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978-1-107-06470-6 - Humanitarian Photography: A History

Edited by Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno

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## Introduction

### *The Morality of Sight: Humanitarian Photography in History*

Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno

For well over a century, humanitarians and their organizations have used photographic imagery and the latest media technologies to raise public awareness and funds to alleviate human suffering. This volume examines the historical genealogies, evolution, and epistemologies of what today we call “humanitarian photography”: the mobilization of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across state boundaries. The term itself is of recent origin, in use only since the 1990s. Yet over the last two decades, prizes and fellowships – such as the Care International Award for Humanitarian Photojournalism, the Luis Valtueña International Humanitarian Photography Award, UNICEF’s Photo of the Year Award, and the Photocrati Fellowships – have been endowed in its name.<sup>1</sup>

What accounts for the historical shift from the fitful and debated use of photography for humanitarian purposes in the late nineteenth century to our current situation in which photographers market themselves as “humanitarian photographers”? This book is the first to investigate how humanitarian photography emerged and has functioned historically in diverse political, institutional, and social contexts. It brings together more than a dozen scholars working on the history of humanitarianism, international organizations or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and visual culture in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Based on original archival research and informed by current historical and theoretical debates, their chapters explore the historical mobilization of images and emotions in the globalization of humanitarian agendas from the late nineteenth century through the present.

This volume sits at the intersection of two distinct scholarly trends, one of which is focused on visual culture and media studies, the other

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on humanitarianism and human rights. There is now a well-developed scholarship concerned with the aesthetic and institutional development of photography and photojournalism, global and new media, and the circulation of images of violence and suffering, war and genocide; however, most of it is not written by historians or motivated by historical questions.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, shortly before her death, American writer and public intellectual Susan Sontag published her famous meditation on our “camera-mediated knowledge of war,” in which she declared “being a spectator to distant calamities” a “quintessential modern experience.” Although widely cited, her work was not the first word, nor the last, on how photos depicting “the pain of others” address viewers, incite voyeurism, touch emotion, convey knowledge, fix memories, or position privileged spectators in relation to human misery. Media scholars too have explored and debated photography’s power as a medium as well as the ways that photography is implicated in structures of power, particularly the modern visual economy in which “we,” in the industrial West, watch as “others,” elsewhere, suffer.<sup>3</sup>

Historians, on the other hand, have begun to write the social, institutional, and legal histories of humanitarianism and human rights. They have focused, for example, on missionary work; the relationship between the imperialism and the humanitarian impulse; the growth of international law, international organizations, and NGOs; instances of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and genocide; natural disasters; the development of wartime refugee and relief work; and the values driving foreign policy and military intervention.<sup>4</sup> In addition, cultural and intellectual historians of North America, Britain, and France have investigated the emergence of humanitarian sensibilities since the late eighteenth century, which they have attributed to the spread of capitalist markets, empires, and technologies; shifting notions of pain (from unavoidable and God-given to “unacceptable and eradicable”); and the rise of sentimental literature, which engaged readers’ emotions by acquainting them with the dramatic interior and social lives of sentient others.<sup>5</sup> In general, scholars agree that by 1850, “something changed.”<sup>6</sup> There was a greater sense of interconnectivity and felt responsibility for distant human suffering among cosmopolitan publics in Western capitalist nations and empires. Through the international Red Cross movement, the humanitarian impulse spread to Asian countries as well, mixing with longer standing native traditions of charity and philanthropy.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Laqueur has suggested that humanitarian narratives “demanded new ways of seeing”: “exact, slow, active, engaged seeing” in order to keep distant others

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“within ethical range.”<sup>8</sup> Yet to date, historians have done very little to examine the visual histories of humanitarianism and, in particular, the question of what role photography has played in shaping and disseminating humanitarian agendas and values.<sup>9</sup> This is likely due to the relative youth of the field: the scholarly study of humanitarianism and internationalism is recent, and historians are still engaged in excavating their institutional, political, and social histories from the archives. Many of the chapters in our volume contribute to this project of archival excavation while refocusing attention on the use and significance of visual media and strategies.

