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Assistance or Resistance: A False Dilemma?

Humanitarian action in the Occupied Palestinian Territories
and in other states of occupation

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While humanitarian action is playing an ever greater role in contemporary political emergencies, how can we account for the position held by humanitarianism in Israel/Palestine today? Drawing on the experience of humanitarian action in states of occupation worldwide, the seminar meeting explores the complexities of humanitarian intervention in such contexts, in an attempt to place the Israeli occupation and various humanitarian efforts to contain its effects in a broader, global perspective.

The seminar was organized by the research group on “Israel-Palestine: A Catastrophe in the Making,” which attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the current phase of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and to study the political, juridical, economic and social implications of its re-framing as a chronic political disaster.

NOTE ON THE SPEAKERS

Rony Brauman, born in Jerusalem in 1950, is a medical doctor. He served as president of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) France from 1982 till 1994. He is currently associate professor at the *Institut d'Études Politiques* in Paris, and is involved with MSF mainly for training and evaluation. Brauman is the author of several books and documentary films, in which he has dealt extensively with humanitarian action and its dilemmas.

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Adi Ophir is associate professor at the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University, and a fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, where in the early nineties he established the journal *Theory and Criticism*, and more recently the research group on "Israel-Palestine: A Catastrophe in the Making."

RONY BRAUMAN

My talk will focus on humanitarianism from the point of view of a practitioner who has been involved in humanitarian action for a number of years. Therefore, I do not intend to utter general truths, but I will delineate some theoretical perspectives drawn from and consistent with my own practical experience.

The end of November 2005 marks the 20th anniversary of the first major event that MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) experienced in its early stage of existence – that is, the expulsion of the organization from Ethiopia by the Ethiopian government. I would like to recall a few points raised at the time, not in order to praise our position, but to highlight a moment of reflection.

There was a large-scale famine in Ethiopia which started already in 1983-84 – not in 1984-85, as is commonly said. Why is this fact important? Because generally speaking, when a famine of this type occurs due to a violent government and to war, relief arrives after the famine and only treats its survivors. This is what happened in Ethiopia, as well as in Somalia and in a number of other critical situations. By the time we arrived, more than 500,000 people had already died. The narrative adopted by the media, the Ethiopian government and the NGO community (including MSF for a period of time) maintained that the famine was caused initially by a drought that struck the whole tropical belt region in Africa, from Mauritania to Djibouti. With the drought came the locusts, crops were weakened, and in this overpopulated area, mainly the northern part of Ethiopia, where the topsoil had been washed away in previous years by heavy rains, famine followed. All these assertions are true: but neither locusts, nor drought and overpopulation explain why, for instance, neighboring Kenya, which has approximately the same environment and demographic data, was not also hit by famine. The question was not even raised at the time.

In 1983-84, tens of thousands of people had been gathered in so-called relief camps. When the solidarity movement commenced, by the end of 1984, when NGOs started pouring in and when food aid was dispatched, a new process started – that of forced relocations. During the first months of 1985, hundreds of thousands of people were forcibly deported from the northern part of the country to the southern part, and these forced relocations became the main cause of mortality in Ethiopia. Our estimation, cross-checked with other sources, led us to estimate the number of deaths due to forced relocation at between 150,000 and 200,000. Thus, in 1985 more people died from forced relocation than from famine and drought. Our main problem was that this was due to the relief efforts: the NGOs and to some extent the UN agencies were used as baits in population traps. At dawn, militia, party and army people would surround the camps and force the people at gunpoint into trucks or take them to land strips where they were put on airplanes and

taken to an unknown destination. Families were separated; these abductions were carried out in a very brutal way. We were there observing, shocked by what we saw but unable to understand what was going on and what was our role. We had unwittingly become part of a deportation process, a kind of Maurice Papon *à l'humanitaire*: as relief workers in the camps, we were deeply involved in the forced relocation drive, although we were not the ones who put the people in the trucks.

Some NGOs were not uncomfortable with their involvement in the process of forced relocation; they truly thought that this “surgical” transformation of Ethiopian society was a good thing. They approved of the construction of a new social structure for what they perceived to be backward communities, as did the communist rulers of the country. But the “fellow travelers” were a minority. For most of us, what was at stake was to relieve the suffering of the people, to save those who could be saved, not to be one more battalion used by the Addis junta to enforce a new social order in Ethiopia. Hence, being a part of this criminal process entailed a very deep responsibility for us. In order to overcome this dilemma, MSF attempted to gather a number of NGOs who acted more or less on the same ground as we did. We thought that we could send a common message: “We don’t know what these relocations mean, but we know that it is a murderous process and we don’t want to be part of it.” However, this attempt failed because we were considered as being “too political.” Speaking out and pointing at the violence was an unacceptable breach of the principle of neutrality.

This brings me back to the description of the famine I gave earlier on. I mentioned the natural conditions which led to the famine – drought, locusts, etc. While these causes were real, other causes made the situation in Ethiopia different from that prevailing in Kenya, for instance. These were the insane taxation system of the peasantry; the forced recruitment of all youngsters to the war against Eritrea; and the collectivization of land, production and marketing, whose direct effects were retraction to a self-reliant production and refusal of the peasants to grow food to sell on the market. Taxation, forced recruitment, collectivization, an extremely violent system and a tyrannical government were in fact the underlying causes of the famine.

