-shunning-foreign-aid (accessed 29 June 2019).

[25] Graham Heaslip, Gyöngyi Kovács, and Ira Haavisto, 'Cash-Based Response in Relief: The Impact for Humanitarian Logistics', *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management* 8, no. 1 (2018): 87–106.

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posthumanitarianism has started to take hold, something Lilie Chouliaraki describes as a move 'from an ethics of a "common humanity" towards a morality of "the self" as the main motivation for action'.[26] As a tendency that has prevailed for some decades, this development is a part of our concept of expressive humanitarianism. However, an analysis that tries to contrast current *practices* with past *ideals* – which is an impossible comparison – will fail to notice that the self of the donor has, in fact, been a significant driver since the beginnings of humanitarianism.

By contrast, the application of remote sensing, mobile phone technology, and crisis informatics, as well as humanitarian drones, biometrical systems, and distance management, may mark the beginning of a genuinely new, technologically fortified system of identifying needs and delivering humanitarian services. In addition, voluntary so-called digital humanitarians offer to support emergency aid on the ground, providing technological expertise and big data analysis. These trends, alongside an increasing 'bunkerization of the aid industry', are consistent with the request that greater responsibility be taken on behalf of victims and their local institutions in finding ways to cope with food insecurity.[27] Such a resilience-oriented approach 'walks a thin line between support and abandonment, between enabling the self-reliance of crisis-affected populations and refugees, and depriving them of basic protection'.[28] Abandonment may well be the major outcome, in particular for groups facing governments with adverse moral economies.[29] Mark Duffield suggests that, rather than marking the beginning of a new era, all this may be the 'long anticipated arrival' of a system of techno-governance facilitated by decades of cybernetic behaviourism.[30] Nevertheless, a novel kind of defensive humanitarianism with roots in the expressive age, with automated interfaces, and with thick 'firewalls' between donors and recipients may be in the making.

Towards a New History of Humanitarianism

In a recent essay, Bertrand Taithe suggests that revealing the uses of humanitarian history may be a rewarding academic endeavour, whereas attempting to

[26] Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Post-humanitarianism', in *Humanitarianism: A Dictionary of Concepts*, eds Tim Allen, Anna Macdonald, and Henry Radice (London: Routledge, 2018), 253.

[27] Mark Duffield, *Post-humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 89. See also Kristin Bergtora Sandvik and Kjersti Lohne, 'The Rise of the Humanitarian Drone: Giving Content to an Emerging Concept', *Millennium* 43, no. 1 (2014): 145–64.

[28] Dorothea Hilhorst, 'Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism: Making Sense of Two Brands of Humanitarian Action', *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3, no. 15 (2018): 10 (quotation), 5–6.

[29] Jaspars, *Food Aid*, 2.

[30] Duffield, *Post-humanitarianism*, 149.

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write the history of humanitarianism as such 'may prove foolhardy'.[31] This assessment refers to the amorphous character of a quasi-ideology with blurred delimitations regarding a wide range of phenomena. At the same time, one may suspect that any history of humanitarianism might devolve into a grand narrative, that is, a use of history, a piece of ideology, rather than providing the critical account that would advance our understanding of humanitarian history and practice. The near total lack of comprehensive histories of humanitarianism warns us of the difficulty of coming to terms with global action for more than two centuries because the field is often characterised by a paucity of distinctions, unintended consequences, disputable achievements, and poor archival records.

Nonetheless, during the course of this project, the history of humanitarian action has flourished and valuable research has been published covering a wide range of emergencies and aid protagonists. There is also an emerging self-reflexive discussion on the approaches that have created new knowledge in the field, and what is needed in the future.[32] In part, this historical interest is driven by the new source material that has become available through the opening of voluntary organisations' archives; but there is also a reappraisal of existing material as traditional celebratory histories written by insiders and supporters appear increasingly outdated. It is promising that leading aid organisations like Oxfam, CARE, and Save the Children have begun to recognise that their archives are strategic assets for analysing the evolution of humanitarianism in a changing political landscape. Academic attention has also benefitted from the momentum that transnational history and studies of civil society have shown at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Most research pertains to relief efforts originating in the Global North, although there are some pioneering studies of Southern humanitarianism.[33] Regularly lamented is a lack of recipient perspectives. Moreover, the history of humanitarian or voluntary organisations as businesses is still in its infancy.[34] By following charity money from income generation, via the deployment of resources, to bookkeeping and documentation, the present volume hopes to

[31] Taithe, 'Humanitarian History?', 62.

