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Introduction

In 1954, the year that Vietnamese fighters routed the French at Dien Bien Phu and the Front de Libération Nationale began its bloody campaign to free Algeria, a tiny bookshop called La Librairie de l'Escalier opened in the Latin Quarter of the French capital. Within a few years, this bookshop – in a new site and with a new name – had become the single most important source of material about liberation struggles and revolutionary politics around the world and a significant player in the anti-colonial movement within France. As La Joie de Lire, the bookshop became a meeting place for idealists and activists across the left spectrum. Discussion groups gathered there to debate the passage of events in what was then called the 'third world' and the theories of a newly influential set of third-world thinkers. Economics and political theory occupied shelves alongside poetry and literature; the stock burned or was reduced to pulp in attacks from right-wing militants and riot police. Anti-capitalist students loitered there for hours, leafing through the books, or simply stealing them, so that by the early 1980s despite its iconic status the business was going under.[1]

From a certain point of view (though not the personal), this did not matter. François Maspero, its owner, had never really considered his venture as a business. La Joie de Lire had been intended as 'part library, part discussion space, part shop' and it was: militants of multiple generations experienced it as a place for the meeting of minds and ideas, a site of refuge from the exactions of the authorities, a temple with an almost devotional function.

The bookshop and the publishing house Maspero went on to set up in 1959 were emblematic of the embrace of the third world by militants in

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post-war France. They were instrumental in the spread of the awareness about and influence of third-world intellectuals, activists, and politicians. It was Maspero who brought the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro to France, who published Jean-Paul Sartre's call for violent uprising against colonial rule, and who helped document the French government's use of torture in Algeria. Maspero conceived of his role as showing his readers that 'in a given part of the world, people you do not know are fighting for their survival and it is not only in Paris, Washington or Moscow that important things are happening, that the future of the world is made'.[2] In 1954, when Maspero's idea began to take form, this message could not have been clearer.

This period saw the surfacing of 'tiers-mondiste' movements, which had at their core the belief in the 'third world' as the motor for world-wide revolution.[3] The concept of the third world itself was a product of this moment. As a political ideology in France, *tiers-mondisme* (third-worldism) emerged at a time when most European Communist movements were either stagnating or discredited and the third world seemed to offer a renewed hope for the revolutionary project. The struggles for independence in Algeria and Vietnam, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and the Cultural Revolution begun in China in 1966 stood in seeming opposition to events like the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 or the French government's use of repression and torture in Algeria, with the acquiescence of the parliamentary left. Rejecting the capitalist model as exploitative and oppressive, adopting a utopian ideology, yet under the sway of charismatic leaders and thinkers, *tiers-mondisme* emerged as, in Robert Malley's words, 'the belief in the revolutionary aspirations of the Third-World masses, in the inevitability of their fulfilment, and in the role of strong, centralised states in this undertaking'.[4] Another cornerstone was anti-Americanism. The whole was captured by Sartre in the mid 1960s:

> Europeans . . . must pay attention to, show interest in, prove their solidarity with all the Vietnamese, the Cubans, the Africans, all the friends from the third world who are achieving life and liberty and who prove precisely each day that the greatest power in the world is incapable of imposing its laws, that it is the most vulnerable, and that the world has not chosen it as the centre of gravity.[5]

The fascination for third-world revolution manifested itself in theoretical, literary, and cultural forms and crossed multiple generations of French intellectual actors. Though the number of active members of *tiers-mondiste* groups was relatively low – the Maoist movement, for instance, had at its peak in 1971–2 approximately 7,000 militants across

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all tendencies – the influence of the ideology was diffuse and diverse and its generational impact significant.[6]