Therefore, the first point I would like to stress is the following: When do you become political? Are you a-political when you say “drought, locusts, bad luck, whatever, are the causes of famine,” and do you become political only when you point to collectivization, taxation and forced recruitment? Common sense would hold that one is political in adhering to the latter position but not to the former. But I think that both stances are equally political: it is political to adopt and replicate the position of the government, as it is political to contest and challenge it. So the problem is not to know whether you are political or not, but rather to recognize what politics you stick to.

The second point that we may draw from the case of Ethiopia concerns the dilemma of action. It is clear that NGOs must try and avoid being political if they claim they are humanitarian. Under these conditions, what should we have said and what should we have done? In my opinion (which was accepted by MSF, but met with disagreement among the so-called NGOs community), we first had to analyze our own position in the overall process.

We did not have to accuse the government of being the cause of the famine, but we could say that the “resettlement” (the official name of the deportations) was a devastating process and that we did not want to be part of it. We could not stop it, we could not prevent those people from dying, but we could avoid being part of the mechanism that led to their deaths. My point is that in this particular situation, we had to realize that whatever we could do would be transformed into oppression and violence by the local authority. If the very sane Hippocratic principle “first, do no harm” – that is supposed to be the bottom line for all of us – is to be taken seriously, it would have been better to stop working in the field, if we did not succeed in changing part of the conditions. As the Ethiopian famine relief operation was a major event, with high media coverage, I believe that the NGOs had real leverage power. Challenging the official version of “resettlement” and exerting pressures on the government was possible, provided the major NGOs would have decided to do so.

Aid, which was supposed to save lives, was used to kill people. That was the main point. All the rest – the process of forced relocations and the political system of Ethiopia – was none of our business. Of course we had to understand what was at stake, but our public position was not to denunciate or to accuse: it was to bring about a fact-based analysis of our position as relief actors in order not to be drawn blindly and passively into the criminal process. By doing so, in the particular circumstances of Ethiopia at the time, the NGOs could have pushed toward a suspension of the deportations, instead of easing their realization.

As humanitarian actors, what do we respond for? Exceptional situations, like Ethiopia, or the Rwanda camps after the 1994 genocide, shed light on internal contradictions, problems and limitations of humanitarian action and may help circumvent the limits of its relevance.

In the beginning of July 1994, when a huge flow of Rwandans arrived in neighboring Zaire, it was obvious that these were not spontaneous population movements. Although many were leaving their country out of fear, they had valid reasons to be afraid of the change of regime and the seizure of power by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Many of the fleeing Rwandans were themselves war criminals who took an active part in the genocide: the displaced population was

deeply mixed, and it was impossible to differentiate between criminals and refugees. In a massive crime of this type, it is often extremely difficult to draw a clear-cut line between innocent people and those who were part of the genocide in one way or the other. But all these ambiguities were rapidly pushed aside by the outbreak of a cholera epidemic in the refugee camps in the Goma region. Relief teams from all around the world rushed to these camps in an attempt to bring medical care and emergency relief to more than one million refugees, who were dying by tens of thousands from cholera. Yesterday's criminals became today's victims: although, by July 1994, it was clear that the "Hutu power" was responsible for the genocide in Rwanda, the relief effort which unfolded in the Rwandan camps erased the past, brushed aside the genocide and transformed the Rwandans who fled to Zaire into an exemplary group of victims.

This is where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) comes in, and, with all its authority and legitimacy, declares the entire population that fled from Rwanda to be refugees. The Goma camps indeed looked like canonic refugee camps, with the blue plastic sheeting carrying the logo of the UNHCR, the four-wheel-drive vehicles, radio communication, nutrition centers, hospitals, MSF, Oxfam, etc. But in reality it was a military sanctuary that housed some real refugees, but a military sanctuary nevertheless. A number of NGOs tried to raise this issue by September 1994, after the cholera epidemic was already over (thanks to the medical treatment given to the victims of the epidemic its level of lethality dropped from 20% to 2%; I believe this work had to be done because it was not our role to condemn those people collectively). About a dozen agencies sent a letter to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, asking that a police force be sent into the camps, but despite Boutros-Ghali's support, nothing came of this move.

As a result, MSF found itself in a dilemma similar to the one that it faced in the case of Ethiopia, namely: *should we continue or should we stop?* MSF decided it was better to stop and not be part of a criminal process, caused by the absolute control exerted by the Hutu power in the camps. For example, by recruiting local personnel – drivers, logisticians, mechanics, doctors, nurses, health auxiliaries, and accountants – we were transferring incredible amounts of financial and symbolic resources to the Hutu power that controlled practically all aspects of life in the camps. The yearly budget of those camps amounted to approximately one billion dollars, which could easily be transformed into militia power and finance arms purchase. Two years later an army emerged out of those camps and war erupted in the Kivu province. Deciding to leave was a way of acknowledging our impotence to avoid manipulation by the genocidal Hutu power which was ruling these camps. Famine relief in Ethiopia and refugee assistance in Zaire therefore raise the same issue: Whom do we serve, the victims or the victimizers?

