

# Forces of Compassion

*Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics*

*Edited by Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield*



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## Notes

1. The many books written by French humanitarian actors themselves include Rony Brauman, *Humanitaire: Le Dilemme* (Paris: Textuel, 1996), *Penser dans l'Urgence: Parcours Critique d'un Humanitaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), *Aider, Sauver: Pourquoi? Comment?* (Paris: Bayard, 2006); Xavier Emmanuelli, *Les Prédateurs de l'Action Humanitaire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), *Au Vent du Monde* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), *Au Secours de la Vie: La Médecine d'Urgence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Bernard Kouchner, *Charité Business* (Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1986), *Le Malheur des Autres* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1991), *Les Guerriers de la Paix* (Paris: Grasset, 2004); Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le Piège; Quand l'Aide Humanitaire Remplace la Guerre* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1986), *L'Aventure Humanitaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), *Les Causes Perdues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). Works glorifying French humanitarian organizations or their heroes include Olivier Weber, *French Doctors: L'Epopée des Hommes et des Femmes qui Ont Inventé l'Humanitaire* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999); David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Anne Valleys, *Médecins Sans Frontières: La Biographie* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); Alain Guillemoles, *Bernard Kouchner: La Biographie* (Paris: Bayard, 2002); Michel-Antoine Burnier, *Les Sept Vies du Dr. Kouchner* (Paris: Editions XO, 2008).
2. For the case study of Médecins Sans Frontières I used the organization's *Rapport d'Activités 2002–2003* (May 2003), 123 p.; *Compte-rendu de la Réunion du Conseil d'Administration*, March 23, 2003; and *DazibaG* (May 2003), 125. For the case study of Médecins du Monde I used the organization's *Rapport Moral 1999* (October 2000), 175 p.; *Opération Mur de Protection Naplouse: Mission d'enquête conjointe Médecins du Monde-Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme, West Bank* (May 2002), 64 p. and *Les Civils Israéliens Victimes des Attaques des Groupes Armés Palestiniens: Mission d'enquête Médecins du Monde, Jerusalem* (August 2003), 70 p.

# 3

## The Impossible Problem of Neutrality

Peter Redfield

"Neutrality was never an issue outside the minds of humanitarians."

—Rony Brauman (MSF-Holland 2000:16)

The concept of neutrality now carries a hopeless burden of critique. On the far side of veiled interests, positioned subjects, and situated knowledge, it has become second nature in some quarters of contemporary scholarship to dismiss claims to neutrality, along with related concepts such as objectivity and impartiality, as naive surface representations or techniques to leach away political consciousness. There are many good reasons for this impulse and little doubt—in the comfortable preserve of academic disputes, at least—that the concept of neutrality constitutes a depoliticized and ahistorical fiction. But the dismissal of neutrality has a weakness: when reduced to a truism it grows ethnographically thin. Actual human practice is intricate and the practice of neutrality no less complex and thorny than other useful fictions people deploy.

In this essay I consider neutrality not as an absence of political positioning, but rather as an "impossible" or negative form of politics: a strategic refusal with moral inflections, actively problematic and generative.<sup>1</sup> Rather than engaging in critique at a global level, I seek to follow the more specific trajectory of neutrality as a problem amid shifting political and ethical norms related to life and death. My primary object of study will be the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans

Frontières (MSF). As both the inheritor of humanitarianism's neutral legacy and a sometime heretic within it, the group embodies critical tensions of the concept relative to shifting modes of practice. Examining MSF's statements and actions, then, may illuminate aspects of the larger problem of neutrality in a particular and grounded way—long the promise of anthropological case studies. As with humanitarianism itself, the classic ethnographic move of worrying less about the veracity or consistency of people's claims, and more about the manner in which they do or don't make and pursue them, serves to highlight the variability of historical experience. A neutral stance, I will emphasize, has served more than one end, and its strategic significance varies under different regimes of power. Recognizing variability and complexity in turn shifts the terms of question and critique. Rather than evaluating neutrality as an abstract principle, the goal becomes to evaluate the claim and relative practice of neutrality under given conditions.

The ethical standing of neutrality grows particularly vexed and contradictory when defined in relation to human suffering. On the one hand, war is the classic venue in which neutrality takes shape. To the degree that humanitarians evaluate organized violence in terms other than victory and defeat, they stand apart from military alliances and their political objectives. On the other hand, the humanitarian conscience responds to spectacles of human tragedy and remains haunted by the specter of genocide. To the degree that humanitarians involve themselves in delivering aid they are obviously engaged in any field of action, and to the extent they oppose any regime that fosters death they are clearly committed to its alteration or demise.