However, the fervour of revolutionary zeal faltered as it became more difficult to ignore the abuses of post-colonial third-world rulers. Concurrent with the *tiers-mondiste* phase of disillusionment emerged the radical humanitarianism of the 'sans-frontiériste' movement, which did not provide an answer to failed revolutionary hopes so much as another model for engagement with the third world and an original expression of humanitarianism. A French Red Cross mission during the Biafra–Nigeria War (1967–70) contributed to the genesis of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 1971, giving the movement its name. The dominant model against which MSF eventually defined itself was that of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which emphasised the principles of neutrality and discretion. In contrast, the *sans-frontiériste* movement has been characterised by the practice of speaking out, known in French as 'témoignage' with its connotations of bearing witness. For Bernard Kouchner, one of the volunteers in Biafra and a prominent early spokesperson of the *sans-frontiériste* movement, the use of the media constituted a strategy of activism he dubbed the 'loi du tapage' (law of hype).[7] The public presence of organisations of the *sans-frontiériste* model and their 'florid expressions of humanitarian intent' have thus been distinguished from the quieter style of British and other agencies.[8] *Sans-frontiérisme* was not without precedent, nor was it entirely unique in its channelling of progressive hopes into humanitarian politics, but it did come to represent a new phase in the history of emergency aid. Far from being, as Paul Berman would have it, 'one more '68-style uprising against the hierarchies of command-and-obedience in a well-established institution', the innovation in humanitarian practice initiated by French activists in the early 1970s profoundly altered the field of international aid.[9]

The impact of the *sans-frontiériste* model has been immense. MSF was the first organisation to specialise in the practice of emergency medical assistance during situations of crisis, such as conflict and natural disasters. In historian Bertrand Taithe's words, 'the concepts of *urgences*, humanitarian medical intervention, and *ingérence* all originated from the ideas of a handful of medical practitioners, yet they have contributed more than any other set of ideas to the reshaping of French diplomatic and international discourse over the past twenty years'.[10] The 'Without Borders' ethos and epithet gained traction in France and abroad, influencing a generation of humanitarian organisations as well as other transnational organisations. Its privileging of the entitlement of affected populations to

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access relief over the principle of state sovereignty has also found international resonance. Yet the roots and early phases of this narrative remain inadequately contextualised and poorly linked to historiography of the period.

This study demonstrates how and why the *sans-frontiériste* movement, before it refashioned international diplomacy, attracted the attention of many of France's most prestigious intellectuals and influential publications. Unsympathetic readings like that of Kristin Ross have reduced those she called the 'humanitarian "parachutists"' to 'ex-*gauchistes* concerned with distancing themselves from a militant past or with avoiding coming to terms with the disappointments of May'.[11] Such views are predicated on the notion of backlash, not least because of the influence of disillusioned revolutionaries who by the mid 1980s were insisting that 'we fought the wrong war'.[12] Indeed, this is the dominant way that the relationship between third-worldism and radical humanitarianism has been cast. It is also the way that political and ideological activism and humanitarian action tend to be cast: as opposed forms of engagement, one partisan, and the other neutral; one about changing a ship's course, the other simply about plugging its leaks. In this view, it was only when one ambition failed – when the revolutionary dreams finally sank – that the other, more modest and yet more practical, could emerge in its place.

The attacks on *tiers-mondisme* in the 1980s, in which *sans-frontiériste* activists were amongst the most aggressive participants, undoubtedly lent credence to this view. They bear examining for a moment here, despite their more detailed coverage later in the book, because of their lingering influence on portrayals of the relationship between the two movements. The peak of these attacks came in February 1985 with the inaugural conference of the short-lived Fondation Liberté Sans Frontières (LSF), a think tank founded by the then leaders of MSF, Claude Malhuret and Rony Brauman. The theme of the conference was 'Third Worldism in Question', a topic that made space for a number of critiques of left-wing ideology and its supposed connection with development thinking in the aid world. At this time, Malhuret and Brauman were by their own admission on an anti-communist campaign that drew on their experiences amongst refugees fleeing communist regimes but was largely conducted through interventions back in France. The conference met with outrage and condemnation from those who didn't share its organisers' views, described at the time as a Reaganite 'ideological war machine', 'suicidal', a 'moral and intellectual swindle'.

