

assimilate this information, incorporate it in their daily military duties and pass it on to their subordinates, maybe the judges of the international criminal tribunals currently being set up will have some spare time to listen to Franz Schubert's music, which the author seems to cherish...

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**Rony Brauman, *Le dilemme humanitaire. Entretien avec Philippe Petit*,<sup>1</sup> Éditions Textuel, Paris, 1996, 106 pp.**

What is very stimulating about Rony Brauman is the free-thinking approach, whether spontaneous or reflective, that he adopts in order to gain a clearer picture of the purpose of humanitarian action in today's world. In this short collection of interviews with the journalist Philippe Petit, the former President (1982 - 1994) of MSF-France<sup>2</sup> gives the reader a generous insight into his thought and creativity as he talks about the way humanitarian action has evolved and the main challenges it has to face. Compared with the current trend of stereotyped thinking, there is true delight to be found in this philosophical exercise offered by an accomplished practitioner of modern philanthropy, who at his best proves to be brilliant at demolishing generally accepted ideas.

With conventional "stamps of approval" excluded by definition from the conversation, the exchange of questions and answers spotlights the errors and shortcomings of humanitarian players against the setting of this century's major tragedies. We take a look back at the Second World War and the ICRC's deathly silence on the Jewish question, which Rony Brauman interprets as a logical consequence of all that remained unspoken from 1938, when the German Red Cross expelled its Jewish members in

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<sup>1</sup> *The humanitarian dilemma. Interview with Philippe Petit.*

<sup>2</sup> MSF: *Médecins sans frontières.*

droves. Stressing the untypical nature of this moral abdication, which can be explained to some extent by the prevalent refusal to see what was going on, he points out that the ICRC had condemned the use of gas in warfare during the First World War. During the decolonization period of the 1950s and 60s, development aid was at the top of the solidarity agenda, well ahead of humanitarian action. The 1970s, on the other hand, saw the emergence of, as Rosenau put it, "new agents free of national sovereignty",<sup>3</sup> including private charities, which began to move into areas traditionally reserved for States and diplomacy. *Médecins sans frontières* was created in 1971, after the Nigeria-Biafra war, by French Red Cross doctors led by Bernard Kouchner who were unhappy with neutrality. Emergency aid then became overlaid with a duty to speak out in public, an attitude which, in the author's view, amounted in the event to involuntary propaganda in favour of the Biafran secessionist cause. In 1979, after some very lively internal debates, MSF took a majority decision to adopt an independent and more operational structure, detaching itself by the same token from the informal early "legitimists", represented by Bernard Kouchner. Making MSF more professional was also, for Rony Brauman, a way of undoing the harm done by the sort of "third-worldism and poetic illusion" which was so deeply ingrained in the minds of young left-wingers at the time. "With Claude Malhuret, we began systematically to criticize tyrannies in virtuous disguise." This deconditioning was followed up by increasingly firm opposition to State humanitarianism, institutionalized in 1988 by the ever-present Bernard Kouchner, who had meanwhile been elevated to the status of Minister of the Republic: "A State is always suspected of ulterior motives (...) and inevitably places contacts with the authorities on the level of political transaction". What really arouses Brauman's indignation, however, is the shameful "cover-up" of injustice that results from State humanitarianism, as in Kurdistan, Somalia, Rwanda or Bosnia-Herzegovina, insofar as it "served more to mask our own collective abdication in the face of large-scale excesses than to strengthen any resolve to eliminate them". As a means of countering this trend, Rony Brauman quite rightly urges governments to make use of the instruments of international humanitarian law which they have ratified.

For MSF-France, one of the great testing grounds has been Ethiopia, which from 1984 was ravaged by famine. "MSF protested against the

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations are ICRC translations.

forced population transfers organized by the Ethiopian government using the logistic resources of international aid (...). The idea that humanitarian action can be used to impose a cruel political measure, and will not necessarily serve the interests of the victims in the end, is the basic lesson to emerge from Ethiopia." This stance was to lead to the expulsion of MSF from the country in 1986, for which Rony Brauman accepts full responsibility. He sets this responsibility in clear opposition to the demagogic sentimentality of Bob Geldof, the organizer of the "concert of the century", who "just made the situation worse and aggravated the plight of the very people he was trying to help".

Whence the notion of the humanitarian trap, which became a commonplace in the debate on the right of interference.

Taking his consideration of the perverse effects of humanitarian aid a step further, the author roundly condemns "the mechanization of humanitarian action", with all its paraphernalia of "trucks, four-wheel drive vehicles, walkie-talkies, satellite-operated telephones and computers, which create an artificial environment, placing the teams in a quasi-virtual world where time and space are measured in units quite foreign to the country where they are operating". This "bubble" effect, the antidote for which consists in greater simplicity and common sense, tends to make the "humanitarian horde" behave irresponsibly and to increase the risks in the field.

A further concern is the excessive media attention focused on humanitarian action. While admitting the need for information, and especially the value of pictures, which are so often indispensable for the conduct of relief work, Rony Brauman rejects the view that television could prevent "another Auschwitz". "For a mere technique to become, as if by magic, a moral or political standard is already dubious. But to go on spouting such inanities after all the horrors that have occurred at the end of this century is frankly beyond belief."

With his scrutiny of the links between humanitarian and political action, Rony Brauman drives a wedge into the sacrosanct principle that one should not abandon victims unless forced to do so. Taking the view that the margin allowed for humanitarian action was not always wide enough to work in, and that humanitarian operations were all too clearly a fig-leaf for political inaction, MSF-France took the decision to withdraw, either provisionally or *sine die*, from situations as varied as Somalia, Zaire, the former Yugoslavia (after Vukovar), or Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. To leave or to stay is a dilemma that can arise anywhere at any time, as the ICRC well knows. The choice becomes even more

difficult when it depends on parameters such as the degree of danger or ethical doubts, areas in which the threshold of acceptability is particularly hard to establish. What will become of the French-led "ethic of refusal" remains to be seen, in view of MSF's current efforts to strengthen its central structure and make it more international.

Displaying a lucidity which is at times disheartening, Rony Brauman occasionally indulges in sweeping generalizations, such as when he states that non-governmental organizations maintain an artificial climate of emergency to serve their own material ends and to keep a high profile. To avoid picking the wrong target, he might have done better to support his argument with a sharper reminder of the root causes of conflicts. In this sense, his systematic but rather reductive dismantling of the humanitarian phenomenon could ultimately have a demotivating effect. There is no denying, however, the relevance of most of his clinical observations, which show no trace of leniency. And if some admissions of failure seem to be attributable to passing moments of disillusion, they may also be a way of arousing our vigilance, which is so easily dissipated.

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### **Recent publications**

*Annual Report 1995*, by the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1996, 346 pp.

The *Annual Report* gives a full account of the ICRC's operational activities in 1995 and of its work to promote international humanitarian law, including the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. The reader will also find useful information of a general nature on the ICRC.