How do these dilemmas of humanitarian action translate into the particular political reality of the Occupied Palestinian Territories? In general terms, occupation can be defined as the presence of foreign troops controlling a national territory in full or in part. This definition does not take into account the position of the local population towards the occupying power. For instance, the Australian and the UN troops were welcomed in East Timor, as the UNMIC (United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo) troops in some regions of Congo and the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops in Afghanistan. This latter example shows that the perception of the people evolves over time, and what was perceived as a liberation force may later be considered a foreign occupier, with whom it is dangerous to be associated.

From a humanitarian point of view, occupation is not a very specific issue: occupation points to conflict, which is a classic framework for humanitarian action. With the emergence of humanitarian action at the end of the 19th century, the question of who is right and who is wrong in an armed conflict was no longer exclusive. New questions arose, which did not replace the old ones, but were now considered legitimate: *What can I do?; How can I help?; Where are most of the needs and how can I meet them?; Are there unmet needs created by the conflict which I could respond to, and what is the best way to do it?* Humanitarian action is enshrined in situations of conflict; its purpose is to make life easier and to alleviate the suffering created by the conflict – or, if the conflict leads to occupation, to ease the effects of this occupation. This can be very decently challenged of course: many people tend to think that it is better to fight a war than to fight for the victims of the war. But once one is engaged in humanitarian action, this option has to be put aside. It is extremely important to keep in mind that when confronting a conflict or an occupation, the problem is not whether one eases them; we have to accept that the very purpose of humanitarian action is to do just that, and if this poses a problem, then we should rather refrain from humanitarian action altogether. The main issues in a situation of occupation should therefore be how to apply the Geneva Conventions, and how to act so that the rights of the occupied are respected and the legal obligations of the occupants complied with.

At this point, I would like to refer more specifically to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. I'll start by listing a few characteristics that distinguish it from other cases of occupation. The first one is of course the duration: it is the longest occupation in modern history. The second is that the political and national authority of the occupied country is also a liberation front. The third point which characterizes this occupation is – and I will use the formula coined by Edward Said – that the Palestinians are “victims of victims.” All three points are extremely interesting from a political point of view and have important social and human consequences, but they are not directly relevant for humanitarian action. There is a fourth point, however, which is decisive for the humanitarian perspective and which

makes our problems here even more complicated than in many other situations of conflict: the Israeli occupation is not only a military occupation, but should also be qualified as a civilian occupation.

Let's take the example of a Palestinian village which is used as a garbage dump by a nearby settlement. The settlement throws all its garbage and used water on the village's lands and the settlement's sewage is openly spilled there. We would not approve of an NGO involved in sanitation and hygiene setting up a sewage system for the settlement in order to protect the Palestinian village. In this particular situation we would refuse to translate the political situation into our vernacular language which employs health parameters. We would automatically relate the sewage problem to the political framework, and expect the Israelis and the settlers to face up to their own obligations. However, there is one further step that we can try to take, which consists of understanding that we are not the spokespersons of the Israelis or the Palestinians. It is they first and foremost who have to face this reality and to handle the problem. The Israelis should confront what they are doing in the settlements and the Palestinians can fight and have to fight against it. Whatever our indignation when confronted with of this kind of situation, it should not be dealt with by foreign NGOs. We are not supposed to be the big brothers of the Palestinians and to care for everything in their name. This is another way of posing a limitation to humanitarian action.

Another example may be drawn from MSF activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which entails psychological support to Palestinians victims of war. One of the problems which have arisen in the past was whether we should try to empower our patients to confront violence and to strengthen their resistance to it, while in the same token preventing counter-violence. Let's suppose that one of our patients becomes a suicide bomber, would that be considered an indication of the failure of our psychological intervention? My answer is negative: we are here to help people become stronger and fitter for their lives in general, no matter how they choose to direct it (to attack Israel, to build a business or to run away to Australia). The only thing we should account for is making people stronger and more autonomous.

Humanitarian action in a situation of occupation (which actually means a situation of conflict, under the reservations I made for this specific occupation) is not an "all or nothing" alternative. The strength and the value of humanitarian action lie in its rejection of the politics of the worst, and in its attempt to develop and to rehabilitate a politics of the lesser evil.

My last word concerns NGOs and aid institutions in general. NGOs are institutions, and as institutions we have our own particular interests. The problems arise not from the fact that such specific interests exist, but because we are inclined to

overlook them. In fact, we like to consider ourselves (and we are very frequently considered) as a kind of “magic bullets” that always reach their targets. Yet NGOs have their own institutional interests which do not always coincide with those of the victims, and may even depart from them. Ethiopia was a case in point: as it was the media and emotional center of the world at the time, the obvious interest of NGOs was to be there, and at a certain stage the interest of the Ethiopian victims became totally different.

