Progressive politics in transnational space

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'Qui veut faire l'ange, fait la bête.' David Rieff, perhaps the best-known American writer on humanitarianism and human rights, chose Pascal's aphorism as the epigraph to his latest collection of essays. This cynical take on good intentions can arguably stand for the prevailing view of action in the name of humanity, or at least the unofficial view.[1] There is much to be said for it. How can one look closely at Kosovo today without sharing Rieff's disappointment at what those magnificent abstractions have wrought? If one had to choose between cynicism and the hypocritical idealism of the so-called international community, there would seem to be no contest. Still, whether cynicism should be allowed to represent our highest wisdom on this subject (as it does not, I think, for Rieff himself) is another question. It is this other question that is posed by two recent books, one of them deeply cynical and the other making an exemplary effort not to be.*

The bêtise in which the official discourse of the angels so often results was nicely expressed by US President Bill Clinton, speaking at the inauguration of the Holocaust Museum in 1994. Clinton spoke two emphatic words: 'Never again.' Pronounced in the year of the Rwandan genocide, this tribute to the memory of the Holocaust was 'literally meaningless', as Rieff observed shortly afterwards.

> For if there was to be no intervention to stop a genocide that was taking place, then the words 'Never again' meant nothing more than: Never again would the Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s. Clinton might as well have said, 'Never again the potato famine', or 'Never again the slaughter of the Albigensians.'[2]

A reader today would not want to forget the slaughter of the Iraqis, which continues unabated as I write. The war in Iraq offers up an entirely different motive for popular cynicism, of course: not the hesitation of the US government to act on its supposed ideals, but on the contrary its aggressive military actions, actions that have seriously tarnished the ideals of democracy and human rights invoked to legitimate them. One can only hope that there will be greater and greater readiness to refuse this abusive logic. But perhaps cynicism is not the most precise or desirable term for such a refusal. For cynicism refuses more. Its assumption is that ideals are simply irrelevant – irrelevant to what nations do and to what they don't do, and for that matter (I will come to this) to what nongovernmental organizations do as well. It assumes, no doubt correctly, that self-interest held Clinton back from acting in Rwanda (so soon after the disastrous intervention in Somalia, American voters would not have put up with entanglement in another distant and messy corner of Africa). It assumes, correctly again, that much the same self-interest sent the US army into the oilfields of Iraq. And it assumes, this time more questionably, that it would be a mistake ever to expect anything other than self-interest, even from nongovernmental actors.[3]

Self-interest rules the world, of this the cynic is sure, and it will continue to do so eternally and immutably. It is against this background that Rieff's eloquent sarcasm takes on a certain corrective force. If I read him correctly, his implied analogy between events that are inaccessible to action because they happened in the distant past (the slaughter of the Albigensians) and events that are inaccessible to action because the would-be actor is restrained by national self-interest (the slaughter of the Rwandans) shocks us into wondering whether after all we really believe that political self-interest must or can be quite as absolute and unquestionable as the linearity of time.[4] Surely the former offers at least a bit more freedom of manoeuvre than the latter?

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* Michel Feher, ed., with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee, *Nongovernmental Politics*, Zone Books, New York, 2007, 672 pp., £25.95 pb., 978 1 890951 74 0; Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, 288 pp., £30.00 hb., 978 0 231 13124 7.

To deny this degree of freedom, facing the future as if it were already as determined as the past, would be to express an excess of cynicism even about ourselves. For we are the constituencies whose capacity to sustain care about distant strangers we would be voting no confidence in. Worse, in that case we would not even be thinking hard enough about what in fact constitutes our self-interest. 'Can anything be stupider', Pascal asked on another occasion, 'than that a man has the right to kill me because he lives on the other side of a river and his ruler has a quarrel with mine, though I have not quarrelled with him?' He who mocks high-flown invocations of humanity by pointing out their embarrassing disconnection from reality on the ground does not do anything thereby to change the reality on the ground. Today, the cynic is resigned to living and perhaps dying within the reality of antagonistic nation-states, a reality which remains as stupid and as dangerous as it was when Pascal described it. Our citizenly self-interest, properly understood, demands that something be done. Which means that attention must be paid to cynicism too. Cynicism is a sort of defence mechanism, allowing us to maintain our daily routines without interruption. But in the long run, it does not defend us well enough.