The current moment is a particularly fraught and telling one for this discussion. Recent trends in international politics toward humanitarian justification of military action and moves to legislate a moral "right to intervene," as well as the US led "war on terror," have presented humanitarian organizations with renewed quandaries about defining and proclaiming their allegiances (see, for example, Allen and Styan 2000; HPN 2003; Harroff-Tavel 2003; Shetty 2007; Lischer 2007). Thus neutrality has again emerged as a relevant topic in aid circles, reconfigured anew after an earlier round of concern about post-Cold War conflict and genocide in the 1990s (Duffield 2001). In an era when military conflict primarily produces civilian death and frequently involves strategic displacements, when political powers deploy the language of human rights and humanitarianism, when actors display keen awareness of the presence or absence of cameras and regularly communicate across context and distance, the process of

defining terms of involvement is unlikely to be clear or simple. Rather, the heightened struggles over definition may themselves reveal older contours in the larger problem of not taking sides.

### THE POLITICAL ART OF ABSTAINING

What might this term, "neutrality," signify? Before examining humanitarian understandings and MSF's particular travails with the term, I will take a historical detour. My purpose in doing so is to expand the concept, and thereby suggest the extent to which current assumptions may be anachronistic in more than one direction. Just as with "war" itself, "neutrality" may be an impossible word (Nordstrom 2004:5), one that appears sharp and sure on the surface, but rapidly dissolves under close examination into a wide range of forms and events. Current discussions cast the neutral state as fixed and inviolable when it is not a facade, a moral condition of purity akin to virginity, deeply associated with inaction. Neutrals are disinterested observers, bystanders to oppression or even genocide, invested above all else in maintaining a status quo. But it has not always been so, or at least not to the same degree.

Etymologically the Latin root (*ne-uter*) suggests a state of being neither one thing nor another, a condition of refraining or abstaining (Haug 1996). The possibility of standing apart during a conflict is a common enough human experience, as mediated by obligations of kinship and other alliances. However, relationships formally *defined* through degrees of abstinence present a more unusual and anthropologically interesting phenomenon. For the purposes of this essay I will concentrate on the modern tradition as understood in international relations and law, which dates from at least the seventeenth century. This legal trajectory has the advantage of both representing more than a specific case, as it constitutes an ostensive lineage extending to the present. Whether or not the edifice of treaties, principles, and precedents currently invoked or ignored represents a monument of human progress, it carries traces of a longer history of practice.<sup>2</sup>

In European military and legal history a formal category of neutrality emerged in relation to questions of arbitration and trade between warring parties. Thus a sovereign power might claim the right to stand apart from the conflict of others and by making that claim seek protections for its political and economic affairs. Likewise, it might seek to serve as a diplomatic intermediary during conflict or a geographic buffer between potential adversaries in times of peace. Neutrals, then, were as much active as passive figures on the political landscape. Moreover, theirs was hardly an absolute condition: the state of neutrality extended only to particular conflicts and

to certain relationships within them. In this sense it represented an effort to define parameters for situated action.

Several additional points become quickly apparent when looking at the historical emergence of neutrality as a political and legal concept in early modern Europe. First, the tradition derives from human practice far more than from abstract principle or Enlightenment reason. As Stephen Neff notes in his historical survey of the topic, "The law of neutrality, in short, was made not, as it were, from the top-down by scholars and commentators, but rather from the bottom-up by statesmen, generals, admirals and traders" (2000:7). Although standing apart might not conform to medieval theories of "just war," the record suggests a considerable body of custom that recognized precisely this possibility. Second, neutrality rarely appears disinterested or selfless. A concern for commerce and exchange is particularly evident: given that war might interfere with such other interests, it could be restricted for their sake. Third, the practice of war itself—its technologies, goals, and legitimate parameters—varies significantly over time. The importance of neutrality has waxed and waned in different periods, depending on moral framings of war and justice, the relative professionalism of armies, and the strategic scale of conflict. The eighteenth-century revolutionary version of "total war," for example, targeted economic exchange and thereby altered the manner and extent to which non-combatants could stand apart. Finally, neutrality was rarely certain or guaranteed; rather it was a claim, one that might or might not prove successful. Neutrals had duties as much as rights, primarily to abstain from open conflict and show impartiality in relations with combatants (Neff 2000:13). Whether or not they fulfilled such duties, or claimed legal rights as they developed, however, neutrals could be—and often were—invaded or otherwise compromised.

From the perspective of the present the historical record underscores a significant, often overlooked point: the refusal of political positioning not only has political effects, it is also a political strategy. Like any strategy, neutrality might or might not succeed in furthering specific aims under given circumstances. But its very claim suggests a potential limit to the sovereignty of another. Instead of denying self-interest, then, neutrality expresses it through an attempt to restrict or alter the terms of engagement. By expressing a desire to stand apart, the would-be neutral asserts independence, and by implication the capacity to maintain or form an alternative connection. Whatever neutrality has been about in the longer run of European historical experience, it has rarely expressed attachment to abstract virtue and certainly not altruistic justice (Neff 2000; Walzer 1977).

Rather, a broader principle of limitation emerges from a cobble of limited, and distinctly self-centered, aims.