Similarly, the aid for the South Asian tsunami victims showed to what extent many of us are inclined to translate a disaster into our vernacular language and institutional interests. Medical agencies anticipated epidemics, organizations acting for children foresaw orphans, and those working in the domain of water and sanitation prepared themselves for problems in water supply. Although there were no epidemics, no orphans and no water problems, something had to be done and problems had to be fabricated in order to justify the presence of major relief and development NGOs in the field. The consequence is a huge waste of money, hundreds of millions of Euros lost. The tsunami serves as an amplified example of the institutional behavior of the relief industry, a caricature of what it might become when it loses its mind.

Palestine is an analogous situation: as *the* emblematic conflict today, it is very difficult for humanitarian or other types of organizations, provided their action is relevant, not to be here. I believe that the question that should be raised again and again, not as an obsession but just as a way to take some distance, is: *Why are we here, as institutions? Are we here for our own interest or are we here for the interest of the people we are supposed to serve?*

JAMIL HILAL

My talk will focus on the characterization of the occupation and on the role of NGOs in the Palestinian context. All occupations are regimes of control and subjugation: this is a general characteristic of any military occupation. They differ from each other of course in terms of intensity, of length and of scope. From a Palestinian point of view, what distinguishes the Israeli occupation, apart from its length and intensity, is the control of all major aspects of life, from space to the economy, to infrastructure and to movement, to name just a few. This has repercussions on the Palestinian society as a whole. One of the major differences between Palestine and Afghanistan, Iraq or Vietnam, is that in the Israeli-Palestinian context there is a history which cannot be ignored. A history that involves the dispossession and the dispersion of most of the Palestinians and the shattering of their society in 1948. The repercussions of the Nakba still live with us: there are refugees, refugee camps and problems of the rights of the refugees, that put the

Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in a different light, a different perspective, a different paradigm than that, say, of Afghanistan or Iraq.

The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a colonial settler occupation. It is not similar to the case of Afghanistan or Iraq, where a foreign army controls the territory and the population but is not building foreign colonies or annexing part of the land. This is a very important point because the problem of the sewage referred to would not have existed were it not for the settlements. Another point we need to refer to is the criminalization of Palestinian nationalism or Palestinian resistance. This of course has impacted Palestinian society, which has the highest rate in the world of political detainees and prisoners in the general population, held in Israeli jails. At the moment there are more than 8,000 Palestinians in detention and in prisons out of a population of 3.5 million. It is almost impossible to find a Palestinian family in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that has not been affected by the occupation (in terms of members being killed, maimed, had their house (home) blown up, had some of their land confiscated or spent time in Israeli prisons).

Also, the occupation is not a civil occupation, as Rony Brauman contends, but very much a military occupation. The checkpoints are manned by military personnel, and the military enter and leave whenever they want in any of the towns, villages and camps in the West Bank. Even in Gaza where direct military occupation has been withdrawn, indirect occupation persists in terms of the control of the exits, the sky and the sea, and of who enters and who leaves. For example, the preamble of the Rafah agreement states that the opening of the Rafah crossing-point to Palestinian identity-card carriers is done for humanitarian reasons, and in order to promote peaceful economic development. Yet, if you read further down in the agreement, you soon realize that the real purpose of the agreement is to maintain control of Palestinian movement (of people and goods) through a third party – in this case the European Union – and through remote television control. The document is really worth reading because it demonstrates how control is being packaged in the language of humanitarianism and marketed through humanitarian considerations

The result of the Israeli occupation has been to create a fragmented society. One can speak here about cantonization – of the West Bank into three pieces in addition to Jerusalem, and of Gaza into another separate piece. It has also created what I would call a high-risk society for the Palestinians. Your chances of being killed, maimed or injured, the chances that your house will be destroyed, the chances that you will be put in prison or will not be allowed to move from point A to point B, are very high. Another thing that has to be mentioned is the institutionalization of an apartheid system, best exemplified by the separation wall. Anybody who sees that cemented wall cannot miss the fact that its purpose is to concretize separation and control.

Lastly, everything is being done to prevent Palestinians from exercising the right to self-determination. Everything is being done to prevent the emergence of a viable, independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which could also redress some of the historic injustice that has been done to the Palestinian refugees. Look at the determination to dismantle Oslo and to bury the roadmap, and witness the unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the enforced separation that is taking place daily in the West Bank.

To come back to the issue of the politics of humanitarianism, my general point is that the discourse of humanitarian action is linked in one way or another to the neo-liberal discourse constricting the role of the state, a discourse that has dominated in the 1980s and 1990s. This goes back, of course, to the colonial discourse, as Rony Brauman mentioned. I think that it is a discourse that would have as an alternative a discourse of emancipation, a discourse of existence and a discourse of change. This explains why NGOs, whether international NGOs dealing with humanitarianism, NGOs dealing with development or NGOs dealing with human rights, do not have either the tools or the theory of social change. They are not equipped to change existing structures of discrimination, of inequalities or of domination. They are there, as Rony Brauman mentioned, to lessen the pain but not to deal with the causes of the pain. Their mission is not to deal with misery, and that is not their mandate. They sit on the fence because they do not want to be political, and being political, of course, means engaging in changing the situation. They are different from political parties, from pressure groups, from mass organizations or from social movements whose job it is to represent, to mobilize and therefore to change. Historically, the latter have been the instruments of change in the last two centuries. Thus, although human rights organizations record violations here and there, they are trying to redirect these violations to individual rights, and refrain from talking about collective rights such as self-determination. Unlike political parties, mass organizations or social movements, NGOs are not representative of a constituency and therefore they are not accountable to a constituency, but only to themselves and to their funders.