Cynicism about NGOs

It is not governments alone that popular cynicism understands to be acting in a self-interested manner under cover of humanitarian ideals. In the popular and journalistic mind, an accusation of covert self-interest falls equally on nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs. For Michael Maren, 'aid and charity' form an 'industry', a 'religion', 'a self-serving system that sacrifices its own practitioners and intended beneficiaries in order that it may survive and grow'.[5] Writing about the 'humanitarian international' of experts and aid workers and its involvement in African famine, Alex de Waal accuses the struggle against famine of having become 'professionalized and institutionalized', a self-interested and self-perpetuating 'industry' (the same word again) that has taken famine as its 'property'.[6] De Waal, who contributes an article to the Feher collection, speaks there of how humanitarian agencies, seemingly unbound at the end of the Cold War, found themselves shackled anew, tied both to 'the hardware of the world's most powerful states', which they try to mobilize in pursuit of their philanthropic goals, and to 'their own institutional self-interest'. Examples might easily be multiplied.

Institutional self-interest is also the prime explanatory factor in Nicolas Guilhot's *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order*. The title of Guilhot's first chapter, 'From Cold Warriors to Human Rights Activists', succinctly encapsulates the story he tells. He traces the current vogue for human rights back to an origin in Cold War anti-totalitarianism. And he declares that origin to be absolutely determining. Today's champions of human rights, Guilhot concludes, are 'double agents'. They pretend to be, or think they are, agents of progressive causes. In fact they are traitors to such causes and agents of the enemy, whether consciously or unconsciously.

> All these new forms of international activism and moral entrepreneurship are firmly located within the global networks of power. Far from fulfilling some counter-hegemonic role, as it is often argued or wishfully thought, they actually represent a specific mode of exercising global power. (5)

They do the ideological work of US imperialism, and for this they are rewarded, through their well-funded institutes and brilliant career trajectories.

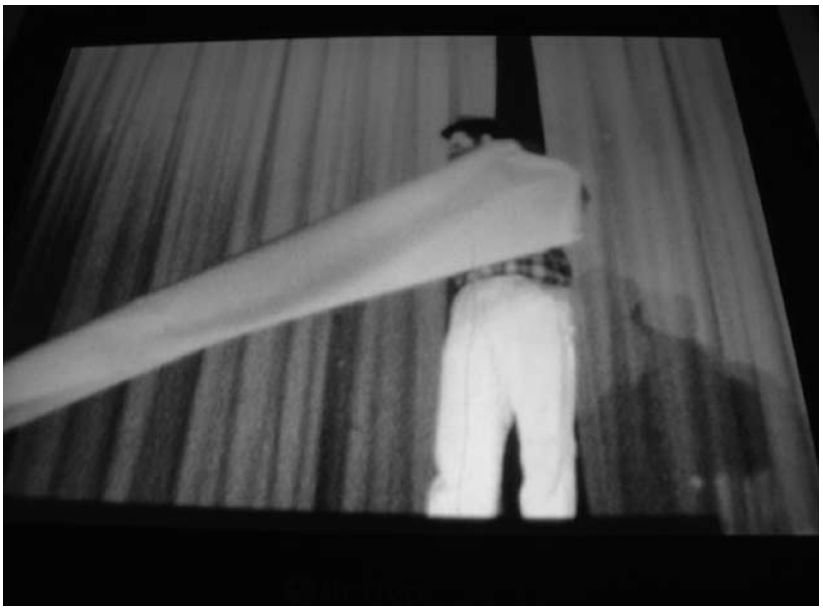
Writing under the sign of Pierre Bourdieu, Guilhot announces that he has discovered a 'field' and calls that field 'democracy and human rights'. The field, populated both by NGOs and by academics, came into existence, he suggests, because its ideologically inflected expertise was convenient to government policymakers. Its political meaning is expressed entirely by that convenience.

> The emergence of an institutionalized field of democracy and human rights in the 1980s is the outcome of the successful reformulation of the old anti-totalitarian, anti-Communist ideological project in a completely new political context, dominated by the victory of Ronald Reagan. (52)

This field has served the self-interest of human rights NGOs, which get money from the government and from foundations in much the same way that Cold War journals and conferences once did. And it has served the interests of academics, who find that government-favoured ideas 'offered fast tracks to academic tenure and prestige' (110). Activists and academics alike have become professionalized. Professionalization is the term by which Guilhot posits the institutional self-interest linking intellectuals and activists, the Cold War and the post-Cold War period, the university and the NGOs, and turning them all into instruments of US power.