Although the mobilization of photographic images has become so crucial in raising both awareness and funds for humanitarian and human rights agendas, historians have not yet studied it in a systematic way. As a result, scholars have too liberally claimed “first-time” status for their object or period of study: that this was the “first time” a certain photographic technology was used to a particular effect, that this was the first time certain visual narrative conventions were mobilized or that celebrities fronted humanitarian appeals.<sup>10</sup> This volume, in effect, tests such assertions and fills a gap in our historical understanding: first, by establishing humanitarian photography as a historical problematic, and second, by indicating key moments in humanitarianism’s long visual history.

A critical word is in order regarding the geographical scope of our volume. The scholarship on photography and humanitarianism has had a strongly Eurocentric and North American orientation. Photography and humanitarianism have been treated as Western inventions and, more problematically, as peculiarly Western practices. While our volume is necessarily informed by this literature, it also aspires to unsettle these assumptions, particularly concerning humanitarian and photographic practice, and to present a somewhat more diverse perspective.<sup>11</sup> Our volume’s overall contribution in this area is admittedly modest; it nonetheless reflects the current state of the research.<sup>12</sup> As a result, while the chapters offer geographical breadth, most of the humanitarian organizations, image-makers, and image-purveyors discussed come from Europe and North America. To date, we have little empirical knowledge of “how visibility and humanitarianism might intersect” in the great cultural and political expanses outside of the West.<sup>13</sup>

Historically, humanitarianism emerged and evolved in tandem with photographic technologies.<sup>14</sup> By the second half of the nineteenth century, photography was increasingly used to generate empirical knowledge of

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previously unseen worlds: from the spiritual to the material, from the microscopic to the cosmic, from the sociological to the anthropological.<sup>15</sup> Missionaries, reformers, and journalists began to employ photos in illustrated books and lantern-slide lectures to focus public attention on select examples of human misery in the world – from the local slum to the distant famine – transforming specific episodes of privation and suffering into humanitarian crises and campaigns. Humanitarian imagery gave form and meaning to human suffering, rendering it comprehensible, urgent, and actionable for European and American audiences.<sup>16</sup> Such photographic “evidence” was necessarily interpretative.<sup>17</sup> It commanded viewers’ attention via specific narratives and moral framings. It articulated a duty and distinct worldview: *Here is a problem that requires redress: here are those who suffer, this is how and why they suffer, this is why we are responsible and what we need to do about it.* Photo-centered appeals forged communities of emotion and action, fleeting or otherwise, of like-minded viewers around specific “causes.”<sup>18</sup>

Photographic imagery, narratives, and technologies helped to craft and disseminate humanitarian values via compelling content – both specific and symbolic. The chapters in this volume explore the special relationship between photography and humanitarianism. Nonetheless, we recognize that photography is part of a larger visual and cultural landscape. For more than a century and a half, photographs have co-habited with other existing and emerging visual media: drawings, etchings, cartoons, posters, prints, films, and later television, videos, the Internet, and social media. While photography assumed an important place in humanitarian campaigns, photography did not completely eclipse its visual forerunners. Nor has photography been displaced by its technological successors. The visual economy has remained diverse.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, visual media of various types have accompanied and supplemented each other in humanitarian appeals. Early on, this was due to limitations of photo-mechanical technologies. Some early photographic techniques, like the daguerreotype, did not enable reproduction. For those that did, development processes made it difficult to create photographs in tropical and other challenging natural environments. Even with the invention of dry-plate photography in the 1870s, exposing, developing, and storing glass negatives remained cumbersome. Photography became simple and widely popularized only in 1888 with the introduction and mass marketing of the Kodak camera: a point-and-shoot convenience that came loaded with film and was returned to the manufacturer for film development and reloading.<sup>19</sup>

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Printing technologies too played a role. The half-tone process that allowed for the direct reproduction of photographs in print media was invented in the 1880s but became economical only in the 1890s. Prior to that, engravings of photographs were reproduced in print.<sup>20</sup> In addition, aesthetic and visual conventions, pedagogical choices, and other cultural factors came into play. Crucially, the juxtapositions of photographs with other visual media, as well as written text and captions, have shaped meanings of individual images and of humanitarian appeals. In the process, such strategies of representation and communication gave rise to a recognizable, if not unitary, “humanitarian imaginary” that not only reflects, but has also influenced, the historical evolution of humanitarianism.<sup>21</sup>