The danger with humanitarian action, as well as with the family of related concepts, is that they create the illusion that development or democracy are possible under occupation. Another danger is that even if not by intention, they reproduce dependency. The Palestinian society is becoming more and more dependent on foreign aid, whether it originates from UNRWA, from international NGOs, from the United Nations agencies or from the EU, the USA and other states. This applies to the Palestinian Authority, to Palestinian NGOs and to part of the private sector. In making a society highly dependent on foreign aid you are emasculating that society and the possibility of resistance and of directed change.

Finally, I feel that the dilemma of humanitarian action should not only be considered from the point of view of the givers or the humanitarian agencies. One should also look at it from the point of view of the recipient. If I or my family are dying of starvation or disease, you do not expect us to refuse if somebody is willing to provide us with help to alleviate our pain and our misery. This is why the dilemma remains, not only for humanitarian organizations, but for millions of families of refugees, and for all those who experience misfortune or injustice.

ADI OPHIR

One of the most admirable aspects of Rony Brauman's work, and more generally of the work of MSF, is the systematic, persistent, often painful work of reflection and self-criticism in which they are engaged. Self-criticism for them is an integral part of the humanitarian practice – one must know the social, economic, and political circumstances in which one is involved in order to assess the possibilities and effects of bringing relief to the sufferers. Interestingly, MSF speaks about the political skills necessary to understand the situation, but only rarely uses this understanding in order to denunciate political actors, and in general tries to avoid becoming one. This is a curious case in which one should be deeply engaged in political theory and political analysis in order to keep a distance from politics, and remain on the exterior of the political. At the same time, it is a case in which being nonpolitical is a form of positioning within the political. Especially, one must be as clear as possible about the political situation in which one acts, and avoid as much as possible an ideological language that prevents one from seeing what is really going on. Rony Brauman expressed this position recently in an interview with Michel Feher and Philippe Mangeot. While referring to the case of Darfur, Brauman said that “in producing an intelligible political description of the situation, one re-discovers a field of action, one can define the vital priorities in the organization of relief,” which the analysis in terms of a prevalent ideological discourse – the language of genocide in this case – might conceal.¹

There is nothing reminiscent of genocide in the case of Palestine, but there is an ample amount of ideological language that contributes to the concealment of what is really going on. I think that the word “occupation” itself fulfils a similar function to the word “genocide” in the way it conceals the situation, and deserves the same kind of scrutiny. In the interview I just quoted, Brauman speaks about the inertia that sometimes keeps MSF in places where they should not be or in involvements that they should not have undertaken. I would like to put it bluntly as a question: perhaps your presence in our region is an expression of the same kind of inertia;

¹ Michel Feher and Philippe Mangeot, “L'école de dilemmes. Entretien avec Rony Brauman,” *Vacarme* no. 34, Hiver 2006: 8–14.

perhaps a different or a more critical political description of the situation would bring you to change your mind on your involvement?

I would like to support this claim with a brief statement on what such a description may be. Of the fragmentation of space, the systematic destruction of the infrastructure of Palestinian society and all the other aspects of continuous destruction that Israel brings about by its occupation of the Palestinian territory – you would say, and rightly so, that these are none of your business. You have a political position on these matters, but not a humanitarian position; as a humanitarian practitioner, your stake is with the victims. I think, however, that the analysis can go a little further, and show how your position as a humanitarian is implicated in the logic of the occupation.

Israel rules the OPT by a variety of military, geographic, architectonic and economic means that create conditions of a chronic disaster and bring the population to the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe, without ever crossing that threshold. Catastrophe is suspended in the same way that transfer is suspended, but also in the same way that any political solution, or any serious effort to work toward such a solution, is suspended. Suspension is not a coincidence; it is the very logic of the situation. Some of the things that are suspended – violence, of course, but also transfer or even negotiation – sometimes erupt to the surface, but their eruption does not break the systematic logic of suspension. Israel, therefore, is a *deferocracy*: it rules by a series of deferrals.

In this system of suspensions, the contribution of NGOs, humanitarian and others, as well as the aid supplied to Palestine by governments and international organizations, have a crucial role. On the one hand, the foreign aid alleviates not only the suffering of the Palestinians but also the economic burden of the Israeli government, and saves the Israeli government the money it should have invested in the OPT in its capacity as the effective sovereign. On the other hand, foreign aid prevents the creation of a full-fledged disaster while reproducing the conditions of a chronic disaster, and thus sustains what I would call “a catastrophe light,” which is a structural element in the Israeli system of governance. In other words, the Israeli ruling apparatus in the OPT would not function without the aid which Europe and the US deliver to Palestine.