Two additional historical observations help further undermine contemporary certainties about neutrality. First, minor states feature conspicuously in the collective record related to the topic. Declarations of neutrality offered "small powers" a means to survive amid larger neighbors; by avoiding conflict they could assert independence and sometimes enjoy the prospect of profit. At the same time, the existence of small neutrals could also periodically serve the commercial and diplomatic interests of larger states, including expansionistic ones. Even as Europe produced a series of major empires, odd corners managed not only to stand apart, but also eventually to present themselves as exceptional zones. Prominent among these was Switzerland, which would later play a central role in international affairs—and humanitarianism—as a distinctly neutral ground. Thus neutrality might appear as much a strategic weapon of the weak as a hegemonic assumption of the powerful.

Second, only in the nineteenth century did neutrality come to be defined as an absolute state. Prior to that time degrees of "imperfect" or "partial" neutrality enjoyed some recognition; for example, states might continue to honor arrangements that predated the onset of hostilities (Neff 2000:103). Amid royal disputes waged by mercenary armies, allegiances were fluid, and a measure of accommodation had reigned in war as well as peace. The wider scope of total war, however, recast both conflict and neutrality in more absolute terms. As civilians and their livelihood began to play a larger role in military strategy, neutrality entered law as a more permanent and restrictive condition. To dampen potential conflict in the aftermath of the Napoleonic era, states such as Belgium were designated as being "perpetually" neutral. As custom gelled into elaborated law, temporary or partial abstinence faded before permanent renunciation. Thus the image of neutrality as an inviolable principle appears a relatively recent inheritance, one that may be as inappropriate to many contemporary circumstances as the equivalent image of warfare that presumes neatly arrayed, uniformed lines of troops. In this respect at least, our present may have more in common with earlier European experience than with the more immediate past.<sup>3</sup>

#### MSF, THE RED CROSS, AND NEUTRALITY

Thus equipped with a measure of historical uncertainty, let us now return to the problems of the present. MSF has a famously complex relationship to neutrality, embracing and denying aspects of the concept at one

and the same time. In genealogical terms, the group descends from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), an entity constituted around a moral response to the suffering of wounded soldiers and a commitment to circumspect operational neutrality (Hutchinson 1996). The Red Cross helped establish a skeleton for international humanitarian law with the first Geneva Convention held in 1864 and built itself around the emerging order of nation-states. MSF, by contrast, originally conceived of itself as an alternative to both. Even if moral testimony may not have been as central to the group's formation as later myth would suggest, its very name embodied independence and global ambition (Vallaey 2004). In 1971 claims to neutrality and an international order of sovereign nation-states were political norms. The decolonization of European empire both reinforced the centrality of the nation-state form and embedded it into a new field of historical instability. At the same time the Cold War struggle produced numerous proxy conflicts, and technical developments in communications and transport reworked the speed and scale of international connections. Thus television could broadcast tragedy from afar, and middle-class European youth could travel to engage the world without having to rely on state conveyance (Boltanski 1999; Brauman 1996; Tanguy 1999). Moreover, in richer countries emergency medicine was moving off battlefields and into hospitals as part of a routine response to crisis. When the oppositional spirit identified with the period called for direct action, the biomedical context increasingly had means to realize a form of direct and rapid intervention.

The generation that most shaped MSF's early history saw the Red Cross's silence during the Holocaust as a failure and was quick to embrace the media, even as it sought to avoid bureaucratic entanglements and diplomatic niceties. Over the following decades, the group would deviate dramatically from Red Cross orthodoxy in several different directions. To cite just a few prominent and formative examples, in Afghanistan at the beginning of the 1980s, MSF operated a clandestine mission essentially in support of the mujahideen. In 1985, the era of Live Aid, the original French section of the organization found itself evicted from Ethiopia after speaking out against government resettlement policy. In Rwanda in 1994, MSF denounced the genocide and even issued a frustrated call for armed intervention. Nonetheless, much of the time the group's work on the ground has resembled that of the ICRC, albeit with a more informal and flamboyant twist. Furthermore, despite episodic internal debate, it has never removed the term "neutrality" from its charter. This last point, I suggest, merits particular attention, for it suggests that humanitarian claims to neutral status may run deeper than at first it might appear.

In order to grasp the historical force of the ICRC, one must first denaturalize humanitarian norms. At the point when the Red Cross emerged, the status of battlefield medicine was uncertain in principle as well as practice. Wounded soldiers and medical personnel had no uniform standing, and their protection depended on the calculations or consciences of individual commanders. Even if the greater Red Cross movement ultimately reinforced state interests by effectively creating an auxiliary civilian medical corps (Hutchinson 1996), it also repositioned ordinary suffering within moral sensibility. Through its sustained effort a red cross on a white background grew into an accepted symbol on the battlefields of Europe as well as in civilian settings. And even if the same armies ignored Genevan niceties in colonial contexts (Lindqvist 2000), key elements were in place for projection into more universal claims.

