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Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy

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Humanitarian sentiments have motivated a variety of manifestations of pity, from nineteenth-century movements to end slavery to the creation of modern international humanitarian law. While humanitarianism is clearly political, *Humanitarianism and Suffering* addresses the ways in which it is also an ethos embedded in civil society, one that drives secular and religious social and cultural movements, not just legal and political institutions. As an ethos, humanitarianism has a strong narrative and representational dimension that can generate humanitarian constituencies for particular causes. The emotional nature of compassion is closely linked to visual and literary images of suffering and innocence. Essays in the volume analyze the character, form, and voice of private or public narratives themselves and explain how and why some narratives of suffering energize political movements of solidarity, whereas others do not. *Humanitarianism and Suffering* explores when, how, and why humanitarian movements become widespread popular movements. It shows how popular sentiments move political and social elites to action and, conversely, how national elites appropriate humanitarian ideals for more instrumental ends.



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Editorial Review

Review

"As humanitarian workers and human rights activists we owe it to those most in need that they are protected against well-intended incompetence. Through a generation of humanitarian and human rights work I have seen how the difference between good and bad action is measured in lives lost or saved. We therefore need this excellent, critical, and systematic review of humanitarianism and suffering in our time.

--Jan Egeland, Director, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and former UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (2003-2006)

"Superbly conceived and wonderfully executed: this book offers a sustained analysis of the changing historical connections between humanitarian sentiments, humanitarian interventions, and the complex ways these are articulated with civil society and legal and political institutions. An outstanding account of why some narratives of suffering stimulate political movements of solidarity while others do not."

--David Held, Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science, London School of Economics

"Humanitarian action not only reflects politics, law, and administration, but it is deeply ethical. Humanitarianism and Suffering contains sharp interdisciplinary insights in vivid and superbly nuanced essays about the moral imperative of helping strangers caught in the cross-hairs of violence."

--Thomas G. Weiss, Presidential Professor of Political Science, Director, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York

"What do we humans owe each other in an ever more interconnected world? This book provides a rich and moving interdisciplinary exploration of the most pressing problem of our time."

--Ruti Teitel, Ernst C Stiefel Professor of Comparative Law, New York Law School

"...an eclectic, yet surprisingly coherent, set of essays that analyze how and why narratives of suffering help humanitarian movements to catch on among the broader publics, and also how power-holders have abused such humanitarian ideals for more self-aggrandizing political ends....Humanitarianism and Suffering is an important book that will be of great interest to scholars who teach and do research in the multi-disciplinary fields of human rights and humanitarian affairs. As such, professors of political science, law, international studies, ethics, literature and anthropology will find this book to be of great interest. Likewise, those working as practitioners in the humanitarian assistance/aid industry will find useful the book's lucid analyses, and its attempt to untangle the multi-faceted subject of humanitarianism. The book is easily compared to David Kennedy's *The Dark Side of Virtue* (2004) and is, in the view of the present reviewer, the most systematic and attentive treatment of humanitarianism since the publication of Kennedy's 2004 book....recommend to anyone who is interested in issues concerning humanitarian affairs and human rights."

--Eric A. Heinze, University of Oklahoma, Human Rights & Human Welfare

About the Author

Richard A. Wilson is Gladstein Distinguished Chair of Human Rights, Professor of Anthropology, and Director of the Human Rights Institute at the University of Connecticut. He is the author or editor of

numerous works on human rights, truth commissions, and international criminal tribunals, including *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala*, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, *Low Intensity Democracy*, *Human Rights, Culture and Context*, *Culture and Rights*, *Human Rights in Global Perspectives*, and *Human Rights and the 'War on Terror.'* He has been a visiting professor at the University of Oslo, Norway; the New School for Social Research; and the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. He is a member of the Committee for Human Rights of the American Anthropological Association. In addition, he serves on the editorial boards of *Critique of Anthropology*, the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, the *Journal of Human Rights*, the *Journal of Transitional Justice*, and the *Journal of Social Justice*. Richard D. Brown is Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of History and Director of the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute. He specializes in the cultural and political history of early America and is the author of *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America* with Irene Quenzler Brown; *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870*; *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*; and *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, among other works. Past president of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic, he has held fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Science Research Council, and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. Currently, he serves on the editorial board of the *New England Quarterly*.

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