This is a pretty crude picture. My lack of sympathy has perhaps caused me to exaggerate its crudeness. But I don't think so. Guilhot points out, correctly enough, the foundations on which NGOs of the global North

are dependent for much of their funding. However, he does not spend equal time on other sources of nongovernmental funding, which are diverse and considerable. He does not ask whether taking money from any given source (whether the Ford Foundation or the French government) in fact determines the political coloration of the work done with that money, in any particular instance. The global network of NGOs, he proposes, has tugged politics away from where it belongs (local grassroots organizations) and made it a reflection of what he calls, a bit obscurely, 'global trends and practices'. He does not recognize the extent to which many NGOs *are* grassroots organizations, sustained from below. That is rarely all they are, even in the best cases. And the potential to undermine local organizations and local governments, even unintentionally, is always a pertinent worry. But the absolute worst case – the NGO as a front for imperialism – certainly



cannot be taken as representative either. Guilhot does not weigh the two sorts or sets of cases against each other. He does not compare the actual impact of NGOs with that of any other political organizations, grassroots or not. No evidence that might test or inflect his conclusions is acknowledged. When he talks about academic disciplines, he does not recognize such obvious counter-examples as US departments of Middle Eastern Studies. Crude models of his sort – academic discipline rises in prestige because it represents the ideology of US government – simply cannot deal with such departments, which have been notoriously and controversially critical of US policy in the Middle East, in particular of support for Zionism. Guilhot cannot account for the influence of Edward W. Said, whose name (not in the index) has been hysterically invoked by politicians trying (vainly, thus far) to control public funds that go into scholarship on the Middle East. If the politicians have to try so hard for it, is it not clear that such control is something they don't already possess? If university departments were what Guilhot says they are, Middle Eastern Studies should not exist at all in the USA, let alone enjoy such extraordinary prestige both at home and abroad.

Ditto for human rights organizations. We are asked to believe that when Human Rights Watch repeatedly condemns the human rights case by which the Bush administration justified its invasion of Iraq, or when the American Civil Liberties Union brings legal suits against the US government over Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, these NGOs are actually helping Bush exercise global power. True, one can never exclude some element of symbolic legitimation that such activities might be seen as offering to the system as a whole. But Guilhot does not even pause to note the tension between legitimation and genuine opposition or critique – to my mind, a very real tension. The progressive activities of these NGOs simply don't register.

Guilhot is right, of course, that American governments have tried to make the human rights programme into an instrument of their foreign policy. So have other governments. The US has tried to lop off economic and social rights (like so many others, Guilhot forgets cultural rights, which have been similarly disregarded) in favour of civil and political rights, thus seizing for the USA (and its European allies) a strategic public relations advantage. But has it succeeded? Ronald Reagan, who came into office opposed to the human rights vocabulary, was reluctantly converted to it. This conversion is arguably the historical centre of Guilhot's book, for it seems to make a case for the independent power of the human rights NGOs. It is this case that Guilhot wants to refute. But he does not establish what he would need to establish in order to do so, namely that 'benevolent liberal networks committed to the extension of human rights' were completely taken over by 'a cynical, realist, conservative, and aggressive administration' (178) and successfully turned against their prior purposes. He never asks whether Reagan made any concession to the power of the human rights vocabulary, whether that vocabulary later made him and his successors vulnerable, whether it has always and everywhere submitted to the purposes

of US governments. What about those highly publicized lawsuits over Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib?

Like Bourdieu's, Guilhot's vision of the world is foreshortened and radically presentist, a disconnected series of battles between self-interested actors who are not constrained or informed to any significant degree by the outcome of past struggles. Each contest, fought in the brightly lit arena of the present, offers a completely fresh start. Thus there are no long-term cumulative effects of the commitment to human rights talk. Nor are there any dialectical twists and turns in which victory turns into partial defeat or defeat into partial victory. Neglecting to look for unintended consequences, Guilhot does not even speculate that the same historical swerve might have other meanings – for example, that policy knowledge might have been constrained to cloak itself in an emancipatory language, a language that comes back later to annoy and constrain the policymakers. 'The human rights doctrine developed by neoconservatives and Cold War social democrats in the early 1980s', he writes, 'transformed human rights almost beyond recognition. What was once an international legal standard had now become an instrument for reshaping other nations to America's specifications or at least in conformity with her interests' (82). There is no doubt that this is what the neoconservatives wanted to do. But (I repeat myself) did they accomplish their goal? Did they win agreement from all players? To what extent is any such agreement in force today? Guilhot does not pose these questions, let alone answer them. The reader will thus emerge from his book unenlightened about the actual politics of human rights today.

