

Introduction

In a much-cited essay on the occasion of the 1971 famine in East Bengal (today's Bangladesh), moral philosopher Peter Singer claimed that the UK government valued the development of the supersonic Concorde airplane thirty times as highly as the lives of nine million refugees. The Sydney Opera House – then still under construction – served as a benchmark for a similar Australian calculation. Singer sidestepped the more common trope of making comparisons between military and humanitarian spending, perhaps to avoid a tedious discussion of the appropriate level of national security expenses. With regard to individuals, he noted that 'people do not feel in any way ashamed or guilty about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief'. Thus, according to him, while charity may be praised, its lack is not condemned. Singer decried the inadequate reaction to famine on the part of those living in relatively affluent countries as totally unacceptable. For him, the way we look at moral issues and our way of life needs to change.¹ Singer himself donated 10 per cent of his income to Oxfam at the time.²

Drawing on scholar-activists such as Singer, as well as Amartya Sen and E. P. Thompson, among others, this book is a call for us to rethink humanitarianism. The history of distant responses to humanitarian crises is full of compelling appeals, remarkable efforts on the ground, and accounts of encouraging achievements. It is a record that is longer than commonly assumed and, as we see it, not adequately known. We have attempted to take a fresh look at humanitarian action through the concept of moral economy.

In Thompson's classic exposition of the concept, moral economy is tied to food riots as the key to understanding how disadvantaged groups confront the rich within agrarian society.³ Subsequent research across the humanities and

¹ Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–30, 235 (quotation).

² Peter Singer, 'Preface', in *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), xi.

³ E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 50 (1971): 76–136. See also E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', in *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin, 1991), 259–351.

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social sciences has proven the fruitfulness of this Marxist approach, while at the same time monopolising and infusing a term that has a much broader appeal and potential with specific normative presumptions.⁴ Whereas the self-interested crowd has found approval as a moral force and inspired researchers, few have engaged in an exploration of the more complex ‘paternalistic model’ of moral economy, to which Thompson ascribed both ‘an ideal existence, and also a fragmentary real existence’ in eighteenth-century England.⁵ As we see it, such a model still exists today, in both ideal and practice. The present book applies a reframed moral economy approach that focuses on the wealthy and others in generally affluent countries with regard to their provision of food aid in studying three cases of famine relief in different periods, geographical locations, and political circumstances: the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s, the famine in Soviet Russia in 1921–3, and the famine in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s. Our analysis shows that the construction of altruistic meaning is pivotal to understanding the background, practice, and documentation of relief efforts.

The motivation for charitable giving, while often ascribed to universal philanthropy, in fact often reveals impulses and blind spots that result from the specific interests and preferences of donors.⁶ As a result, the allocation of limited resources across borders depends on the success of appeals in attracting funds for particular causes, on appropriate ways of providing relief, and on the accountability of aid brokers. Around these key elements of humanitarian reason, a web of moral arguments and choices emerges. By analysing them, one may gain new insight into relief operations, which have been in most cases the traditional focus of research.

Our approach emphasises what are often under-investigated topics, namely, aid appeals, and relief accounts in their narrative and statistical form. Thus, unlike the frequently criticised ‘presentism’ of relief agents and humanitarian studies, our moral economy approach allows a detached analytical perspective that looks at the future and the past on a par with the present. At the same time, we also suggest a fresh periodisation of humanitarianism, based on the socio-cultural and economic preconditions under which aid efforts operate. In contrast to what has been criticised as a myopic tendency of humanitarian studies in general,⁷ the nineteenth century is treated as part of a larger history of emergency aid.

⁴ Norbert Götz, ‘“Moral Economy”: Its Conceptual History and Analytical Prospects’, *Journal of Global Ethics* 11, no. 2 (2015): 147–62.

⁵ Thompson, ‘Moral Economy of the English Crowd’, 88.

⁶ Tony Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War* (London: Earthscan, 2001).