The point is not that humanitarianism lacks historical precedents; the ICRC itself now proudly catalogs potential antecedents to humanitarian thought worldwide, and many warrior traditions have included precepts of honorable behavior, mercy, and sanctuary (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Ignatieff 1997; ICRC 2000; Cox 1911). Instead, the project of nineteenth-century humanitarianism refashioned a matter of virtue into a moral and legal category focused on health care. The fiction of standing outside battle (*hors de combat*) could now be predetermined by professional status as a medical worker and bodily states related to suffering.

The Red Cross variant of neutrality, then, developed in a historical context where it represented the very possibility of delimited engagement, as defined through medicine. The ICRC's strategy depended on the extension of international legal conventions, into which it was subsequently written. It also anticipated the existence of clear sovereignty to work through and against. As the tendrils of the Red Cross movement expanded beyond care for wounded soldiers into a more general response to suffering, they provided a civil, state-sanctioned mode of welfare protection amid disaster. In addition they suggested a limit to state discretion in the form of international humanitarian law. Sovereign power might still declare a state of war, and claim legal exceptions through it, but would now confront a field of specific expectations to meet or ignore. At stake would be an appearance of humanity, as displayed through relative restraint.

Once transported beyond nineteenth-century European warfare, the Red Cross strategy faced serious structural "challenges" (to use the all-purpose euphemism of the aid world). Its legal claim anticipated a defined order of nation-states and clear sovereigns, not contexts of civil war and ethnic conflict. Even so, the ICRC maintained a creed of seven principles, including

impartiality and neutrality. Neutrality constituted a disciplined refusal of involvement beyond the core mission: "In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature" (Plattner 1996). Although the work might embody a greater ethic of compassion for human suffering, it should not give way to passions of any lesser sort. My portrayal here simplifies for the sake of emphasis. The ICRC now acknowledges its limits more openly and recognizes possible exceptions to its principle of confidentiality (Harroff-Tavel 2003). Nonetheless, its neutrality continues to define humanitarian orthodoxy, and the organization's legacy remains one of deep and abiding consistency. In schematic mappings of humanitarian types created by analysts, the Red Cross inevitably occupies the "classic" or prophetically "Dunantist" pole (for example, Hoffman and Weiss 2006:99; Slim 1998; Weiss 1999).

MSF's rebellion against this orthodoxy gained both clarity and nuance over time. Born in association with a medical journal, the initial group included a few journalists amid its doctors. Moreover, its name connoted a rejection of state authority alongside a more general refusal of limitations. Still, the organization's actual charter mirrored Red Cross principles, with neutrality, impartiality, and even confidentiality firmly in place. Media involvement grew more central during its tumultuous first decade, along with hints of assertive moral vision that suggested humanitarian needs took precedence over political order. This sense of moral primacy both reflected a longer tradition of French universalist impulses and anticipated the "right to interfere" later championed by Bernard Kouchner (Fox 1995; Taihe 2004; Vallaeys 2004). After losing a power struggle within MSF, Kouchner founded a rival group, Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World or MDM). Initially distinguished from MSF by personality and style, MDM would push even further beyond the Red Cross model by embracing elements of human rights discourse in opposition to suffering. MSF, meanwhile, continued to grow and rupture with the emergence of new, largely autonomous sections elsewhere in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Following a bitter early controversy over the politics of "third-worldism" and a series of disputes in the wake of major crises in the mid-1990s, the greater assemblage quarreled its way into a loose consensus about its humanitarian perspective.

Like the Red Cross, MSF would generally concentrate on limited and short-term goals, avoiding appeals for development on the one hand and a full embrace of human rights on the other. MSF's version of neutrality, however, was more openly instrumental than that of its ancestor. The greater ethic of impartiality would find its sharpest definition through

medical care. Operational neutrality, by contrast, must always allow for moral duty and its potential politics. To describe this delicate balance in the precise terms of its engagement, MSF gradually adopted the term *témoignage* to imply an active sense of witnessing, as motivated by humanitarian concern for suffering. In extreme circumstances, *témoignage* would take the form of "speaking out" and public denunciation. However much it might resemble political advocacy in practice, MSF would present its public speech as an exceptional act, deriving from a sense of moral obligation rather than the pursuit of political objectives (Terry 2001; MSF-Holland 2000; MSF 2006).<sup>5</sup>

MSF's variant of neutrality, then, developed in a historical context where engagement was no longer fully predicated on states. Independence, rather than reliance on international law, would serve to guarantee virtue. MSF constituted itself as a nongovernmental organization and jealously guarded its autonomy, even largely weaning itself away from state funding during the 1990s. Engagement remained rigorously medical but practiced with heretical zeal. Compassion now acknowledged passion and public speech, if still resisting formal politics. Thus MSF challenged sovereignty more directly than the ICRC, while avoiding any final determination of its own placement or responsibility. At the same time it only reinforced a medical vision of the humanitarian mission, its vision of advocacy nominally that of a collective doctor (Redfield 2006). Human life, health, and dignity constituted the core values, through which all political formations would be measured.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the claim of a "right to interfere" (*le droit d'ingérence*) on humanitarian grounds migrated from nongovernmental to governmental terrain, even as Bernard Kouchner became a significant political figure in France (Allen and Styan 2000). The phrase lurked in the background of the international intervention in Somalia and even more prominently in the NATO operation in Kosovo. By the time the "war on terror" was proclaimed by the United States in 2001, humanitarian justifications for military action and occupation had become a topic of dispute in their own right.