The historical irony that grabs Guilhot's attention (and that makes his book worth reading) is the link he uncovers between human rights neoliberalism today and genuine progressivism in the past – specifically (1) the Trotskyist Left and (2) Latin American anti-imperialism. What he calls the 'professionalization of activism' entails a migration of '*socially progressive repertoires of collective action*, inherited from anti-imperialist campaigns, struggles for rights, emancipatory causes, *from social movements often opposing state institutions to the most dominant state institutions themselves*' (3–4). At the centre of the anti-Stalinist side of the story is Max Shachtman (1904–1972). Shachtman did indeed have a fascinating political career. A Trotskyist of heroic stature in the 1930s and 1940s, then an apostate to his fellow apostates, he allowed his anti-Stalinism to lead him gradually into the embrace of American anti-Communism, and he ended his life defending the US war in Vietnam. Guilhot follows the trajectories of his disciples, several of them moderately influential, as they too became figures of the American Right. It's as valuable a history as, say, that of the students of Leo Strauss, like Paul Wolfowitz, who provided the ideological push for the Iraq War. But Guilhot does not ask the crucial questions that have been repeatedly asked about the Straussians: 'Does this historical continuity have anything significant to say about the nature of the initial ideas, in this case Trotskyism (stage 1)?' 'Does it say anything significant about the nature of human rights discourse (stage 3)?' 'Are these stages meaningfully linked by the intermediary stage of Cold War anti-totalitarianism?' Guilhot wants us to understand that they are. But if the linkage tells us nothing substantive about Trotskyism, neither does it necessarily tell us anything about the politics of human rights discourse.

The same holds for left-wing critics of the modernization paradigm in Latin America. Guilhot writes:

> Their democratic activism, formed within a radical or leftist matrix, ended up generating policy-oriented science in line with the canons of academe and the needs of the political elite. Their political science became a kind of capital valorized within the field of state expertise and reformist politics. (132)

Guilhot does not even try to pretend that their turn to democracy and human rights discredits their initial critique of modernization theory. But if not, then what does it show? Nothing at all that I can see,

except perhaps that history exists and that we should continue to pay attention to it. Experience of the new Latin American authoritarianism in the 1960s and 1970s, which killed or imprisoned so many of their comrades, certainly gave the anti-imperialist critics a greater respect for formal democracy. They learned from historical experience, as Adorno and Benjamin did from the rise of fascism. Guilhot seems to feel that they should *not* have learned from history – that to have done so is to have abandoned the true political faith. He does not tell us what anti-imperialism ought to be doing now that it is not already doing. His political analysis stops at the level of name-calling: they are neocons. 'By the end of the decade, this academic knowledge would become a quasi-official doctrine supporting the new international crusade for democracy launched by the neoconservatives in Washington' (123).

The NGOs are today's exemplars of civic virtue, Guilhot writes, and civic virtue 'presupposes economic and social capital'. In this time-honoured fashion, especially beloved of the anti-intellectuals of the Right, progressives can be rejected on the cheap, without taking the trouble to describe what they actually believe or do, merely by associating them with 'social elites'. 'NGOs are the *honoratiores*, the *optimati*, that is, the aristocratic class of the present times. In the same fashion, the Neiers (Human Rights Watch), the Soroses (Open Society Network), the Eigens (Transparency International) are leading members of the republican aristocracy within the Empire' (6). There is considerable incoherence here. Guilhot invokes Weber, but Weber was not saying that the notables who took over tasks of administration had an economic interest in so doing. (What the notables had was leisure and authority.) What Guilhot wants to charge the professionalized NGOs with, however, is economic self-interest. Like doctors depending on the existence of disease, he suggests, they have a self-interest in perpetuating the crises and emergencies they are called in to deal with, and they don't really want to see these problems solved. The analogy is wildly misleading. We need not suspect doctors of seeking to prolong or multiply our sufferings so as to get more money out of us, for we can assume that they can assume that there will always be enough ill-health to guarantee them a decent living. So too for NGOs.