⁷ Bertrand Taihe, ‘Humanitarian History?’, in *The Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action*, eds Roger Mac Ginty and Jenny H. Peterson (London: Routledge, 2015), 70. On various aspects of presentism, see John Borton, ‘Improving the Use of History in the International

Although transnational charity predates the twentieth century and the Red Cross, early humanitarianism has left few sources and remains under-researched. The rise of humanitarian action is correlated to Western modernisation and expansion, with its improved communication, widened frames of reference and material, and logistical capabilities. Singer's call for famine relief argued that the progression from a world of face-to-face contacts to a global village with an awareness of faraway places and the power to make a difference has brought distant strangers into a sphere of moral obligation.⁸ The increasingly interconnected world that has emerged over the past two-and-a-half centuries has had its bearing on the evolution of thinking along such lines – whatever privileges and biases may inform the morality of current world citizens.

Our analysis of aid organisations thus includes contributions from English and non-English speaking countries in today's Global North and the world-at-large. We employ a theoretical outlook that reflects the emerging academic interest in histories of morality, the cross-disciplinary rise of a 'moral economy' discourse beyond the confines of Thompson's framing, and the growing field of humanitarian studies, with a history of the humanitarian movement. Our original research is based on a rereading or first-time examination of a wide range of published and unpublished sources. Three unique aspects distinguish this book.

First, its integrated moral economy perspective draws on philosophical, humanitarian, and medical ethics, especially the problems of triage. This allows a balanced assessment of humanitarian action that goes beyond endorsing idealistic efforts or denouncing power politics. In avoiding both naïveté and cynicism, we have sought a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms and dilemmas of humanitarian action by examining how donors and relief agencies endow aid choices with altruistic meaning in mounting appeals, allocating, and accounting for aid. Our moral economy perspective is built on an understanding of humanitarianism as voluntary emergency aid. At the same time, we point out the correlation between humanitarian efforts and human rights advocacy, actions taken by governments, and development assistance. Other significant discussions to which the moral economy approach contributes insights concern religious stimuli; the motivation of aid between the poles of altruism and social control; market affinity; the connection between domestic and foreign philanthropy; imperialism and neo-colonialism; gender and class relations; and the types of humanitarian agencies and endeavours that characterise different epochs.

Humanitarian Sector', *European Review of History* 23, nos 1–2 (2016): 193–209; Maria Framke and Joël Glasman, 'Editorial', *Werkstatt Geschichte*, no. 68 (2015): 3–12; Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires, and Advocacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8; Jean-Hervé Bradol and Jacky Mamou, 'La commémoration amnésique des humanitaires', *Humanitaire*, no. 10 (2004): 12–28.

⁸ Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', 232–3. See also Singer, 'Preface', xxvi.

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Second, the book's contextualised case studies provide instructive narratives of how humanitarianism developed over the past two centuries. We propose a periodisation of humanitarianism by analogy to politico-economic regimes, rather than the geopolitical sequencing that has dominated academic analyses in this field up to now. In the view taken by our moral economy approach, the time of elitist laissez-faire liberalism was one of *ad hoc humanitarianism* (c. 1800–1900); that of Taylorism and mass society was one of *organised humanitarianism* (c. 1900–70); and the blend of individualised post-material lifestyles, flexible production and communication regimes, and neo-liberal public management in our own time is what we call *expressive humanitarianism* (since c. 1970). We thereby shift the principal question regarding humanitarian efforts from 'what?' to 'how?', moving the focus of the history of humanitarianism from the imperatives of crisis management in the outside world to the pragmatic mechanisms of fundraising, relief efforts on the ground, and accounting, thus correlating their history with that of voluntary action and broader societal trends.⁹

Third, the empirical studies provide insights into the history of three humanitarian causes. The study of Irish famine relief in the 1840s, for example, redetermines the origins of the major British relief campaign. It is also singular in acknowledging the role of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, and in drawing on material from the Vatican-based Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and diocesan archives across the Western Hemisphere. The study on Soviet famine relief in the 1920s provides a broader perspective than previous organisation-based studies and identifies similarities among competing ethnic, religious, political, and national relief cultures. Another feature is the analysis of letters of appeal written by individuals and groups in Russia facing starvation, addressed to private individuals and groups in the USA – a rare documentary source in the context of famine studies. Our analysis of the famine in Ethiopia of the 1980s is one of the few historical examinations of transnational food aid during that disaster that draws on newly available archival sources. Historical research to date has generally focused on Anglo-American fundraising and the geopolitics of aid for Ethiopia, rather than on issues of allocation and accounting. Likewise, scholars have concentrated more on the cultural impact of the Band Aid and Live Aid phenomena than on the changes they wrought in the humanitarian industry, which is what we studied.