Although fundamentally committed to a sense of moral duty for intervention on their own part, MSF expressed deepening reservations about any general "right to interfere" on the part of political powers, particularly military action justified in the name of alleviating suffering. During its Rwandan agony the group had called for military intervention, noting bitterly "you can't stop genocide with doctors."<sup>6</sup> But Kouchner's successors never joined in his larger campaign, and in the aftermath of September 11



MSF only redoubled its denunciation of “military humanitarianism” (for example, Weissman 2004; MSF CRASH 2002; Dachy 2001). Instead, the group’s rhetoric has focused on what it calls “humanitarian space” (Brauman 1996). This abstract formulation refers to the ability of humanitarians to work freely in a given set of circumstances. In effect, it seeks to define the situation so that humanitarianism—materialized in medical practice—will stand apart as a recognized exception. In this sense it follows the historical strategy of the larger concept of neutrality, defining a limited relationship outside conflict that permits the pursuit of another interest. At the same time the spatial metaphor suggests a mobile variant of religious sanctuary, in which certain ground would grant immunity from profane conflict (Cox 1911; Lippert 2004). As with the Red Cross, this assertion ultimately relies on moral appeal and persuasion. Although sometimes referenced against legal precept, its real calibration stems from practice and the reiterative normalization of humanitarian action.

Like most aid agencies, MSF seeks to actively signal its neutrality through both the form and content of its missions. From the uniform T-shirts and ubiquitous white vehicles, every object associated with the organization normally carries its logo, signaling a status that is at once distinctive and recognizably generic. Vehicles and key buildings also commonly carry a no-weapons logo to indicate their refusal of arms. Moreover, the group takes every opportunity to remind all actors on the ground of its medical focus and underscores the noncommercial and professional nature of its involvement by offering its treatments free of charge, under criteria it defines as medical need. In this sense it asserts humanitarian space by occupying it. Although claiming international humanitarian law as an authorizing precedent, as an independent, nongovernmental organization MSF depends less on treaties than on personalities and a fragile web of local agreements. Whenever possible, mission field coordinators take care to pay regular respects to all local potentates, with ritual visits a recognized part of operational routine.

Humanitarian space is a fragile fiction, easily disrupted by state strategy or violence. When military forces undertake missions pursuing humanitarian goals, the humanitarian space demarcated by MSF blurs back into a larger continuum of conflict. The case of Afghanistan is instructive in this regard. Following the romantic adventure in the early 1980s, MSF spent another two decades in the country, staying on through dark days of civil war and Taliban rule. The organization protested against food drops by US forces during their 2001 campaign and sought to maintain distance from

state-sponsored reconstruction efforts. Nonetheless, MSF found itself—like all foreign agencies—increasingly identified with the American effort.<sup>7</sup> After the murder of five team members in 2004 the group withdrew. The deaths of project personnel, together with the absence of a meaningful state response, effectively collapsed MSF’s definition of the situation.

Even as it maintained a version of operational neutrality in pursuit of projects on the ground, MSF also elaborated various forms of advocacy under the tradition of *témoignage* described above. In practice the term now can indicate a wide variety of activities undertaken with conscience in mind, from diplomatic encouragement to the production of statistics, in addition to “speaking out” through public appeals and protest (Redfield 2006). As its reputation readily attests, MSF’s threshold for publicity and protest has proven far lower than that of the ICRC. Nonetheless, the group stops short of promoting human rights per se or directly pursuing legal redress for war crimes; indeed, with the emergence of an international juridical system it has sought to narrowly define its role as a medical actor rather than as a potential participant in juridical proceedings (Bouchet-Saulnier and Dubuet 2007:49–50).<sup>8</sup> Thus speaking out constitutes MSF’s most overt ethical gesture toward justice. The form and limits of this engagement have varied through time along with its target and at times include a measure of self-interrogation, in addition to ready critique of the larger aid apparatus of which it is a part (Soussan 2008).

The precise balance between MSF’s conception of humanitarian space and its practice of speaking out remains unclear. Speaking out certainly breaks with medical and humanitarian traditions of discrete silence and stands in implied contradiction with strict neutrality. Most prominent instances of the group’s public speech involve moments of major humanitarian disaster and operational frustration or collapse.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as Didier Fassin (2004, 2007a) suggests, in certain limit cases like Palestine, MSF’s presence itself is primarily an act of advocacy, having minimal medical justification. At the same time instances of kidnapping or murder affecting members of the organization’s staff trigger particularly passionate and loud response, even as they reveal uncomfortable inequities between the relative worth of particular lives.<sup>10</sup> Under extreme conditions, the group has few strategic options available to it other than withdrawal and denunciation. As it agonized over its public response during the Rwandan genocide and issued frantic declarations, MSF was only able to stay in the country by removing its own compromised insignia and working under the flag of the ICRC (Orbinski 2008:193). The rebel had returned home.