Unpersuasive as it may be, Guilhot's sociologizing points towards a more serious and troubling issue. The long-term social catastrophes faced by NGOs often go too deep to be dealt with by the NGOs alone or by the discourse of disinterested humanitarianism that continues to inspire much of the support for them. Such situations require collective subjects on a larger scale, and they require the sorts of thinking, will and action that we are accustomed to call, by contrast, political, meaning (among other things) self-interested. Do the activities of the NGOs add up to something that could be thought of as genuinely political? As it happens, the dilemma of interest and disinterestedness is one of the main themes of the Feher collection.

Nongovernmental politics?

Guilhot accuses the NGOs of little that we do not see them worry over themselves in *Nongovernmental Politics*. On such topics, there is every reason to expect a tone of self-righteousness. What one gets instead is self-questioning. Published in the United States, though much of it is translated from French – in this sense, it is an example of the strange transnational hybrid François Cusset calls 'French theory' – this long collection of essays, profiles and interviews (almost 700 pages) is brimming with self-criticism. Voice after voice expresses anxiety about sources of funding, mistakes of the past, the potentially depoliticizing effects of human rights talk, the risks of collaboration with unsavoury governments, and so on. If the group portrait of the NGO world that emerges never passes over into mere self-examination, it is only because everyone involved assumes that action of some sort must be taken, whatever the risks and uncertainties, and sooner rather than later. At the same time, one can hear the anxiety. Will the actions we propose merely offer moral satisfaction without in fact accomplishing anything of significance? In short, is nongovernmental politics really a politics at all?

This question, which leads to many more, is at the heart of the volume's most searching self-criticisms. Traditionally, action in the name of humanitarianism and human rights claimed its unique authority on the basis of its neutrality. That claim was decisively shaken in Biafra in the 1960s, where the programmatic political blindness of the humanitarian organizations is widely believed to have led to tens of thousands of additional deaths. Médecins Sans Frontières, which was born from that trauma, thus became the exemplar of a new sort of NGO that cannot afford to be fully neutral, yet also cannot afford to be or claim to be fully political. It is on this inherently unstable point that Feher presses Rony Brauman in an interview. Once MSF gives up on the posture of the neutral witness and begins questioning 'the political meaning and consequences' of its actions (139), Feher declares, 'you

are no longer able to present yourselves as nonpolitical observers of a political situation.' Doesn't MSF become one political agent among others, pursuing its own 'political agenda' (141)? Brauman is eloquent on his and his organization's past failings – for example, a certain proximity to Cold War liberalism. But the only real answer to Feher's question is one neither he nor Feher can easily articulate: that new forms of action are coming into being, or must come into being, in which politics and humanitarian neutrality in their traditional senses enter into previously unimaginable syntheses.

Moments of neutrality recorded here, like the MSF's refusal to sign a statement condemning the US invasion of Iraq, will enrage some readers, who will no doubt draw the opposite conclusion: that such organizations are constitutively incapable of becoming political in any satisfactory sense. In certain situations, Brauman argues, MSF's choice must be to 'just leave the scene' (139). (He too would presumably figure on Guilhot's list of 'double agents', but one thing is clear: he is not cynically trying to arrange a maximum of work for his NGO.) One may feel the same political dissatisfaction about, say, the Council for Responsible Genetics, a US-based NGO that 'takes no general position on the technoscientific capacity to trace and intervene in the molecular structure of living beings' (268). Yet we would hardly be better off, politically speaking, without this organization, which works to bring to public attention how genetically engineered crops affect both agriculture in the global South and consumers in the global North. And here, paradigmatically, what the idea of neutrality seems to stand in for is the project of putting together an as-yet-non-existent political subject that would include both global South and global North, a discourse that would simultaneously address both the victims and the beneficiaries of global capital. That's asking a lot. Under this planetary pressure, no existing conception of politics seems quite adequate. It is no surprise, then, that various authors should take risks with other vocabularies, including that of humanitarianism.

Under the heading of self-criticism, one could also take the instructive example of an NGO called Witness, discussed by Meg McLaglen. Founded in a moment of 'optimism' (320) about supplying video cameras to front-line defenders of human rights, Witness gradually realized that these activists were not in fact succeeding in getting their message in the proper form to the proper audiences. So it shifted its strategy, emphasizing not philanthropy (handing out cameras) but the training of the activists and 'brokering relations between partners, audiences, and decision-makers' (321). Rather than bemoaning its professionalization, one might say, it decided to accept its privileged professional expertise and put it to work. Among the 'biggest successes' of this strategy, McLaglen lists its collaboration with Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI), which began with scandals in the treatment of psychiatric patients in Paraguay and ended in a huge shake-up of the country's mental health services.