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Many publications of the second half of the 1980s, which might otherwise appear as historical studies of *tiers-mondisme*, or *sans-frontiérisme*, or both, are in fact part and parcel of these events. A case in point is the work of Claude Liauzu, the celebrated historian of colonialism. Liauzu's work on *tiers-mondisme* began with an examination of its origins in interwar anti-colonialist movements. In 1987 he published a monograph on the rise, decline, and remnants of *tiers-mondisme* in which he endeavoured to provide an informed perspective on the vitriolic exchanges of the previous years. Liauzu insisted that the very notion of the third world was 'a classification device produced by the West for non-Western realities' and was at pains to explain that attacks on *tiers-mondisme* in the mid 1980s, were, like *tiers-mondisme* itself, rather more an expression of intellectual dynamics in France than of realities elsewhere. Yet his position was one of a participant in the polemics as well as a professional observer of them. Several other publications on *tiers-mondisme* in this period which might seek to present as historiography also fall foul of the convention against conflict of interest.[13]

Returning to these anti-*tiers-mondiste* debates allows a more nuanced reflection on their construction and significance. More recent scholarship has insisted upon the extent to which attacks on *tiers-mondisme* were in fact constitutive of the concept, with the term 'tiers-mondiste' (as distinct from the concept of the third world which informed it) gaining ground in the phase of its purported decline. What was described as *tiers-mondisme* from the second half of the 1970s onwards was until that point often allowed to exist in institutional and intellectual plurality: as Maoism, Castroism, support for Vietnam, publication in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, anti-colonialism, and so on.[14] This thoughtful argument makes clear why the process by which revolutionary hopes declined is so complex to trace: because they were not one hope, but many, and there was not one *tiers-mondisme* but many distinct albeit allied *tiers-mondiste* engagements. However, acknowledging this basic dynamic should not pose an obstacle to considering how the historical interactions and eventual convergence of these different threads have influenced ideas of the third world, even if this convergence appears mostly in hostile characterisations. Moreover, most of the movements within the *tiers-mondiste* constellation were as much about political imagination as they were about a concrete reality in the third world – a point that should not be obscured by recognition of their plurality. Finally, just as *tiers-mondisme* is not a monolith or a reality independent of its construction by commentators, *sans-frontiérisme* also offers more complexity than definitions might imply and is more

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dependent on a political imaginary than is often acknowledged. The concept of *sans-frontiérisme* is inseparable from, but not the same as, the practices that take place in its name. In sum, they may be invented categories, and not necessarily applicable at all points in the stories that follow, but we must work with these terms with their limitations acknowledged.

A surge of scholarship on different facets of third-worldism and humanitarianism alike make a return to their respective and connected narratives timely. An influential account and required reading for the study of activist networks is Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman's *Génération*, in which *tiers-mondiste* ideas are seen to inflect the militancy of much of the *soixante-huitard* cohort.[15] Attention devoted to particular strands of militant activity has revealed the depth of conviction and commitment that *tiers-mondiste* ideologies inspired, with notable examples including Jeannine Verdès-Leroux's work on French supporters of Fidel Castro and Christophe Bourseiller's charting of the Maoist universe in France. Julian Bourg and Richard Wolin have brought this universe within sight of English-language readers, while other francophone works have addressed elements of Maoism that go beyond the focus of this study.[16] None of them, however, have tackled the relationship with humanitarianism, which went to the heart of the 1980s debates. Conversely, studies of *sans-frontiérisme* have often tended towards hagiography in the manner of Olivier Weber's study – a kind of humanitarian counterpart to *Génération* – or Anne Vallaeys' detailed biography of MSF itself.[17] Peter Redfield, Elsa Rambaud, Renée Fox, and Didier Fassin, amongst others, have brought the critical eye of anthropology and sociology to the organisation's evolution.[18] The historiography of humanitarianism in France and in general continues to have only limited interaction with that of other global ideologies.

This book therefore describes two activist movements in France, *tiers-mondiste* and *sans-frontiériste*, and the process by which one came to displace the other as the dominant way of approaching suffering in the third world. These concepts and their related variants are abstract and contested, but considering their evolution helps understand how the frameworks and narratives we apply in our interpretations are constitutive of reality. Activists in both modes were idealist and revolutionary in their approach to the question of the suffering of others. Both models of engagement drew inspiration from past resistance to oppression and struggled with the memory and legacy of political violence. Both had their utopian aspects and interpreted events through this lens. Nonetheless, the shift between them represented a profound transformation of ideological

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and intellectual paradigms in France and a crucial chapter in the rise to prominence of Western humanitarianism.