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⁹ See also Norbert Götz, Georgina Brewis, and Steffen Werther, 'Humanitäre Hilfe: Eine Braudel'sche Perspektive', *Freiwilligenarbeit und gemeinnützige Organisationen im Wandel: Neue Perspektiven auf das 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds Nicole Kramer and Christine G. Krüger (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019), 89–119.

Revisiting his article ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ after more than forty years, Singer corrected two points. He had drawn an analogy between pulling a drowning child out of a pond and donating money to save the life of a Bengali. Implicit in the argument that distance did not matter was that the cost of replacing muddy clothes would be equivalent to the amount that could save a life in the Global South. In a later essay, Singer also referred to a calculation that donating US\$200 would be enough to enable a two-year-old in a country like Pakistan or Nigeria to reach the age of six, giving it a high likelihood of survival until adulthood. Based on further research into charity effectiveness that put the figure at closer to US\$5,000, Singer now acknowledged that life-saving was a more expensive business than he had previously assumed.¹⁰ However, citing the middle class in affluent countries, Singer did not think that this undermined his moral argument that ‘instead of spending our available income on new clothes, cars, dinners in expensive restaurants, or other items that cannot be compared, in moral importance, to saving someone from starving to death, we ought to give our money to those who can most effectively use it to prevent starvation’.¹¹

Singer’s second revision is a tacit but sweeping reformulation of what he had written previously. Apparently uncomfortable with his infantilisation of the ‘Bengali’, he now reformulated the analogy as pertaining to two children, one drowning in a pond nearby and another ‘in a developing country dying from poverty-related causes’.¹² Earlier, Singer had explained that his use of the example of children is not grounded on the belief they are more worth saving than adults, but rather to simplify the issue, since children cannot be assumed to have brought poverty upon themselves.¹³ Seen in this light, the imbalance in the original analogy appears to be not so much a postcolonial faux pas as a well-intentioned rhetorical move assigning a moral state of innocence to a broader circle of people suffering from famine in the South. However, in singling out a particular group to make his analogy vivid, Singer surrendered that impartiality which he himself esteems, and which is generally considered a core value of humanitarian action.¹⁴

The present book focuses on related dilemmas, contradictions, and unintended consequences in an asymmetrical world. Human agents in different

¹⁰ Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, 231–2; Singer, ‘Preface’, xix–xx; Peter Singer, ‘The Singer Solution to World Poverty’, *New York Times Magazine* (5 Sept. 1999).

¹¹ Peter Singer, ‘Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument’, in *Food Policy: The Responsibility of the United States in the Life and Death Choices*, eds Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue (New York: Free Press, 1977), 37.

¹² Singer, ‘Preface’, xvii. ¹³ Singer, ‘Singer Solution’.

¹⁴ Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, 232; Singer, ‘Reconsidering’, 42–3; Peter Singer, ‘Outsiders: Our Obligations to Those beyond Our Borders’, in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

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official positions act according to their socially embedded preferences, drawing on fragmented information, insufficient material resources, and the limited trust they have in others. We have arranged these topics thematically according to our moral economy approach. We analyse appeals for aid, the allocation of relief, and accounting documents as three characteristic dimensions. These main chapters treat the cases of relief in Ireland, Soviet Russia, and Ethiopia in chronological order. However, those interested in a single case can follow its thread across the three central chapters.

Chapter 1 draws on literature that addresses dilemmas of humanitarian aid, exploring the social origins of famine and outlining our moral economic perspective on humanitarian aid. Chapter 2 presents an overview of humanitarian history as seen according to our periodisation scheme, followed by background information on the context of the three case studies. Chapter 3 discusses aid appeals as measures of humanitarian sensibility and as instruments for securing donations. Chapter 4 examines relief operations, showing the difficulties humanitarian workers face from headquarters or encounter in the field as their efforts are either facilitated or constrained by economic, moral, or political considerations. Chapter 5 shows how humanitarian agencies account for the aid they provide, acknowledging donors, creating aid narratives, and seeking to legitimise their allocation decisions. The Conclusion brings together our findings and recommendations for future histories of humanitarian aid and for research on humanitarianism in general.