Even in the nineteenth century, contemporaries were hardly naïve consumers of photographs. Initially, photography was celebrated, or derided, as automatic “sun writing” (heliography): a chemical and optical process that rendered “neutral” and “natural” images, compared to paintings or drawing created by the hand of the artist.<sup>22</sup> Photography was understood to have a certain technical truth-value: each photo froze a distinct slice of time and space, fixing for posterity whatever appeared before the camera’s lens. In the 1840s and 1850s, Europeans and Americans began to use photography to study and document the bodies of nonwhite humans at home and abroad in order to construct and legitimize racial typologies; in the process they pioneered the visual conventions of ethnographic and anthropological photography.<sup>23</sup> By the 1870s, photography was embraced by professionalizing scientists who established, through photographic evidence, for example, that lightning’s actual form differed greatly from the geometrically perfect zig-zags of artists’ renderings and that a world of microbes and bacteria existed, invisible to the human eye yet hazardous to human health. Photography was used and circulated – in scientific conferences, laboratories, publications, and the mainstream press – to both train “the scientific eye” and popularize advances in scientific knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Yet scientists also found it prudent to rely on supplemental drawings or engravings to “paraphrase” the photograph in order to “see what was there” and “show scientific meanings.” This was especially the case for photomicrography, since cellular and subcellular objects often appeared “poorly delineated” and did not reproduce well in textbooks.<sup>25</sup> So even as photography was employed to produce “evidence” and publicize scientific progress, it was simultaneously recognized as a malleable and unstable medium due to technical limitations and the vagaries of human intervention and interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

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Nineteenth-century photographers, photographic subjects, and viewers noted that the medium could distort or misrepresent subjects, whether as a result of intentional artifice, technical incompetence, the angle, framing or duration of exposure, the processes of development, or some other choice or error of visual or narrative framing. Indeed, the mere presence of a camera could influence the action before its lens. In 1859, prominent American doctor and philosopher Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed himself “smitten” with the powerful new medium whose “*appearance* of reality ... cheats the senses with its seeming truth.”<sup>27</sup> In sum, while Americans and Europeans were astounded by the medium’s “uncanny” powers of representation, they did not necessarily accept photographic images as presenting an undisputed or indisputable truth. Substantial cultural work was required for photographs to acquire authority as “fact” or evidence.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps especially in humanitarian campaigns, photographic representations had to be authenticated in some way to be accepted as “truth”: their value as evidence rested on convincing viewers of what, precisely, they were evidence *of*. Even then, as we shall see, political or ethical concerns could be – and often were – raised regarding the content, meanings, proper use, and display of photography, particularly in the case of photography depicting suffering bodies.<sup>29</sup>

Humanitarian activity and imagery are highly selective. Not all natural catastrophes or episodes of manmade violence are turned into humanitarian causes by humanitarian organizations or the news media.<sup>30</sup> But once a cause is identified, a depiction of human suffering is expected – and probably necessary – to rally the desired response.<sup>31</sup> Since the late nineteenth century, humanitarians, journalists, and missionaries have used visual props and narratives to summon attention and funds. These visual props – often photos – were not just “evidence”; they were *rhetoric*. In focusing the viewers’ attention on individual cases of suffering (typically, individual cases were used to connote a larger group of victims), photographs made an argument that such suffering was undeserved and that it should be mitigated. Yet humanitarian imagery only rarely gestured at political causation. And if it did, it would not – likely could not – convey political and social complexities. Indeed, the effectiveness of humanitarian rhetoric appears to depend on its apparent simplicity and directness of emotional address. It focuses viewer attention on suffering, framing it as unjust yet amenable to remedy. It erases distracting political or social detail that would complicate the duty to act. In this sense, humanitarian imagery is *moral rhetoric* masquerading as visual evidence.<sup>32</sup> As such, humanitarian photography was, and is, politically and morally charged

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terrain. It was certainly not uncontroversial, whether among viewing publics or even, in some cases, among the individuals or organizations that created and distributed it.

