Distant Suffering examines the moral and political implications for a spectator of the distant suffering of others as presented through the media. What are the morally acceptable responses to the sight of suffering on television, for example, when the viewer cannot act directly to affect the circumstances in which the suffering takes place? Luc Boltanski argues that spectators can actively involve themselves and others by talking about what they have seen and how they were affected by it. Developing the idea of the spectator in Adam Smith's moral theory, he examines three rhetorical 'topics' available for the expression of the spectator's response to suffering and which have existed since pity became central to politics at the end of the eighteenth century: the topic of *denunciation*, the topic of *sentiment* and the *aesthetic* topic. The book concludes with a discussion of a 'crisis of pity' in relation to modern forms of humanitarianism and suggests a possible way out of this crisis which involves an emphasis and focus on present suffering.

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Distant Suffering

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Distant Suffering

Morality, Media and Politics

Luc Boltanski

Translated by Graham Burchell

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The world in which we Westerners live today has grave faults and dangers, but when compared to former times our world has a tremendous advantage: everyone can know everything about everything. Information today is the 'fourth estate': at least in theory the reporter, the journalist and the news photographer have free access everywhere; nobody has the right to stop them or to send them away. Everything is easy: if you wish you can receive radio or television broadcasts from your own or any other country. You can go to the newsstand and choose the newspaper you prefer; an Italian newspaper of any political tendency, an American or Soviet newspaper, there is an extremely wide choice. You can buy and read the books you want without risk of being incriminated for 'anti-Italian activities' or attracting a search of your house by the political police. Certainly it is not easy to avoid *all* conditioning, but at least you can pick the conditioning you prefer . . .

In Hitler's Germany a particular code was widespread: those who knew did not talk; those who did not know did not ask questions; those who did ask questions received no answers. In this way the typical German citizen won and defended his ignorance, which seemed to him sufficient justification of his adherence to Nazism. Shutting his mouth, his eyes and his ears, he built for himself the illusion of not knowing, hence not being an accomplice to the things taking place in front of his very door.

Primo Levi, Afterword to *If This is a Man*, in *If This is a Man and The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf, intro. Paul Bailey, London: Abacus/Sphere, 1987, pp. 382–3 and 386 [translation slightly modified].

Contents

Preface

The subject of this book is the question of humanitarianism which has been revived by the recent debate on humanitarian action but has been on the agenda for at least two centuries. Our aim is first of all to clarify this debate by taking up the discussions and models which accompanied the introduction of the argument of pity into politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the purposes of this return to the past is to show that the argument between those in favour of humanitarian altruism and those who deny its possibility was fixed when political theory began to be concerned with what Hannah Arendt calls the 'politics of pity'.

We are not attempting to show that there is nothing new under the sun however. To the contrary, it seems to us that over the last twenty years the development of a number of non-governmental organisations involved in humanitarian action throughout the world, and the importance and significance this movement is in the process of acquiring, is something new. What is more, this nascent humanitarian movement lies at the heart of two tensions within today's Western societies.

The first of these tensions is between an abstract universalism and a narrow communitarianism. Moreover, it is often in terms of this opposition that promoters and opponents of humanitarian action confront each other, the first siding with global solidarity against national particularisms and preferences, while the second unmasks the hypocrisy or, at best, naive eirenic idealism which ignores the primacy of interests and ties forged by history. Particularly ominous today, this tension may be reduced however by the development of forms of universalism connected to the historical traditions from which they arose and which are rooted in local groups and actions, that is by what Michael Walzer, whose reflections on the possibility of a third way between universalism and communitarianism are particularly innovative and promising, calls an

emergent universalism.[1] We will conclude by suggesting that the consolidation of the humanitarian movement depends, at least in part, on its ability to clarify and make explicit the connection, which is often realised in practice by its members, between distant causes and the traditions, sensibilities and even interests of those who organise support for these causes.

The second tension lies at the heart of what Charles Taylor calls the 'culture of authenticity', an important component of the modern identities whose history he presents in his great book, *Sources of the Self*.[2] Charles Taylor clearly shows that the culture of authenticity cannot be reduced either to a hyper-individualism or to a soft relativism as is frequently claimed by the prophets or denigrators of modernity or post-modernity in order either to celebrate or deplore it. The culture of authenticity requires everyone to be themselves, but by choosing between objectives which are taken for granted and transcend the self.[3] Hence the wavering between the egoistic ideal of self-realisation and an altruistic commitment to causes which enables one to 'realise oneself' through action. The interest aroused by the humanitarian movement is one of the areas in which this tension is most clearly expressed today, as Charles Taylor suggests at the end of *Sources of the Self*.[4] However, with the current decline of the workers' movement, humanitarian action, which is the focus of most altruistic yearnings[5] and is familiar to the vast majority of people only through the media, is also denounced for giving everyone the opportunity to cultivate themselves through absorption in their own pity at the spectacle of someone else's suffering.