If it seems incongruous that a history of humanitarianism should be so bound up in revolutionary aspirations, it should not. That it will feel so for many illustrates what Tony Judt called the 'disconcertingly alien character of the past' as viewed from the twenty-first century.[19] The failure to see the past as connected to the present – not necessarily to identify with it, but to be aware of its legacy – has shaped many analyses of humanitarianism. An overemphasis on watershed moments such as the Al Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001, or the collapse of the Soviet Union ten years earlier, has contributed to a sense of perpetual present and discouraged the search for links between recent humanitarian thinking and longer political and intellectual processes of change. Looking at the French case, this study argues that the *sans-frontiériste* model has been shaped more and more enduringly by its *tiers-mondiste* precursors than has generally been acknowledged or understood. Part legacy, part continued dialogue, the relationship between the two was synchronic as well as diachronic.

Why should this matter? At the most basic level, given the influence of *sans-frontiériste* ideas in the current international humanitarian system, their context and evolution merit far greater attention in English literature. Progress has certainly been made since Tim Allen and David Styan remarked in 2000 that 'it is quite extraordinary how little recognition there has been among English language analysts of the importance of French thinking in shaping the new humanitarian agenda'.[20] Like the earlier analysis of David Rieff, Michael Barnett's wide-ranging account of the history of humanitarianism acknowledged the importance of the 'complicated currents' that influenced the formation of MSF and the *sans-frontiériste* approach, and recent scholarship has begun to challenge the foundational myths of the movement, notably the representation of the Biafra–Nigeria War.[21] However, the fact that MSF is now often seen as eschewing transformative politics in favour of emergency priorities (despite its push for change through initiatives like the Access Campaign) tends to work against a more complex understanding of their historical positions. In fact, as an organisation and as individuals, these doctors without borders – not all of them doctors, by the way – have debated the dilemmas of humanitarianism with reference to the organisation's past, its experiences of the politics of aid, and its concepts of morality in politics.[22] History in such debates is not an antiquarian interest but a living influence.

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There remains, in sum, a need to properly examine the different paradigms that have influenced the development of *sans-frontieriste* ideas, notably the related trajectory of revolutionary thinking and the importance of the memory of the Second World War. The latter's role is one of the key motifs throughout the story that follows, for the memory of the 1940s – Holocaust, Occupation, and Resistance – was instrumental in motivating and inflecting the sense of responsibility for the suffering of others among *sans-frontiéristes* and *tiers-mondistes* alike. Memories of the Holocaust shaped responses to political violence in the post-war period in a number of countries and have been seen as integral to the eventual rise of human rights and humanitarianism.[23] But the experience of Occupation, exemplified by the collaboration of the Vichy regime with the German occupiers, was also crucial to French understandings of responsibility to others. For radicals of the post-war period, inaction in the face of suffering and injustice, especially but not exclusively that caused by political violence, was cast as an act of collaboration – or more specifically a failing commensurate to collaboration. One of the results was the desire to create a different world, an internationalist mindset that drew upon longer French political traditions but also reflected a sense of outrage at the moral vacuum of the Occupation period. In another's voice: 'You know, to be born just after Vichy, that really creates a need for an epic . . . So, selling coffee and guns in Abyssynia, leading an army of camel drivers along the Red Sea, a squadron above the Tereul Sierra, an assault team in Havana, dying next to a Berlin canal – these were the confused horizons of our ambitions'.[24] These horizons framed not only the desires of what came to be called *tiers-mondisme* but also the references of *sans-frontiérisme*. In Britain and North America, where the experience of the Second World War was different, the practice of humanitarianism has not been so explicitly linked to the memory of the war nor has this memory featured as heavily in historical accounts.

Secondly, when thinking about why this history matters, we must remember that the intellectual history of Western humanitarianism – its conceptual context and development – has a bearing upon its practice in the present. Analysis of the international humanitarian system in the early twenty-first century has been dominated by considerations of contemporary geo-politics and such phenomena as the political and economic ascent of China, India, Brazil, and other players in the so-called global South, or the tense relationship between Islam and the West. Despite frequent mention of the critical juncture that these phenomena have wrought, the system remains unable to reflect upon itself as a product

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of the same twentieth-century forces that brought them about. In focusing on the geo-political import of the *end* of the Cold War, analyses of the humanitarian system often have little to say about the profound paradigm shift that took place *during* the Cold War, that is, the displacement of the ideological confrontation between left and right and the rise of the ideology of human rights.