I assume that if this were your understanding of the situation, you would have added Palestine to the list of cases in which MSF departed from a major scene of humanitarian action. MSF’s “voluntary departure” from the Rwandan camps in Zaire and Tanzania in November 1994, and its retreat from North Korea in 1998 – these decisions, and I am quoting you again from a recent text, “were not motivated simply by the will to protest against mass violence. Their common reason was the conviction that, in those circumstances, humanitarian aid served mainly a criminal

power, and that once the possibilities of redressing the situation have been exhausted, retreat became preferable to action”.² If I could convince you that the alternative description I have just suggested is true, would you apply the same conclusion here?

I would like now to formulate two more general theoretical questions, concerning the way you position yourself outside politics, but also – if I understood you correctly – outside the moral sphere. Let’s take politics first. I have already said that your engagement in political analysis is very peculiar because it is undertaken in order not to be part of politics. In your lecture in Tel Aviv a few days ago you said that reciprocity, which is lacking in the humanitarian relation, is something that comes together with political obligation. Now, I wonder if you set the boundaries this way because you presuppose the state as the limit of political obligation. I wonder how you would classify the political obligation that an American citizen has toward Iraqis or Mexicans, with whom he is involved because his government’s policies affect their lives and sometimes bring havoc into these lives.

Let’s take another perspective. You often speak about maintaining a relation of power with states – the activist’s own state as well as the state in which he is working – and yet you insist on staying outside politics and speaking to governments from that zone of exteriority. I wonder what it is that really disturbs you about admitting your political role, the role of a responsible citizen of the world. Are you afraid of mixing moral duties with political obligations? Are you afraid of a moralizing attitude toward the political? Or is it the autonomy of the humanitarian as a sphere of knowledge and practice which is at stake here? But then, isn’t this struggle for the autonomy of a sphere of action – be it law, science, art or humanitarianism – a mode of political engagement? In other words, it seems that what you mean by the “political” is merely the narrow sphere in which one joins a party in order to seize state power. Hence, I invite you to reflect on the following claim: humanitarianism, alongside other social movements and organizations that combine new forms of knowledge and new forms of practice and give rise to new forms of civic responsibility, has already transformed the political and invented new modes of political action in which you take part and for which you set an example.

My last question is about morality. You have been a source of inspiration for me and for my moral philosophy. However, in your previous lecture in Tel Aviv I heard you saying that you consider humanitarian action as lying outside morality, because this kind of action lacks reciprocity. This claim sounds very strange to me: basic asymmetry that constitutes the act of giving is not something peculiar to

² Rony Brauman, “Les liaisons dangereuses du témoignage humanitaire et des propagandes politiques. Biafra, Cambodge, les mythes fondateurs de Médecins Sans Frontières,” In Claudine Vidal et Johanna Siméant (eds), *Face aux crises extrêmes*, forthcoming.

humanitarianism; any parent can tell you that. More generally, moral relations – as we have been taught by many, first and foremost by Levinas, Derrida and Lyotard – are *necessarily* asymmetrical. And yet you insist on defining a specific space for humanitarian action which would be neither political nor moral; beyond political obligations, certainly, but also beyond moral duty. I wonder why? Is it a reflection of a desire to create a humanitarian sphere, on par with other professional spheres in which some specific kinds of expertise and a certain configuration of knowledges, in the plural, are being shaped, much like the domains in which the lawyer or the physician operate? But even if this were the case, why would you resist calling this sphere “the sphere of moral experts,” or at least “the sphere of experts specializing in moral response to catastrophes”?

DISCUSSION

Rony Brauman: Regarding Jamil Hilal’s commentary, I fully agree that NGOs are not accountable except to their funders and to their members. Yet this is precisely one of the reasons why we are not legitimate actors for advancing social change, as nobody has asked us to do so.

As to the suggestions made by Adi Ophir, I believe that humanitarianism cannot be the ground for an international political morality or the other way around. Over the past fifteen years, humanitarianism has acquired a broader and broader space in political discourses, which I regard as a way of cheating people and of avoiding handling hard political issues. Kosovo, for instance, was presented as a “humanitarian war,” and Vaclav Havel even went as far as pronouncing the formula “humanitarian bombings” and “humanitarian bombs.” The question is, what makes this kind of discourse and these kinds of assertions receivable? How can they be heard without any adverse reaction? I believe that humanitarianism cannot be considered a ground for morality because humanitarianism is basically asymmetric. If you receive a visit from a relative or a friend which is done out of humanitarian feeling and not out of love or friendship, you will feel humiliated. Actually, the dilemma of the recipient mentioned by Dr Hilal is symmetric to the dilemma of the donor. The donor is a good-doer and every society values his position. At the same time, every society looks down upon the reverse position of the one who receives. This asymmetry in the humanitarian relationship is a psychological and sociological insight that points to the limitations and the shortcomings of humanitarianism. By this, I do not mean to undermine humanitarian action, in which I have been involved for almost thirty years, but just to render it more consistent; my aim is to reflect on an action which is useful in order to limit its field of application.

One last word on the issue of morality. As soon as somebody utters moral prescriptions, I reach for my gun. I regard it as a public posture and as a way of

presenting oneself in a positive and valuable position. My approach to morality and to moral values is the one advocated by Hannah Arendt, who holds, broadly speaking, that morality is a purely personal matter. One may apply moral principles to oneself and morality unfolds as an internal dialogue. For the rest, the collective issue concerns conflicting values and their prioritization. But putting forward one morality is just a way of seizing power over people. Morality leads to violence and war, and this is why I beware of it.