It would take pages to list the movements and organizations profiled in this volume, explaining their activities, and detailing their internal debates. Many of these projects are both socially and technologically innovative, like Laura Kurgan's use of satellite photography to provide evidence of illegal logging in Cameroon. Or the so-called 'planespotters' who monitored obscure but publicly available data of the Federal Aeronautics Agency in order to figure out which civilian airlines were participating in the CIA's programme of 'extraordinary rendition' (337). Or the project of Israeli architect Eyal Weizman in collaboration with the human rights group B'Tselem to show that the apparently random pattern of new settlements in the Occupied Territories corresponds to a deliberate long-term plan for the Israeli control of Palestine. Nearly all of these projects show the signs of strenuous self-consciousness about their own limitations as well as the risks and potential complicities of their chosen tactics.

The contrast between the Guilhot and the Feher books also emerges from their respective treatments of George Soros and the Open Society Institute. For Guilhot (who is also the author of *Financiers, philanthropes: Sociologie de Wall Street*), the financier-philanthropist Soros simply represents American capitalism. In Feher's book, the Open Society Institute comes up twice by my count. The first time, in an essay by co-editor Yates McKee, it is presented as an affiliate of the Justice Mapping Centre, an NGO that has worked to demonstrate the deep injustice of the US criminal justice system by correlating state prison expenditures with the race and class composition of the neighbourhoods from which the prisoners come (349). In other words, its work addresses another of those paradigmatic groups of marginal victims – prisoners, the mentally ill, homosexuals – in whom the traditional Left was least interested, but who elicited the characteristic political efforts of Michel Foucault. The second time Soros's institute is mentioned, in a piece by Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, it is presented as a source of financing for Otpor, a network of civil society organizations that denounced election fraud and helped

make Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 (608–9). Many local commentators immediately assumed, as Guilhot would no doubt assume as well, that such groups 'served no purpose other than establishing US-friendly governments in Central and Eastern Europe' (609). A 'less cynical view', Potte-Bonneville adds, connects these mass demonstrations instead with the counter-globalization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and the massive worldwide demonstrations against the war in Iraq.

Potte-Bonneville does not take one side or the other. He does not doubt American interests in the region, which events in Georgia have recently confirmed. But his essay – in this sense characteristic of the book as a whole – categorically rejects the assumption that international civil society, in so far as it crosses national borders, necessarily expresses *nothing but* the will of American policy and/or global capital. Might it not be that George Soros is both a capitalist financier and a philanthropist and that neither role is a simple function of the other? Why do Soros's critiques of Israel and the Iraq War have to be univocal expressions of predatory capitalism?

According to Potte-Bonneville, Foucault's activist interventions presuppose a more benign view of civil society than Foucault himself seems to have adopted elsewhere. In this reading, the landscape where the NGOs live and work is not that social wasteland, emptied of all true politics, lamented equally by Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben. Theoretically speaking, the heart of the Feher volume is its dispute with Agamben's Heideggerian contention that the contemporary world order, always already enveloped in Western metaphysics, is completing the process of 'reducing all forms of life to "bare life"' (614). For Agamben, the humanitarian relief of refugees and the spread of human rights discourse belong to the same all-inclusive nightmare as the extermination camps of the Holocaust. Victims of incomprehensible disaster cannot be imagined, or imagine themselves, as political agents. From the perspective of the victims' political agency, efforts to help are indistinguishable from efforts to victimize. Thus *l'Europe des camps* can appear to fuse with the extermination camps. For the writers here, on the other hand, refugees remain political agents. They are still drawn to identification with the political systems they belonged to before they became refugees, and they are capable of very varied identifications with other marginal groups; they are political subjects of a sort even in their dealings with NGOs. To pretend they are 'below' the 'threshold' of the political, Amy West argues, is 'almost' to support their marginalization. She warns against the 'romanticization of marginality' (410–12).

The unromantic alternative, more often assumed than argued in this volume, involves taking a more neutral view of governmentality, whether practised by NGOs in civil society or by the state. Foucault is a kind of presiding spirit here even though (or perhaps because) he is obviously not a fan of the state as defender of the common good. Nor is he a champion of civil society as a zone of popular self-organization that precedes the state and is naturally predisposed to contest it. Yet Foucault's embrace of 'the duty and right to address governing agencies, to hold them accountable for the external costs or collateral damages of their calculations or decisions', will often mean holding back from 'calling into question the bases of the latter's claims to authority altogether' (328) – will mean, in effect, strategically recognizing those authority claims in order to make alternative use of them. The contrast to the anarchic passivity of Agamben's messianism is not absolute, but it is striking.