Even in comparatively placid—and more typical—settings, tensions surrounding the degree of desirable outspokenness periodically emerge. In Uganda, for example, different branches of MSF have sponsored a variety of projects in the country for over two decades. While most have worked in relative cooperation with the government, the upsurge of violence and displacement in the north in 2003–04 prompted some soul-searching on the part of field staff about why they had so long accepted government accounts. A head of mission for MSF-Holland at the time mused to me that Uganda had been “cursed by its good image” and aid agencies thereby lulled into collaboration. She advocated taking more risks on behalf of northern populations, expanding operations and publicly denouncing conditions in displacement camps. Although that section later did release a report proclaiming alarm about the health status of displaced people with some fanfare, matters never escalated into an open breach. Operations continued, while MSF’s report joined a larger wave of advocacy produced at the time. Yet people I talked to on later trips to the northern region remained only marginally less suspicious of government intensions than those of the rebel forces. They did not wish MSF’s activity in this context to be taken as endorsement of official policies. At the same time they wished to provide care, and with peace negotiations again on the horizon the political situation remained tantalizingly uncertain.

Given the political complexity of many field situations, it is no surprise that neutrality has remained a topic of continuing concern for MSF and figured in its internal debates. One of the most astute analyses came in 2001 from Fiona Terry, then a researcher at MSF-France’s internal foundation. Raising the question of whether the principle of neutrality remained relevant to the organization, she surveyed its origin, perversions, and contradictions, while noting the significance of perceptions and tensions with the practice of speaking out. On the basis of this last point she proposed that MSF acknowledge its history of engagement and adopt a pending motion to finally drop the principle from its charter. After all, “it is not possible to be a little bit neutral, or subscribe to a ‘spirit of neutrality’” (Terry 2001:5). Following a year of extended discussion across the movement, however, the general assembly of MSF endorsed a statement favoring retention of the charter’s reference to neutrality. The statement noted that neutrality continued to be associated with humanitarian action, that the reference had not impeded the organization’s ability to speak out, and indeed, that dropping it might actually weaken MSF’s position at moments when it is already suspected of taking sides (Bradol 2001). MSF would remain, as it were, a little bit neutral.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF THE WEAK

MSF’s trajectory with regard to neutrality is only one variant in the broader field of humanitarian actors. Others have gone much further in aligning themselves with political crusades or human rights ideals and negotiated collaboration with military reconstruction with far fewer qualms (for example, CARE). However, MSF presents a particularly telling case, I suggest, precisely because it deviates from the inherited understanding of ICRC tradition without ever fully rejecting it. Although this elasticity may upset classificatory schemas, in which MSF is only uncertainly “classical” or “solidarist” (Weiss 1999; Tanguy and Terry 1999), it helpfully returns topics like neutrality from the realm of abstraction to the more fluid ground of historical practice. It also serves as a reminder that radical commitment to an overarching value, such as the minimization of suffering, may consequently render other principles less absolute.

As the tradition of guerrilla warfare suggests, open struggle can be particularly fraught from a position of strategic weakness. The risk of defeat can prove worthwhile, but only if a logic of sacrifice and the moral force of suffering can transform present loss into later political gain. Thus the slaughter of civilians, even supportive ones, can serve strategic ends from a military perspective. For humanitarians, however, such forms of sacrifice are morally unacceptable. By openly committing to the protection and well-being of the living, NGOs like MSF reduce their room for political maneuver. When faced with unacceptable circumstances, they can only negotiate, resort to denunciation, or withdraw.<sup>11</sup> Thus the humanitarian position is politically weak in the strategic sense and must rely on moral persuasion and the actions of others.

In humanitarian discussions of neutrality, protagonists often appeal to additional principles, particularly that of impartiality. For the most part MSF adheres strongly to impartiality, in the sense of providing aid “in proportion to need and without discrimination” and stressing financial independence to forestall undue political and economic influence on its decision-making (Tanguy and Terry 1999). Unsurprisingly, this approach conforms to the tenants of modernist medicine, emphasizing physical need over social position, only reinforced by the organization’s engagement with the statistical logic of epidemiology. Where neutrality may carry deep scars of critique, impartiality appears somewhat less scathed, perhaps due to its intimate role in liberal conceptions of justice that forbid discrimination.

