

In the Shadow of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action, Fabrice Weissman, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 400 pp., \$52.50 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

The debate on the nature of war and conflict and the ways in which the international aid or "humanitarian" community responds to them has taken on heightened significance in the past few years, as this community has grappled with the emergence of new norms both for the conduct of warfare and for intervention on humanitarian grounds. Should NGOs, the authors ask, take the side of "justice" in so-called just wars? Or should they also strive to help those on the "wrong" side of conflict when they are in need? *In the Shadow of "Just Wars"* is a welcome contribution to the growing field of humanitarian studies. Its analyses consider not only the practical, technical response to crises but also the moral, ethical, and political dilemmas caused by these conflicts and the ways in which they challenge internationally held notions of peace and security.

The book consists of a series of articles written by members of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in conjunction with writers, journalists, social scientists, and others who have had some collaborative experience with the work of the organization. The book is as much a textbook on the philosophy of MSF as it is a call to combat the politicization of humanitarian action. This latter idea envisages a moral, human rights-based culture of international politics that stands up for the rights of the abused and suffering and rejects the acceptance of "the death of a part of our global community so that the 'common good' may prevail" (p. 21).

To understand the passion and ideology underlining this book, one has to understand the origins of MSF, founded in 1971 by French doctors who had worked in Biafra and Bangladesh, experiences that left them feeling

constrained by the classical humanitarian response the International Red Cross movement espoused. As an organization, it has taken a deliberate stand in crafting a specific approach to conflict and crises that moves away from the traditional emphasis on neutrality and toward one that proclaims a new and reinvigorated engagement or solidarity with the victims of suffering. MSF thus sees itself as a leader in a new advocacy movement that seeks to recognize the full political implications of speaking out against human suffering and all that causes it. *Témoignage* (witnessing) is the key term that MSF has elevated to its guiding principle. It is through *témoignage* that MSF tries to keep itself independent of political, religious, or government affiliations in achieving its humanitarian aims.

The book consists of seventeen case studies, organized under the four subheadings of "Intervention," "Involvement," "Abstention," and "Points of View." Each focuses on country or thematic cases, criticizing the international community's response to a situation. The aim is to show how abandoning an alliance with sufferers and bowing to political expediencies resulted in the further sacrifice of life, generally made matters worse, or, in the name of peacekeeping, strengthened the power of perpetrators.

In the first part, "Intervention," the book looks at East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan as examples of the ways in which internationally backed peacekeepers used armed force to stop conflicts but failed to adequately punish perpetrators for violations. Though large-scale humanitarian interventions followed in the wake of these initiatives, security is still not guaranteed. Warlords have gone unpunished for their crimes, and others

have been co-opted to form governments for the sake of creating alliances in the “war on terror.”

Under “Involvement,” the cases of North Korea, Angola, and Sudan are presented as long-standing, protracted situations in which states have used international diplomacy to access aid while leaving catastrophically unaddressed the origins of the crises. The book shows these crises to be big business for aid organizations, which are among the many stakeholders that might stand to gain from unresolved and unrelenting situations. Here, the book is as damning about its fellow organizations’ complicity in profiting from crisis as it is concerning the governments and donors who perpetuate human suffering.

Under the theme of “Abstention,” the third part of the volume is dedicated to looking at Liberia, Chechnya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, and Colombia as marginal countries that have garnered nearly complete international indifference concerning the widespread violence and mass brutality taking place in them.

Often angry and occasionally self-righteous, the book continues its criticism of current responses to crisis in the final part, “Points of View,” which covers two more countries, Iraq and Kosovo. It also includes a discussion of the development and role of Islamic NGOs and a critique of international drug manufacturers who, choosing profit above ethics, have failed to develop affordable drugs to help in the battle against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases that threaten tens of millions in the developing world.

The book’s strengths lay in the highly personal and committed stance of the writers, who attempt to embed their own personal working knowledge of each of the situations into the larger context of theoretical debates going on around each particular theme. Given their level of expertise, one suspects the writ-

ers have read more widely than the text indicates, and it is disappointing that the book does not have a more comprehensive bibliography. Given the large range of countries and themes they address, it would have given the volume added weight if they could have made more specific reference to the numerous conferences, workshops, reports, and other publications that they themselves have organized and taken part in, as well as those of the major institutions, NGOs, and donors that have sponsored specific research and evaluations on these same topics.

The main weakness of the volume stems from the translation. Important ideas and concepts have been rendered almost meaningless by a too literal and clumsy translation of the French into English. This often detracts from and distorts the very important messages the book tries to convey. Chief among these is the moral outrage that MSF feels about the elevated accommodation to human suffering the world is prepared to allow in its pursuit of “just wars” for politically expedient reasons. Thus, for example, the text in which MSF calls for a renewed approach to the humanitarian imperative of saving lives, protecting dignity, and reducing suffering against all odds is reduced to the incomprehensible translation “preserving an art of living founded on the pleasure of unconditionally offering people at risk of death the assistance that will allow them to survive” (p. 22).

Despite this shortcoming, *In the Shadow of “Just Wars”* is a provocative and challenging book produced by an organization committed to the realization of universal values and dedicated to speaking up for all those disempowered and disenfranchised by ever more complex and powerful forces shaping this world.

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