What it entails in practice is shown by co-editor Gaëlle Krikorian's account of the struggle for democratic access to generic antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS. This struggle succeeded, at least partially and provisionally, because it was able to enlist the good

offices of Jacques Chirac and Bernard Kouchner. It required the willingness and the resources of certain Third World governments, which defied the regime of intellectual property and produced inexpensive generic drugs. It even required the unintended assistance of George W. Bush. After the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the anthrax scare that followed, the Bush administration discovered that Bayer, which held the patent on the antibiotic used to treat anthrax, was demanding a high price. The government threatened to suspend its patent and produce its own. 'This announcement was heard around the world. The United States was preparing to do for anthrax what it was trying to prevent developing countries from doing for AIDS' (256). This was a propaganda godsend for the NGOs, and they knew how to use it. Within a year there was 'an international consensus in favour of access to medication' (256). Krikorian goes on to detail the problems that have predictably followed – the USA has not wanted to pay what it promised, for example. But she also insists that in this case 'humanitarian reason' did indeed express itself through state policy. The success happened because activists 'turned to their governments to call attention to their moral duties' (251). Agamben, who welcomes the apocalyptic disintegration of the nation-state, can hardly be imagined pronouncing these words. But if I were an African with AIDS, I would put more hope in Krikorian and her friends than in Agamben's anti-statist messiah.

The person with AIDS is of course a classic propaganda exhibit for humanitarianism. The exhibit tells us that this is an emergency. There is literally no time for the long-term thinking or the calculations of interest associated with politics. Something must be done, and done right now. It is a tribute to *Nongovernmental Politics* that, while keeping their focus on the urgency of action, its contributors largely refuse to speak in this familiar and somewhat irritating tone. They strike other tones, make other claims. And they insist over and over on how claims to disinterestedness are shot through with interests and inextricably political. The point is both to enrich and to displace what we understand by neutrality.

In the past, NGOs had often assumed the neutrality of fact. Naming entailed shaming. If you exposed the outrageous facts, it was thought, the proper action would automatically result. When actual video footage of police officers viciously beating African American Rodney King proved inadequate to secure a guilty verdict, however, it became clear that testimony is not enough; showing the body in pain is not enough. Why not? Perhaps it is the absence of the public, or the absence of the right kind of public. In the transnational domain that is assumed by many of these organizations and movements, the absence would be that of the proper kind of 'international community' – the subject of a previous book by Feher. But one could say with equal justice that the problem is cynicism. Peter Sloterdijk has famously described cynicism as 'enlightened false consciousness'. Cynical consciousness can be considered enlightened in that it sees the self-interested motives beneath the veneer of altruism. That is what makes it immune to the usual humanitarian appeals. It can nonetheless be considered *false* consciousness because, however sophisticated, it is a form of disavowal. The large truth it pushes away is that things can be done, for ourselves as well as for others, and that we need not be saints, need not commit our days to the good of humanity, in order to do one or two of those things. We cannot stop asking whether such apparently piecemeal actions, which are often actions at a distance, sponsored by a bewildering variety of organizations and fuelled by suspiciously media-generated emotion, can be made to cohere into a genuine politics – and if so how, and how we can be sure it's the right politics. But neither can we be deterred by these legitimate questions from recognizing that this is now the landscape on which a transnational politics will have to be defined.

Notes

1. David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2005. Rieff's views have changed considerably in the past decade. He began as something of a champion of intervention in the name of human rights, and his recent disillusion is arguably proportional to his earlier hopes.
2. David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995, p. 27.
3. On the US refusal to use the word 'genocide' about Rwanda or allow the UN to act, see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Basic Books, New York, 2002.
4. I note that taking credit for good intentions in a situation – vis-à-vis the slaughters of the past, for example – where it is literally out of the question that one will act on those intentions is a model of angelic discourse that is of some relevance to academic humanists, whose stock-in-trade is the past.
5. Michael Maren, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*, Free Press, New York, 1997, p. 11.
6. Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, African Rights and the International African Institute in association with James Currey, Oxford and Indiana University Press, London, 1997, pp. 5, xv.