Once put into practice, however, impartiality can carry its own risks and political complications. As Terry notes in her essay on neutrality, from a medical perspective the needs of opposing sides are rarely equal. By



acting impartially one can thereby appear aligned, directly contributing goods and services unequally between combatants. In Bosnia even accepting the terms for safe passage led to accusations of concession and threatened the collapse of "humanitarian space." The risks of impartiality extend to a wider field of representation, however, as made clear by another case Terry cites:

In the current conflict in the Molucca Islands of Indonesia, for example, it is the Christian population who are most in need of assistance. But as an essentially European NGO, MSF is perceived as being pro-Christian. Thus MSF is searching for ways to assist Muslim communities to avoid accusations of partiality in the conflict. The need to be perceived as neutral in order to remain present outweighs the importance of basing assistance on the greatest need. [Terry 2001:4]

Impartiality, then, is as much dependent on perception as neutrality and offers no universal safeguard to either operational access or moral standing.

As a former executive director of MSF-USA pointed out in response to an earlier version of this paper, considering neutrality as an imperfect claim rather than an absolute principle does little to alter its ultimate dependence on the perceptions of actors involved. Anecdotal evidence and field experience indicate that people on the ground often have a hard time distinguishing between aid agencies or grasping the nuances of their ideological commitments.<sup>12</sup> Principles of neutrality, or impartiality for that matter, are likely less crucial than a reputation for positive engagement across locales. Given this, the question for humanitarian organizations then becomes how best to influence perception to further their ideals. The classic Red Cross adherence to neutrality traded public silence for operational access and cast its moral appeal at the level of formal agreements and long-term influence. Its aura of moral authenticity thus relied on consistent adherence to principle and recognition by political powers. MSF modified this classic equation by claiming independence, adding public speech, and minimizing its patience for violations. Its moral authenticity therefore shifted to a more oppositional framing of virtue and realistic adjustment of principle to the humanitarian needs of the moment. Neither approach guarantees universal success in achieving humanitarian ends. But MSF's looser style reveals the political edge of a humanitarian ethic, as well as its strategic weakness. The organization's internal debate over neutrality occurred on the eve of 9/11. After subsequent shifts in US foreign policy and a new scale of militarized action co-opting humanitarian

rhetoric, the debate quietly subsided: claiming neutrality clearly still had some uses.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

When the ethics of life intersect with the blunter politics of death, humanitarianism reaches a limit. Medical assistance pales before genocide and a concerted campaign against aid personnel generally forces their withdrawal. Humanitarian neutrality ultimately relies on recognition. Thus it comprises a position of formal weakness alongside its partial counterclaim to sovereignty. At the same time it resists the full sovereignty of political definition, preferring a negative formation of refusal. In this sense neutrality constitutes an "impossible" problem. Nonetheless, it remains actively generative, rearticulating the significance of suffering in moral terms. Humanitarian sensibility now filters back through human rights discourse, through development, and through state policies of immigration (Ticktin 2006a). Humanitarianism even emerges in warfare, reworking the very form that gave it birth and playing again into strategic calculations. Throughout, the medical vision remains two edged: attention to biological life can both clarify the terms of humanity at stake and reduce it to a suffering body.

By prefacing this brief survey of MSF's relationship with neutrality with a brief history of the concept, I have sought to emphasize its variability. The point is not that neutrality in contemporary humanitarianism mirrors that of medieval warfare in any direct fashion, but rather that the concept itself might prove more unstable and thus more potentially generative than we often assume. If one looks beyond nineteenth-century norms as a starting point, then neutrality appears less of a perfect practice and rather as something partial, temporary, and always negotiated. The key, as Terry's article and the MSF board's statement quoted above both note, lies in perception. Given that MSF emerged and grew during an era in which conflict occurred increasingly at the edges of law (even as treaties and resolutions continued to proliferate), it should come as no surprise that the group would retain a formal claim to neutral status while modifying its practices in accordance with circumstance. In this sense contemporary humanitarians may have reinvented something like that European custom under which imperfect neutrality was not only conceivable, but also quite permissible, provided one could get away with it.

On one of my initial visits to MSF, in this case to an office in Amsterdam, I interviewed a veteran staff member, then readying to work for another organization. After a lengthy discussion of the politics of intervention, he

paused, lit another cigarette, and noted with a wry smile: "The beauty of MSF is the anarchy as well. We're not always consistent." The comment stayed with me throughout subsequent research. Beyond reflecting the essential style of the group, it also summed up and celebrated its de facto embrace of contradiction. This remains a significant point of divergence from the ICRC, which plays a role in international law and takes its principles more literally.<sup>13</sup> In the end, I suggest, MSF's inconsistency provides a more revealing reference point for principles such as neutrality. Yes, neutrality is a fiction and often a thin one. But the very inconsistencies of its practice recall that neutrality is also a strategy, one whose effects vary in different contexts. This obvious point is too often forgotten amid either affirmation or denunciation and dismissal, and thus I return to it by way of conclusion. The politics of ethics are rarely singular or stable. The effort to redefine a situation by standing outside, by abstaining and refusing positions, is no exception.

# Notes

1. To emphasize contingent practice over categorical assumption I avoid the term "antipolitics" (as in, for example, the erasure of politics amid development planning described by Ferguson 1990).

