
Review by Vincent Druliolle*

In the post-Cold War period, it has been increasingly difficult for political leaders and their populations to ignore human rights violations and humanitarian crises, wherever they may take place. However, only some of them trigger emergency responses and lay the foundations to prevent their repetition. Explaining this state of affairs has long been a concern for social scientists, lawyers, and other commentators. Power politics and the limits of international law and global governance are often put forward, but many instances seem to question such general explanations, so that more research and an interest in additional explanatory factors are necessary.

This is Wilson and Brown’s starting point in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*. As the title indicates, this inter-disciplinary volume is interested in the emotional appeal of narratives and images of suffering and how this may be crucial in accounting for the occurrence of humanitarian response. The literature has addressed several aspects of the mobilisation of empathy as it is introduced in the book. They are scattered across various fields (media studies, philosophy, human rights, sociology, political theory, literature, and so on) and an overview of this dense scholarship would have been extremely useful, not least to situate the volume’s contribution. Unfortunately, the chapters only cite the “canonical” texts about the issues they address, and even Wilson and Brown’s emphasis upon the limits of the existing literature about humanitarian intervention is backed with only a handful of references. Although such an exhaustive review of the relevant literature about the mobilisation of empathy and intervention cannot be provided here, the volume’s contribution is critically assessed with reference to the issues which it has analysed.

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One problem with the book has to do with the lack of clarification of the emotional and moral appeal of narratives of suffering which may be associated with humanitarianism. Defining and explaining this appeal should underlie the analysis of the variety of such narratives, or the chapters should contribute to this task. However, the book fails to do so. Moreover, the centrality of narrative inevitably raises the issue of representation, or the implications of the narrative forms and images through which suffering and victims are represented. Intertwined with this issue is that of the extent to which efforts to mobilise empathy through narratives of suffering may unwittingly undermine the very objectives they aim to achieve. It is argued that while several chapters are stimulating contributions, their insights should be put into a wider perspective about the implications of the widespread use of narratives of suffering.

1. Humanitarianism, empathy, and narratives

Humanitarianism is a broader agenda than the long-term defence and promotion of human rights, but the two do overlap in objectives. Wilson and Brown stress this somewhat blurred distinction which nevertheless justifies the focus of the book: unlike human rights, humanitarianism is not a set of rights and entitlements enshrined in law, and for this reason it tends to draw upon a much more moral register. The book is therefore interested in how various forms of narratives can trigger emotional responses which may create an ‘ethos embedded in civil society’, ‘generate humanitarian constituencies for particular causes’ and, ultimately, transform into humanitarian action. Wilson and Brown refer to empathy defined as ‘the projection of one’s own mental state into that of another’, so that ‘whereas in a state of sympathy one says “I recognize your pain”, in empathy one says “I feel your pain”’.

This idea of an emotional identification with the suffering of others as a trigger for action was famously articulated by Rorty in a much-discussed essay to which several chapters of Humanitarianism and Suffering refer. For Rorty, the quest for a rational and ultimate foundation (universal principle, human nature, etc.) for human rights is not just doomed to failure, it is unnecessary. In order to promote a culture of human rights, we only need to be able to put ourselves in the shoes of those experiencing suffering. For Rorty, this requires the development of a ‘sentimental education’ based upon ‘long, sad, sentimental’ stories, and ‘the goal of this manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms “our kind of people” and “people like us”’.

While such sentiment may be called empathy, it is striking that the contributors rarely use the term, referring instead to sympathy, imaginative identification, pity, guilt, compassion, indignation, shame, and several other terms. Conceptual clarification would have been useful, as it is not clear how these differ from each other, let alone why they should be reduced to

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2 Wilson and Brown, see fn.1 above, pp.4-12.
3 Wilson and Brown, see fn.1 above, pp.2-3.
4 Wilson and Brown, see fn.1 above, p.2, note 2.
6 Rorty, see fn.5 above, p.122.
empathy—a term Rorty does not use in his above-mentioned text. Also highlighting the emotional potential of narratives of suffering, Morgan argues that shame, not empathy, can and should be harnessed for humanitarian purposes, which raises serious questions not only about the choice of empathy by the co-editors, but also about the volume’s contribution to this question. The book is thus about how narratives of suffering and identification with victims—independently of how they influence each other, and whether or not this should be called empathy—may trigger humanitarian action.