Khalil Nakhleh: * I want to focus on the relationship between the political and the humanitarian. I would like to assert that the distinction between the two is artificial and spurious and is becoming more so. We need to revisit the terms, and to understand better what humanitarian action entails and what a political action means. One can consider the political in the classical sense of who has the power and who lacks it, as something that has to do with access and empowerment, with making decisions and with the distribution of their effects. But it is also possible to look at it more deeply, in terms of inclusion and seclusion of humans. I believe that people in the field of humanitarian action should not go on making this distinction. I would like to assert further that by and large, people in humanitarian organizations continue to insist on this distinction in order to justify their position of prominence.

Rony Brauman: If I understand Mr. Nakhleh correctly, you claim that many humanitarian NGOs draw a kind of moral exception status from their self-distinction from politics. They might feel that they are “better” because they are not involved in such “dirty” things as politics. If this is what you imply, I fully agree with you, and this is the reason why I try to distance myself from the sphere of morality. I am not claiming a higher moral standard for NGOs than for politicians, whether as institutions or on an individual basis. My only point is that we are acting according to different logics of action, which are nevertheless closely intertwined, and that by knowing what logic of action we find ourselves in, we can act better.

To come back to Adi Ophir's suggestion, maybe it would be useful to drop the word “occupation” and to qualify the Israeli system of domination as “colonization,” a term that better accounts for what is happening in the field. After all, occupation may be too general a notion and may conceal the real issue, including to our own eyes of active field actors. Concerning the very sensitive question of our own participation in the maintenance of the occupation, one has to distinguish between easing the occupation, which is our “raison d’être” here, and being an integral part of the Israeli apparatus of rule, a question that should be carefully examined and discussed. I have asked myself a number of times if MSF should be in Palestine, and have put the question forward in the MSF bureau in Paris. In my view, given that MSF needs to be in Palestine, the question is: does MSF need to be

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in Palestine more because of the interests of the Palestinians or more due to its own proper interests?

Ruchama Marton:* There is also a third possibility: to help, but conditionally; to demand that the Israeli authorities accept certain requirements before we intervene.

Rony Brauman: An Israeli organization or an Israeli individual cannot have the same position toward Palestine as foreign ones. We have a set of conditions that apply in all our sites of intervention, which I tried to sum up in the notion of “humanitarian space.” Roughly speaking, these are the criteria that enable us to appreciate how free we are to act. For the time being, I would say that in the OPT humanitarian space is maintained, as we are free to act, to choose the people we want to work with, to recruit the people we are going to work alongside, and so on. Do humanitarian organizations serve the interests of the Israeli government more than the interests of the Palestinians? This is a very serious question, which for the time being can be answered in the negative. Yet, this kind of question should be put forward again and again, not only in the OPT, but more particularly here because of the specificity of the situation.

Orly Noy:* Concerning the suggestion to set conditions for the Israeli government, I do not see how it can resolve a moral problem, because it would only further institutionalize the cooperation between the NGOs and the Israeli occupation authorities and actually turn the former into a part of the occupation mechanism.

Ambrogio Manenti:* For me, the distinction between humanitarian and political action is also a little bit artificial. In my field, which is health, to distinguish between a health action and a political action is very complicated, unless narrow approaches to health are applied. The definition of health as “physical, mental and social well-being” implies political actions. The WHO declaration of Alma-Ata in 1978 – the “health for all” principle and then the social determinants set for health – strongly position it within a social and a political context. According to this broad public health vision, it is relatively non-influential to organize, for example, activities like post-traumatic stress disorder training that can be regarded as medicalizing a social distress related to war. Instead, it could be more useful to address the basic needs that if not satisfied can cause distress. Accordingly, I think that the antinomy Rony Brauman mentioned – “to fight against the war or to fight for the victims of the war” – is a false one. Here we have to do both in order to be effective in our action. Two examples may demonstrate this view. During the last four months, both the Rafah and the Erez border crossings were completely closed. What can I do as a humanitarian agency in order to solve the problem of the patients who need to be

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referred to specialized care outside the Gaza Strip? Nothing, except to advocate for the right to health and for the right to access tertiary care. In the same vein, there is this idea that the Palestinian Authority should reform its health sector to become more effective, efficient and transparent. But how can we promote this if the deputy minister who is located in Nablus cannot meet the minister who is located in Gaza? There is an impotence related to the lack of access, and this implies an action that is related to advocacy and inevitably has wider implications than those strictly related to health and humanitarianism.

Neve Gordon:* Adi Ophir associated the Israeli occupation with the logic of the suspension of the catastrophe, and claimed that humanitarian organizations play into this logic. Then he posed the question, *should humanitarian organizations stay, or should they do what they did in Ethiopia and in other similar situations – namely leave?* My problem with this way of posing the question is that it gives the humanitarian organizations too much power. Would their departure change the logic of suspension? And if it would not, if the logic of suspension exists independently of the aid industry, then is it worthwhile to leave?