This habit is related to the dominance of Anglo-American accounts of humanitarianism – accounts written from the perspective of countries where the revolutionary tradition was weaker and radical politics more marginalised. It also speaks to the way the discourse of ethical politics has sought to present as universal and timeless, a tendency challenged by recent scholarship on the construction and evolution of human rights as an ideology rather than a norm.[25] By treating *sans-frontiériste* humanitarianism as an intellectual phenomenon and tracing its relationship to *tiers-mondiste* forms, this study highlights its place in the collapse of the Marxist project and the associated model of Sartrean intellectual *engagement*. In the second half of the twentieth century, the left-wing revolutionary ambition – engendered by France's Revolution in 1789, revitalised by the Paris Commune and the October Revolution, yet flagging due to the perceived inadequacies of the French proletariat and Communist Party – weakened as a succession of radical left-wing regimes fell into tyranny and repression. The 1970s were a crucial phase in the abandonment of the concept of revolution by left-wing thinkers, in part due to the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *magnum opus* on the Soviet labour camp system, which fed into the rising emphasis on ethics in French politics after May 1968. Scholarship on this shift has offered a rich, complex, and at times contested account of the domestic and international influences involved and their impact on political and intellectual engagement in France.[26]

However, studies to date have neglected the prominent place of humanitarian ideas and practices after the dismantling of the revolutionary Marxist framework in France. Although Julian Bourg recognised the new form of humanitarianism as one of the most important facets of the ethical paradigm in French politics, his study did not take in its origins or development.[27] Likewise, Sunil Khilnani highlighted the importance of anti-totalitarian *nouvelle philosophie* in the 1970s without exploring the convergence and cooperation between the *nouveaux philosophes* and the *sans-frontiériste* activists, who shared many concerns and causes.[28] Robert Horvath, in contrast, has drawn attention to the way in which French anti-totalitarians contributed not only to the ascent of human

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rights but to 'the radicalisation of modern humanitarianism' and 'the genesis of a new humanitarian agenda'.[29] His primary focus, however, was upon the role played by Eastern European dissidents in the dismantling of the revolutionary privilege. Others whose primary interest has been in radical engagement, such as Kristin Ross and Paige Arthur, have viewed humanitarianism in a limited manner through the lens of the other's decline.[30]

By elaborating the relationship between *sans-frontiérisme* and *tiers-mondisme*, therefore, this study examines a previously under-represented component of the shift from revolutionary ideology to the advocacy of human rights and demonstrates how responses to the third world were central to the transformation of French intellectual and political engagement. It also underscores the importance of the memory of the Second World War within, and not simply alongside, this transformation: through an examination of the relationship between *tiers-mondisme* and *sans-frontiérisme* we can see how important this memory was to the rise of ethical paradigms and the ways in which an emerging collective memory of atrocities was internationalised by those who drew upon it for the purposes of new forms of resistance.

The structure of the book is designed to provide an introduction to the two movements before examining the several confluent debates that indicate, together, the way in which the ideas of *tiers-mondisme* and *sans-frontiérisme* rose, fell, and interacted. What emerges is a sort of collective conversation about the nature of suffering, justice, and responsibility, crystallised around the question of the third world and its relationship with the West.

Part I considers how these sets of ideas channelled a form of idealist internationalism and places their emergence against each other as well as within a broader historical backdrop. The first chapter discusses the emergence of the *sans-frontiériste* movement out of critiques of humanitarianism in the 1960s, notably Biafra and Bangladesh, and the central importance of *témoignage*. It explores the importance of memory as a trope in *sans-frontiériste* debates as well as the disputed nature of the memory of this period. Chapter 2 turns to the foundations of *tiers-mondisme*, notably the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62). It elucidates two of the models for action that influenced the militant imaginary of this period: the Republican mobilisation for the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and anti-fascism during the Second World War. These chapters begin the process of showing how the memory of the Holocaust, in

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