

## Sentiments

Adam Smith's 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provides one of the earliest instances of humanitarian sentiments, which are defined as the emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and urge us to remedy them. From the mid-18th century onwards, moral feelings of love, friendship, trust, and solidarity were seen to be equally important as a rational sense of obligation towards helping distant others. These sentiments have been cultivated in everyday practices in modern and contemporary history, although they continue to be unevenly distributed. They also necessitate a broader definition of humanitarianism, going beyond emergencies and their relief to its conceptualization as “a structure of feeling, a cluster of moral principles, a basis for ethical claims and political strategies, and a call for action” (Redfield and Bornstein 2010: 17).

Thomas Haskell (1985) identified the conditions for the historic emergence of humanitarian sentiments as (1) the existence of ethical maxims to help suffering strangers, often grounded in religious ideas, (2) the perception of involvement in the causes of this suffering, (3) the ability to see a way to end it, and (4) the existence of ordinary and familiar recipes for intervention. This is linked to the growth of capitalism, which provided new insights into the causes of human suffering, as well as the discipline and technologies to act on these insights. The movement to abolish slavery is often identified as one of the first campaigns fueled by humanitarian sentiments, with the powerful feelings of sympathy and moral qualms that were aroused in supporters leading to political action (Wilson and Brown 2009). Another early event that contributed to the emergence of foundational ideas of shared humanity was the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Its reporting across Europe focused on how the calamity affected ordinary people, and this created an imagined empathy with the sufferings of distant strangers.

From the 19th century onwards, the expansion of international trade brought with it new senses of interconnectedness. The early achievements of science and technology, wrapped up in modern ideas of progress and improvement, led to new understandings of responsibility and obligation. Secular approaches—as alternatives to religious practices—were also beginning to be applied to fighting poverty, and together with changes in media, advertising, and marketing, they gave rise to mass humanitarianism (Rozario 2003). Since the early 20th century, humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Oxfam, and innumerable subsequent organizations have been working to foster humanitarian sentiments among ever more

people. The emergence of child sponsorship, with its affective dimensions and the involvement of celebrities who have contributed to the emotionalization of humanitarianism, has been especially effective. As a result, humanitarian sentiments now include feelings of empowerment among Northern citizens that they can “Make Poverty History,” often with the help of new digital technologies (Roy 2010).

It is important to acknowledge the limits of humanitarian sentiments. They are often generated by individual stories of suffering that can discourage an understanding of the complexities of humanitarian situations. Sentiments can be fleeting and therefore provide unstable ground for action (Cohen 2001). When such action, be it charitable or political, does occur, it is characterized by the tension between seeing the sufferer as poor and in need of compassion and as an equal human being with whom to stand in solidarity (Fassin 2012). Last but not least, a focus on humanitarian sentiments must not neglect the material conditions, political dynamics, and structural causes of suffering. Instead, it can enrich our understanding of how these work in the world and contribute to mobilizing support for its alleviation.

*Anke Schwittay*

## References

- Cohen, S. (2001) *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Polity.
- Fassin, D. (2012) *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press.
- Haskell, T. (1985) Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibilities. *The American Historical Review*, 90(2): 339–361.
- Redfield, P., Bornstein, E. (2010) An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism. In: Bornstein, E., Redfield, P. eds. *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics*. SAR Press.
- Roy, A. (2010) *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*. Routledge.
- Rozario, K. (2003) “Delicious Horrors”: Mass Culture, The Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism. *American Quarterly*, 55(3): 417–455.
- Smith, A. (2018) [1759] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Digireads.com.
- Wilson, R.A., Brown, R.D. eds. (2009) *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*. Cambridge University Press.