Humanitarian imagery has been produced and disseminated by individuals and organizations concerned with aid, relief, rescue, reform, rehabilitation, and development: religious, moral, social, and political goals tied to organizational missions, agendas, and identities (in contemporary parlance, this has come to be called the organizational “brand”). Like modern humanitarianism proper, humanitarian organizations, campaigns, and imagery have never existed apart from the political world; they have been fraught with ideology and competing interests.<sup>33</sup> The term “humanitarian” is a case in point. First used in 1844 England – just five years after the invention of photography was formally announced<sup>34</sup> – it denoted “all that is concerned with benevolence toward humanity as a whole, with human welfare as a primary good” and was used to “designate someone who advocates action for such ends.” Initially, the term was frequently employed in a pejorative sense to deride “do-gooders” or would-be reformers thought to be driven by an excess of sentimentality or irrationality and “an appetite for applause” – particularly if their efforts appeared unguided by political pragmatism or were inattentive to state, diplomatic, or economic interests and effects.<sup>35</sup> Only by the late nineteenth century was it used as self-ascription by organizations.<sup>36</sup>

Humanitarian organizations were, and are, rooted in national contexts. The majority of the international or transnational aid operations undertaken by humanitarian agencies took place in the age of nationalism.<sup>37</sup> Leaders of humanitarian organizations came from specific cultural, political, and religious milieus, which affected their humanitarian politics. In this volume, contributors focus on a specific variety of humanitarian actions: those undertaken by individuals, associations, and organizations beyond national frontiers. Nonetheless, the distinction between humanitarian aid taking place within *versus* beyond the nation is an artificial and, to some extent, a misleading one. It overlooks the range of actions that characterized humanitarianism – in its Western and non-Western variants<sup>38</sup> – from the mid-nineteenth century to the post-1945 era. During this period, humanitarians’ mental geography – certainly for those from North America and Western Europe – did not necessarily coincide with state frontiers. In fact, many humanitarians undertook aid or rescue operations close to their headquarters, within national frontiers, and simultaneously operated in various colonial or imperial territories as well as beyond national and imperial borders. Examples include the American



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Red Cross, the Quakers, and the American Board for Foreign Missions, three U.S. institutions active at three levels: domestically, in occupied (colonial) territories from Cuba to the Philippines, and internationally. In practice, humanitarian efforts directed outside the nation-state – whether within imperial holdings or beyond – were not completely distinct from more local acts of charity and philanthropy. Historically, humanitarian actors have moved rather fluidly between aid, relief, or reform efforts targeting domestic and distant unfortunates. Similarly, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, professional journalists and photographers, on their own initiative or on behalf of organizations, moved fluidly between domestic, imperial, and broader international settings in their efforts to capture, document, and publicize instances of human misery.<sup>39</sup>

In this volume, we start with the assumption that humanitarian aid meant different things to different individual actors and to different organizations at different times. Despite its moniker, humanitarianism is not a singular *-ism*. In practice, it took various forms during the period covered in this volume, the 1870s to 2010. Humanitarians, sometimes within the same organization, disagreed – and still disagree today – on plausible categorizations of “needy” and on who should be recipients of aid. At its inception in 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) focused on mitigating the worst effects of war and sought to aid only wounded soldiers on the battlefield. In ensuing decades, some humanitarians, for practical, political, or strategic reasons, specialized in relief for women and children; others – most famously, the Save the Children Fund – focused on feeding, housing, and educating children exclusively. Even the category “needy children” was hardly straightforward. Some humanitarians included children of all ages while others focused their action on behalf of orphaned children only. Historically, other key terms – such as “victim,” “refugee,” “crisis,” or “emergency” – have emerged as foci for relief efforts and have been defined in various ways by humanitarian actors and organizations. Humanitarians disagreed on why, how, when, and for how long individuals, communities, or entire nations were worthy of aid or assistance.<sup>40</sup> Our goal is to examine the meaning and definitions that the protagonists of the time gave to humanitarianism.