2. The variety of narratives of suffering

For centuries, witnesses to suffering have written novels, memoirs, testimonies, columns, and other forms of narrative in an attempt to institute and mobilise constituencies for a range of causes, from situations which may be termed political, such as the abolition of slavery, to those which may (anachronistically) be called humanitarian. Nussbaum powerfully argues that literature is a unique medium to stimulate our imaginative and empathetic identification with others, and thus to both promote justice and enrich public life. These examples seem to extend Anderson’s classic argument that novels and newspapers were crucial in constituting ‘imagined [national] communities’, as they suggest that these media have been instrumental in creating a sense of belonging to humanity beyond national borders, and Slaughter also refers to an ‘imagined community of readers and rights holders’. For Laqueur, the “human” subject of humanitarianism has, since the eighteenth century, broadened its reach in various narrative representations, even including the dead and their bodies, as it was seen as humane and a member of a common “humanity”. Without such a shift, he contends, the very idea of humanitarian intervention would hardly make sense.

However, a stress on the importance of novels is in itself not enough and, in his chapter, Slaughter discusses Dunant’s A Memory of Solferino in order to analyse the literary strategies used to foster imaginative identification with the suffering of others. Such analyses complement Dawes’s inquiry into the story-telling characteristics of what he calls the recent ‘global subgenre’ of the ‘novel of human rights’, both non-fictional and fictional.

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The attempt to foster identification with the suffering of others and transform it into humanitarian action is not limited to novelists and intellectuals. It is one of the tasks of several professional organisations. In one of the most stimulating chapters of *Humanitarianism and Suffering*, a chapter about the compilation of statistics which are central to the traditional human rights report, Dudai highlights the issues and dilemmas at stake. Instead of discussing the difficulties in collecting reliable data and the methodological and ideological assumptions embedded in such measurement tools and human rights audits, Dudai analyses the presentation and dissemination of this data. The issue was first raised by Stanley Cohen, for whom neglecting this issue seems paradoxical: ‘we believe that if people “only knew” what was happening they would do something, but we have learnt that just letting them know is not enough’. Dudai analyses these human rights reports as a literary genre. His crucial point is that bare facts and statistics about human rights are not objective and neutral in the sense of being free of, or even opposed to, narrative constructions. Rather, they constitute a specific kind of narrative. Dudai argues that human rights reports are dry, unfeeling, legalistic, and often abstruse, depoliticised, and de-contextualised narratives. Their authors want them to be (seen as) objective, credible, and authoritative, which requires drawing upon the language of science and the law, from which emotions and flights of lyricism are to be banished—which in itself highlights the fact that the law generates a particular kind of narrative (see below). Yet if such reports are important in designing sound policies, they are hardly successful in triggering an emotional reaction and moving the wider population to action.

As a consequence, Dudai stresses ‘the need to encourage introspective self-critique among those who produce human rights reports’, but he may also suggest that advice should be extended to us as readers about what we see as relevant and credible. After all, Dudai points out, the reports of truth commissions have explored alternative ways of narrating suffering in order to move their readers without losing credibility. In no way does the subjective dimension of first-person testimony affect the objectivity of the facts of human rights reports. This testimony makes powerful evidence because it constitutes first-hand accounts by those who have experienced terrible suffering, and both human rights campaigns and literary narratives increasingly include such testimonies.

The issue raised by Dudai is important because the reading of pages of bare facts does not alert us to the plight of distant strangers. Today most organisations and institutions publicise their reports, which are disseminated by the media, and are engaged in the reframing of these facts and their narration. The latter involves not only words but also images, and human rights

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15 R. Dudai, ‘“Can you describe this?” Human rights reports and what they tell us about the human rights movement’ in Wilson and Brown, pp.245-65.
17 Dudai, see fn.15 above, pp.248-50.
18 Dudai, see fn.15 above, p.260.
activists are aware that they create new opportunities to report suffering and foster our identification with victims. Film is a genre that Humanitarianism and Suffering does not discuss, but the question of the implications of representations of victims in narratives of suffering that the book addresses is equally relevant to it.

3. Giving a voice and visibility to victims to mobilise empathy? The ambiguous implications of narratives of suffering

Discussing the media coverage of the 2004 tsunami, Rony Brauman laments that ‘mass solidarity is not based on rational reasoning alone’. He argues that the media misrepresent the tasks of humanitarian relief, while images turn sensationalism into an expression of compassion and encourage hubris. Those who challenge these representations often end up being portrayed as bystanders. Implicitly, therefore, Brauman opposes the respective work of the media and of experts, the former being a necessary evil to be corrected by the latter. A more radical and no less frequent criticism is that the desire to generate some form of emotional identification through narratives of suffering opens the door to political instrumentalisation and rhetorical manipulation.