[32] Matthew Hilton, Emily Baughan, Eleanor Davey, et al., 'History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation', *Past and Present* 241, no. 1 (2018): e1–e38.

[33] Maria Framke and Ester Möller, *From Local Philanthropy to Political Humanitarianism: South Asian and Egyptian Humanitarian Aid during the Period of Decolonisation* (Berlin: Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, 2019); Maria Framke, 'Political Humanitarianism in the 1930s: Indian Aid for Republican Spain', *European Review of History* 23, nos 1–2 (2016): 63–81; Pichamon Yeophantong, *Understanding Humanitarian Action in East and Southeast Asia: A Historical Perspective* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2014).

[34] Exceptions are Roddy, Strange, and Taithe, *Charity Market*; Heike Wieters, 'Reinventing the Firm: From Post-war Relief to International Humanitarian Agency', *European Review of History* 23, nos 1–2 (2016): 116–35.

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shed light on key economic dimensions, although from a viewpoint broader than that of business history. While some attention is given to diasporic relief, indigenous aid, and the agency of beneficiaries, these are not at the centre of our narrative. The focus on humanitarianism as a donor-driven endeavour derives from our readjusted 'moral economy' perspective, which begins with the fundamental question of why and under what conditions one would voluntarily want to share assets with a distant stranger, rather than follow Thompson and examine the desire and methods of the 'crowd' to appease their own hunger. In each of the case studies, we provincialise aid efforts, examining the biases of their 'universalism'. We attempt to highlight the agency of beneficiaries while continuing to focus on facilitating elites. The reaction and agency of recipients in the last mile; their creative appropriation of what is offered to them; their wounds and recalcitrance – all these deserve further attention. Whereas our work underscores the role of the diaspora more strongly than previous research, domestic giving is beyond the scope of our transnational inquiry.

Humanitarians have been content to apply academic evidence from disciplines like social psychology, nutritional science, and more recently logistics studies when shaping their practice, but they rarely draw on empirical historical research. The prevailing ahistoricism of relief agencies and aid workers is not only due to a lack of time and resourses, but also to humanitarianism's ingrained focus on emergencies and action under apparently exceptional circumstances. Therefore, as John Borton puts it, the humanitarian sector is 'locked in a "perpetual present"' in which historical analysis is perceived as having little to contribute, especially if it goes beyond the immediate past.[35] There have been notable attempts by academics to enable humanitarians to better understand their history and vice versa: to convince historians to present their material and narratives in a way that professionals in the humanitarian sector would consider accessible and engaging.[36]

Our moral economy approach sees practice as central to humanitarian history. Such a history is a transdisciplinary endeavour, informed by a wide range of debates and observations, including donor psychology, humanitarian logistics, and critical accounting. We believe that such a perspective, with a

[35] Borton, 'Improving the Use', 195, 199.

[36] For example, the Overseas Development Institute's 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action', the Canadian Network on Humanitarian History, and MSF's many publications on 'MSF Speaking Out', available at http://speakingout.msf.org (accessed 14 Feb. 2020). See also Eleanor Davey and John Borton, 'History and Practitioners: The Use of History by Humanitarians and the Potential Benefits of History to the Humanitarian Sector', in *The Impact of History? Histories at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century*, eds Pedro Ramos Pinto and Bertrand Taithe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 153–68; Borton, 'Improving the Use'; Taithe and Borton, 'History, Memory'.

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focus on fundraising appeals, allocation, and accounting, is of relevance to current humanitarian policy and practice, and will inspire future research. We acknowledge that a synthesis of two centuries of famine relief may not provide present-day humanitarian workers with concrete 'lessons' and blueprints for action. Yet, as with humanitarian relief itself, its historical study 'is not an exact science but an art'.[37] We hope that this book, by presenting 'an alternative perspective on familiar challenges',[38] will not only be read by our colleagues, but also furnish some of those working in the field with critical historical insight – perhaps even 'Aha!' moments – and stimulate them to peer beyond what is obvious in the present. There is a time to look backwards, as we have done, but there is also a time to look forwards, transcend the present, and put evidence of the past to use for imagining alternative futures.

[37] Allié, 'Introduction', 10.
[38] Eleonor Davey and Kim Scriven, 'Humanitarian Aid in the Archives: Introduction', *Disasters* 39, no. s2 (2015): 119.

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