Part of the backdrop to this study is the changing structures of humanitarianism and its organizations. The chapters in this volume examine humanitarian action and representation by a wide range of organizations, institutions, and actors: British and American *missionary groups*; *international organizations*, such as the International Committee of the



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Red Cross (founded 1863), the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, 1943) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 1948); *nongovernmental organizations*, such as Near East Relief and the Save the Children Fund, founded during or just after the First World War; *hybrid organizations* that fuse international and national goals, such as the Chinese Red Cross; and *development organizations*, such as Christian Aid. In addition, some chapters consider humanitarian imagery produced by *journalists* and *photojournalists* since the news media played, and continues to play, an important role in informing publics about large-scale episodes of human suffering and disaster, focusing public attention on and shaping perceptions of such events, and thereby motivating the perceived need for humanitarian intervention.

The chapters in this volume contextualize the efforts of select yet significant actors that made use of photography for a variety of purposes, assuming that the politics of humanitarianism are multiple, that various strands of humanitarianism can coexist within a single organization, and that expressions of humanitarianism can change over time. Given this historical diversity, what assumptions can be made regarding the role and use of photography? Is it plausible to imagine categories of humanitarian photography cutting across multiple humanitarianisms?

We seek to identify trends and threads, continuities and ruptures, similarities and differences related to cultural and representational practices and politics of humanitarian photography. Humanitarianism is not a monolith, it was – and is – a complex and fragmented system of individuals, organizations, and ideas, which coexisted, cooperated, and clashed. Still, since the late nineteenth century something similar to a system, with a gravitational force, emerged. The system expanded and shrank over time, with notable growth spurts accompanying and following the First World War and the Russian Civil War, as well as the Nazi seizure of power and war of aggression in Europe, and Allied victory over Germany and Japan in 1945. Since the late 1970s, humanitarian and human rights organizations have proliferated; after the turn of the 1990s, they multiplied at a historically unprecedented rate.<sup>41</sup> As far as Western humanitarianism is concerned, a heterogeneous group of individuals and organizational actors – as well as the publics they have communicated with – came to share some basic ideas about the desirability of compassion and aiding other human beings in distress. Since the late nineteenth century, this “ethics of care,” Michael Barnett notes, has been “institutionalized” and “internationalized,” yet nonetheless remains dynamic. “Humanitarians project their moral imaginations in ways that reshape

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the world,” he argues, but “what is imaginable, desirable and possible” changes over time.<sup>42</sup>

In Britain, France, and the United States, one can identify common threads, or even ideological pillars, upon which humanitarian practices were erected. Liberalism and capitalism – in their diverse declinations – were two of them. To many humanitarians, these seemed to represent the only models able to ensure peace and prosperity. This in turn might explain why so many humanitarians, secular and religious, became agents of Western empires and of colonization and why they genuinely adopted a civilizational posture. Humanitarians active in domestic, imperial, and transnational contexts carried with them their profound belief that they were capable of “enlightening” and “elevating” the allegedly ignorant, needy, or less civilized.<sup>43</sup> Humanitarians presumed they knew how to solve what they had designated as a humanitarian problem, emergency, or crisis; they were confident in their abilities to transform the world – or at least the slice of it on which they were at work. Humanitarianism, in its Western variety, has been consistently asymmetrical in its power relations and ripe with paternalism.<sup>44</sup>

Christianity too has been pervasive in Western humanitarianism. Certainly up to the 1940s, Christian precepts, morality, and values informed the actions of humanitarians. Indeed, in Western humanitarianisms, it is often difficult to distinguish between secular and religious motivations, even when an organization explicitly claimed to be secular, as in the case of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Can we accept at face value this organization’s claims to universalism and secularism and utterly ignore both its Swiss origins and the Calvinist background of all of its Committee members from the inception of the institution to the late twentieth century? Most humanitarian organizations, even if they were not explicitly Christian or religious, had “transcendental elements”: a belief in “humanity” or some similar category that is greater than us, as individuals, and that lends moral gloss and meaning to our actions.<sup>45</sup> What is more, one’s willingness to engage in humanitarian action, donate money, or shed a tear on behalf of suffering human beings abroad has been understood, since the nineteenth century, as a mark of *our* elevated humanity – as individuals who embody and express particular strands of Western political and cultural heritage. Over time, this has been reinforced as the emotionally, morally, and ideologically “correct” position to assume – at least in relation to successful humanitarian appeals and campaigns.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the intimate relation of humanitarianism with modernity and notions of progress bears mentioning. By the turn of the twentieth