2. Most writing in this area considers the emergence of neutrality as part of the progressive history of law and pays little attention to antecedents or comparative possibilities. See, however, Bauslaugh 1991, Frank 1992, Nevakivi 1993, and Knight 1920. Neff 2000 provides the most comprehensive recent overview I have found.

3. For a parallel argument about war and states see Nordstrom 2004. The larger point is that assumptions about linear, progressive time may at times actually generate analytic conundrums and confusion.

4. For the purposes of this argument I foreshorten the group's history and simplify its structure. MSF currently has nineteen national sections as well as a number of other offices. Not all these sections are equal, however, nor are they always aligned in practice; indeed, the French section has often quarreled with its Belgian and Dutch counterparts, the two other heavyweights.

5. For all that it appears regularly across the group's publications, training materials, and internal discussions, "témoignage" is by no means a stable term, its content shifting across eras alongside MSF's scope of activities and the expansion of international law (see Bouchet-Saulnier and Dubuet 2007; Soussan 2008). MSF's different subgroups have interpreted it differently, with the French section emphasizing a history of practice and even walking back from the term itself (Redfield 2006). In this context I simply underscore MSF's need to authorize its action along the ethical edge of politics.

6. MSF Press conference, June 17, 1994. In the event the group was far from pleased with the actual French action undertaken at the end of the genocide and with the new Rwandan government's later forcible repatriation of refugees. See Orbinski 2008 for a vivid personal account of events.

7. The blurring of military and humanitarian activities extended into appearance and equipment. A field coordinator for MSF told me an anecdote about how the US Army once purchased three hundred white Toyota Land Cruisers of the sort that NGOs commonly use in such settings. Stunned by the sheer scale of potential misrecognition suddenly confronting it, MSF could only plead with the military command to at least paint them green (author's notes, December 2004).

8. As an MSF Foundation study of the group's legal testimony notes, while the organization might wish to avoid establishing precedents of legal obligation and of speaking beyond its actual knowledge, "it is always possible for the volunteer to testify on his/her own account, without mentioning the name of the organization or its members and without using its internal documents" (Bouchet-Saulnier and Dubuet 2007:14). The degree of nuance presented in such self-analyses (see also Soussan 2008) itself indicates the extent to which MSF seeks to define itself as standing apart and, in that sense, potentially neutral.

9. MSF-France has sponsored an internal study series, *MSF Speaking Out/Prises de parole publiques de MSF*, to document the group's response to landmark catastrophes. A full four volumes address the extended crisis in Rwanda and Zaire, an indication of the compound severity of that experience. See also De Torrenté 1995 and Delvaux 2005.

10. Even beyond actual acts of violence, a sense of threatened security has pervaded many aid organizations in recent years and altered their perception of risk. Many older members of MSF regularly express disgust at travel restrictions that would forbid taking public transport and restrict vehicle movement and other cautions to protect expatriate team members that they view as unnecessary and counterproductive.

11. Another possibility—embracing the martyrdom of their staff—remains off the table, part of the unequal political economy of life in which humanitarian action occurs (Fassin 2007a).

12. Most people I talked to in Uganda recognized MSF's medical focus but little else. Preliminary results from a multicountry study undertaken by the organization indicate that it is at times perceived as having a religious or political agenda. See discussion archived at <http://www.msf-crash.org/rencontre-debats/2009/07/09/305/dans-loeil-des-autres/>, accessed June 10, 2010. Also see Donini et al. 2010. The group's commitment to a shorter term humanitarian vision and its general avoidance of development projects likewise do not always translate cleanly, generating consternation when it withdraws.

13. MSF prides itself on maintaining a culture of internal critique. In 2005, the nineteen sections of MSF engaged in a reflective project known as La Mancha (a conscious reference to Cervantes), inviting internal and external commentary, and engaging in debate over its core principles. In contrast to an international gathering a decade earlier at Chantilly, the project featured more consensus than friction, to the extent that some participants expressed disappointment (MSF 2006).

# 4

## The Anthropologist and His Poor

Harri Englund

Dead bodies are rarely encountered in development work, and the dull condition of endemic, structural poverty stands in a sharp contrast to the urgent decisions demanded by humanitarian catastrophes. A clear-cut distinction between international development and global humanitarianism is, however, difficult to sustain. As both the early expositions of dependency (Amin 1976; Frank 1969) and the current critiques of participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004) have made clear, the professionalization of poverty alleviation risks making human suffering look like a technical problem, lacking the urgency of humanitarian emergencies. At the same time, alternative approaches are themselves hard-pressed to avoid the routinization of their own procedures, the hierarchies they depend on barely concealed by the populist idioms of grassroots empowerment and community-based collaborative action. A closer look at one such approach, I argue in this chapter, not only suggests intellectual and pragmatic resources to reconsider the professionalization of poverty alleviation, it also engages a disquieting parallel between this mode of routinizing human suffering and the populism of anthropological practice evident in a recent call for collaborative ethnography.

A dead body was almost laid on the doorstep of the governmental and