Jamil Hilal: I like the concept of the suspension of catastrophe, but I have a problem with the definition of the catastrophe. Ophir was referring to humanitarian catastrophe, while from a Palestinian point of view, the catastrophe that concerns our collective rights and our right to live like other people in a viable, independent state is being implemented and not suspended.

Adi Ophir: The word “occupation” usually designates a temporary situation, while we have here a regime endowed with structure and certain solidity. Once you analyze the regime you have to introduce temporariness into its mechanism: this particular regime works through a temporization that renders everything on suspense. In fact, there are four major things that are on suspense here. The first one is complete catastrophe, in the way it is imagined and conceived by the media – that is, humanitarian catastrophe. This kind of catastrophe is very easy to produce: just close the gates of Gaza for another few months and prevent the trucks of UNRWA from entering and you have famine in the Gaza Strip. Yet Israel does not produce the humanitarian catastrophe it could produce very easily. The other three things on suspense are transfer; full annexation, with or without equal rights for the Palestinians; and the partition of the land and the establishment of a Palestinian state as a viable political solution. These four things are like ghosts that accompany the situation and, through their ghostly presence, structure the political field of actions of everyone involved, including of course the humanitarian actors. The creation of the humanitarian space is part of this mechanism: this space is precisely the buffer between the disastrous effects of the Israeli policies, and the full-fledged disaster which is always on the horizon. The system would collapse if any of these

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suspended factors would materialize. If there were transfer, political solution, annexation or humanitarian catastrophe, this would not be the same regime. Since this regime is also a very powerful mechanism of reproduction driven by its own conatus – it wants to continue existing as it is – Israel would not allow a full catastrophe. Therefore it would react to a threat by NGOs and other international agents to cut aid to the Palestinians. We have seen some evidence for that in the past.

Ruchama Marton: The Israeli state needs the NGOs and the humanitarian agencies because they are providing it with lots of money under the title of “helping people.” According to Major-General Amos Gilad, Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories at the time, the cost involved is estimated at 12 billion NIS a year.³ This is why the Israeli regime permits the international NGOs to function in the Occupied Territories. In other words, the NGOs are subsidizing the occupation.

We need to think about this because the outcome can be very serious from another angle. Once, for example, there were no oxygen supplies to one of the Palestinian hospitals and the outcry was great. Médecins Sans Frontières provided this hospital with oxygen that was purchased in Israel. In less than two months the oxygen factory next to Jenin was closed, and very many families lost their source of income. What can one do in such a case? Leaving the hospital without oxygen is not very nice. Yet, respectable organizations can condition their assistance and demand, “If you open the checkpoint we are willing to carry the gas balloons from the factory in Jenin to the hospital, but we will not buy the oxygen from Israel.” I believe that if solidarity were adopted as a way of thinking and acting, it could change the humanitarian pattern that includes more than a bit of patronizing attitude toward the Palestinians and consequently creates all kinds of dependency.

Jamil Hilal: I believe that if the peace camp in Israel starts taking action and raising its voice against what is taking place in the occupied territories it would be much more helpful than most of the humanitarian work being done. If you look at historical examples, America was defeated in Vietnam not because the Vietnamese were stronger militarily or economically, but because a wide public movement against the war was created within the United States, that put pressure on the government to withdraw. The same thing happened in France during the war in Algeria. This would prepare, in fact, for a system of coexistence here, which is much more important than the billions of dollars spent on humanitarian aid, however necessary this aid may be. It would be a disaster if UNRWA withdraws its rations to Palestinian refugees, but sometimes much of the money is wasted. For example, we have something like eighteen human rights organizations in the West Bank and

³ Gideon Alon, “Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories: Israel prepares for the possibility of a military administration,” *Ha'aretz*, 7 August 2002.

Gaza Strip who are doing more or less the same work and are funded by international organizations, while one or two would be more than enough.

Rony Brauman: This is indeed one of the major reasons why the Israelis are not in the same position toward the issue of Palestine as practitioners and activists of other nationalities. To come back to Ruchama Marton's remark, last year I was told by an Israeli colonel, "You and I are doing the same job." But five minutes later – following a rather tough discussion on several problems – the same guy said, "Why are you causing all these problems?" I believe that if we listen carefully, we realize that the presence of foreign relief workers and their interaction with Palestinians disturb the occupation authorities. I take seriously the dilemma Adi Ophir has just raised about the suspension strategy as the logic of the occupation and the support that humanitarian organizations might be lending to it. My political analysis would be that various Israeli governments have employed what I would call "a strategy of exhaustion" – harassing people, making life impossible, pushing people to leave, etc. If we put it this way, the other term of the debate then becomes: do relief and humanitarian NGOs help the Palestinian people – even if to a very small extent – to resist this strategy of exhaustion? Do they help them get stronger by creating jobs, by offering some opportunities, by just establishing decent, human, relationships with foreigners and breaking the separation between Palestine and the rest of the world? I think that the analysis of our possible support to the mechanisms of suspension should also be handled in terms of how we may hinder those Israeli projects – maybe not through our direct action, but through indirect effects of what the NGOs and the relief community at large is doing here in Palestine.