Much of the book is taken up with an attempt to analyse this tension without falling into either a smug celebration of the return of kindness or an easy denunciation of the perverse spectator. On the one hand we have tried to show that insofar as State politics must be detached from the here and now in order to embrace a generality, the introduction of the argument of pity into politics led by a kind of logical necessity to a consideration of distant suffering. The spectator's dilemma is not the automatic conse-

[1] Cf. M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice. A Defence of Pluralism and Equality,* New York: Basic Books, 1983, and for a survey of his current view of the tension between universalism and communitarianism, see M. Walzer, 'Les deux universalismes', *Esprit,* no. 187 (1992), pp. 114–33.

[2] C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity,* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

[3] C. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1991, especially pp. 31–41.

[4] Ibid., pp. 516–21.

[5] In addition to other indications, there is evidence for this in the responses given to opinion polls on the popularity of personalities who have become famous for their humanitarian action and in the record sales of their biographies or the books they write.

quence of modern media even if it has been dramatised by the development of these media over the last thirty years, and especially by the development of television. On the other hand, we have tried to take the moral demands imposed on the spectator seriously. On what conditions is the spectacle of distant suffering brought to us by the media morally acceptable?

Finally, the confluence of these two sets of constraints – politico-technical necessities and moral demands – have led us to re-open discussion of the two somewhat unfashionable themes of commitment and ideologies.

In effect, when confronted with suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action. Commitment is commitment to action, the intention to act and orientation towards a horizon of action. But what form can this commitment take when those called upon to act are thousands of miles away from the person suffering, comfortably installed in front of the television set in the shelter of the family living-room? The answer we propose in part I is that one can commit oneself through speech; by adopting the stance, even when alone in front of the television, of someone who speaks to somebody else about what they have seen.

But to be an acceptable response to the shocking spectacle of distant suffering, must this speech be given a definite form? Our hypothesis is that speech must at the same time report to the other both what was seen and how this personally affected and involved the spectator. There is only a finite number of ways in which this can be done. Part II presents three forms, or topics, which were established through the formation of different literary genres (pamphlets, novels, art criticism) between the middle of the eighteenth century and around the middle of the nineteenth century, in which speech about suffering can be formulated in a way which enables us to join together a description of the person suffering and the concern of someone informed of this suffering. We call these three forms, the *topic of denunciation*, the *topic of sentiment*, and the *aesthetic topic*.

The word topic should be understood in the sense of ancient rhetoric, that is to say as involving inseparably both an argumentative and an affective dimension. Speech here is affected and it is especially by means of *emotions* that we can conceive of the coordination of spectators – each of whom is also a speaker – and consequently the transition from individual speech and concern to collective commitment. To get from these topics, each of which can be formulated in very different ways, to political *ideologies* which can be aligned on a Left–Right axis, precise descriptions must be given of how the system of places which constitutes the general armature of these topics (which we take from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) are filled.

However, to tell others how one was affected by the spectacle of distant

suffering is not on its own enough to satisfy the demand for commitment to action. For while commitment, and political commitment in particular, is always mediated by speech, as well as speech that may readily be called *effective* there is also speech that is derisively described as *merely verbal*, as just words, precisely in order to indicate the fact that these words in no way commit the person who utters them.

On what conditions can speech about suffering be considered effective? This, principally, is the question broached in part III which considers the contemporary crisis of pity which is characterised, precisely, by a loss of confidence in the effectiveness of committed speech, by a focus on the media and the 'spectacle' effects they produce, by a temptation to fall back on the community, and finally, and most profoundly, by a scepticism with regard to any form of political action orientated towards a horizon of moral ideals. Here again, clarification of the implicit principles which underlie humanitarian action may help us to redefine political commitment and, as a result, to reaffirm the political dimension of life.

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Preparation of this book was undertaken while I was at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and it would not have been possible without the resources I found there; not just the calm, the weather, and the excellent libraries, but also the working relationships and seminars which have directly influenced the questions I have raised. My thanks go above all to Albert Hirschman and to his generous erudition, to Clifford Geerz, to Joan Scott and, in particular Michael Walzer, who was the person in charge for the year and whose work and interests, especially on justice and social criticism, have had a direct impact on my own preoccupations.[1] I have also benefited from many discussions with Allan Silver of the University of Columbia and, above all, during this stay and no less since then, with Elisabeth Claverie.

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[1] In particular, his *Company of Critics,* New York, Basic Books, 1990.

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I must confess, in conclusion, that while writing I often found myself thinking of my brother Christian, whose own work on the holocaust is reflected, without aesthetic indulgence, in a large part of this work, and of my son, Christophe, an honest and courageous young reporter in parts of the world afflicted with violence. This book is therefore dedicated to them.

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