In one way or another, the book’s chapters critically assess the dichotomy of rationality vs. emotions and the ways in which it is intertwined with the set of oppositions rights-legal-rational-expert-prudence/empathy-emotions-subjective-distortion-manipulation—and few of them endorse Brauman’s rather sharp view. The most interesting aspect of Humanitarianism and Suffering is that it takes up the challenge of discussing the mobilisation of emotions without letting hasty moral judgements, either enthusiastic or reproachful, replace analysis. Instead, the chapters emphasise both the potential and the limits and dangers pertaining to the use of narratives of suffering. Suski draws our attention to humanitarian campaigns’ heavy reliance upon pictorial representations of children. Childhood is taken to be a universal symbol of innocence, vulnerability, and hope about the future, while standing outside politics and being confined to the private realm of the family. Yet Suski claims that this image projects onto the deprived South a Western and artificially homogeneous representation of children as beings without agency, which reproduces the global and paternalistic, if not neo-colonial, pattern of power relations. For Suski, the suffering of children is turned into a “spectacle”, viewing and witnessing into a “pornography of pain”, a “scene of desire and revulsion” for the privileged Western subject and agent. She concludes that ‘humanitarianism cannot be meaningfully understood without addressing its relationship to childhood as a space where the tensions between dependency and empowerment are managed and mismanaged’. Like Suski, Keshgegian shows how mobilising empathy through narratives of suffering may generate

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23 Suski, see fn.22 above, pp.203-4.
24 Suski, see fn.22 above, pp.206-7.
25 Suski, see fn.22 above, p.209.
26 Suski, see fn.22 above, p.218.
representations which may unwittingly undermine the very objectives of humanitarian action. More precisely, she warns against framing suffering and the necessity of action in terms of good vs. evil, a ‘moral dualism’ which may strengthen existing divisions and prevent the shift from relief operation to political change.

Narratives of suffering thus raise the question of the representation of victims, their voices, and their agency. Even though their testimonies are first-hand evidence of their suffering, they are always reported and inserted into accounts by a narrator, through specific narrative forms and languages, and against the background of powerful social representations. Thus Dudai argues that in human rights reports their meaning is ‘provided by the legal interpretation of the authors’, and first-person accounts are ‘there to support the organization’s factual and legal claims, not the other way around’.  

Humanitarianism and Suffering stresses how human rights and legal language impose constraints upon, and reshape, victims’ narratives, an issue that the literature has highlighted. Illustrating these arguments, Waldorf explains in his discussion of gacaca courts in post-conflict Rwanda that the institutional mechanisms that seek to give victims a voice, the language and procedures that allow some of them to do so, as well as local cultures, may end up legitimising an official narrative and past ethnic divisions instead of laying the foundations for new national communities, an analysis which echoes Keshgegian’s chapter.

Finally, as she shifts from narratives to ‘performances of victimhood’, Sandvik shows that formal and informal norms shape the ‘performance’ of applicants for resettlement, who feel they have to conform to the dominant image of the refugee and its regime of truth and evidence in order to be granted this status. She discusses some studies of the narratives and performances of women who seek to be recognised as ‘Women-at-Risk’ refugees that show that some women claim to have been raped during a civil conflict while they are in fact the victims of other forms of violence, in order to make a legitimate claim to genuine suffering and receive humanitarian aid. Yet ‘the conclusion is not that “refugees lie”, but that it is necessary to learn more about how the law choreographs suffering and empathy’. The allocation of financial reparations too involves such ‘performances of victimhood’ and may construct arbitrary hierarchies of victimhood.

28 Dudai, see fn.15 above, p.255.
31 Keshgegian, see fn.27 above.
33 Sandvik, see fn.32 above, pp.234-7.
34 Sandvik, see fn.32 above, p.241.
4. Conclusion

Several chapters in *Humanitarianism and Suffering* are stimulating and provocative contributions to the existing literature and deserve to be widely read and discussed. Nevertheless, the book should relate the case studies to more general reflections and questions about why, and the extent to which, certain narratives of suffering are successful in moving their addressees to act. Beyond this question and such phenomena as information overload, desensitisation, and compassion fatigue, what are the other general effects and implications of reading about and looking at the suffering of others?\(^3^6\) This shortcoming is epitomised by the lack of a concluding chapter to the volume and may somewhat limit the individual chapters’ contribution, both analytical and practical.

Despite a lack of conceptual clarification about the emotions that foster identification with the suffering of others, *Humanitarianism and Suffering* is a stimulating contribution to the analysis of how a range of narratives may move us into action, and also of the ambiguities surrounding their use and their representation of those to whom they seek to give a voice. The chapters are a call to the human rights community, and to all of us as the addressees of narratives of suffering, to critically reflect upon the different sources and implications of such a mobilisation of empathy. Practitioners would do well to draw inspiration from the insights they offer, for the book reminds us that good intentions always have ‘dark sides’.\(^3^7\)

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