

Humanitarian action in times of “war on terror”

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In 1991, Jean-Christophe Rufin published *L'Empire et les nouveaux barbares* (*The Empire and the new barbarians*). Two years after the fall of the Berlin wall, he who was then vice-president of Médecins Sans Frontières sent back to back the thesis of *The End of history* developed by Francis Fukuyama and that of the Clash of Civilisations by Samuel Huntington. He announced that a North-South divide would risk succeeding East-West rivalry, one between the Empire – this now pacified world where wealth was concentrated – and the South, inhabited by those who would soon be considered as the avatars of the “barbarians” of the Roman Empire, and menaced by poverty and wars. Long maintained on the outskirts of the free and rich world, they would not be long before expressing their anger, their desperation, and their need for solidarity. After the alert of 9/11, the Empire did not understand, starting a “war on terror” that would only stir up the fire. Twenty-five years later, in the aftermath of the attacks in Paris and Brussels, but also Bamako, Peshawar or Kabul, the analysis of Jean-Christophe Rufin has lost nothing of its acuteness.

Since 1945, we thought the world to be at peace. We were wrong. Since the Paris attacks, we believe we are at war. I do not think that we are right. Whatever, between these two periods, the situation of humanitarian action will never be the same again.

Asymmetrical peace

After the victory against nazism, an equilibrium called the cold war was built. On the condition of being on the right side of the iron curtain, that war had the appearance of peace. Sheltered under the nuclear umbrella, Europe, the United States and Japan enjoyed a prosperity never attained in the history of humanity. Once the Berlin wall was built, the spectre of an armed confrontation was pushed far away and it was not before the nineties that gunfire was heard on the European continent (and even, only on its Balkan hinterland).

Nonetheless, if we were in peace, the rest of the world continued to be war-torn. Wars of confrontation between the East and the West, as in Korea or in Vietnam; wars of decolonisation, from Algeria to Kenya; wars of secession in Eritrea or Sri-Lanka; Israeli-Palestinian wars; communitarian wars in Lebanon or in Rwanda; ethnic wars in Liberia, etc. Some polemicists have calculated that these “dusts of war”, following Christophe de Ponfilly’s¹ expression, have caused more victims than WWII. And nonetheless we felt we were at peace.

¹ Christophe de Ponfilly was a journalist, producer, film maker and author. Very close to French humanitarians and with a passion for Afghanistan where he had known Commander Massoud, he produced in particular “The fighters of Insolence” (Albert Londres prize, 1985) – *Les Combattants de l'Insolence* – and published “Clandestine lives. Our Afghan Years” (Florence Massot Présente, 2001) – *Vies Clandestines. Nos années afghanes* (editor’s note).

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America, through its Imperial responsibilities, continued during these years to be militarily present in the world. But old Europe, finally delivered of its colonies, this “white man’s burden” could savour its entry into the club of the wealthy. For the first time in a long time it was not her who encountered violence and shortages. It was not her who needed to be aided. On the contrary, she could afford the luxury of generosity.

War, that she was not suffering any more physically, she was content with deploring while gazing at the TV screen. Indignation and compassion replaced suffering and deprivation. It is this way that being the last entrant into the donor club, we built the most modern humanitarian tool: borderless type associations.

Humanitarian engagement thus became our response mode to wars that did not menace us any more but that challenged us morally. Like all humans living under democracy, Tocqueville had seen it well: we were expressing solidarity as we had the capacity to suffering in the place of others.

This was the beginning of a new era, that of full humanitarian action. Charitable initiative was first undertaken by independent NGOs, then, after the end of the cold war, the action mode of armies in peace operations and finally the justification for powerful deployments as in Libya. But all this was taking place far away and we could still, like Lucretius, contemplate the damage from the inviolate sanctuary of our territory.

The imbalance of terror

Then came the attacks of January and November 2015 in Paris. The curtain of compassion was torn and all of a sudden conflicts that were believed to be far away, that of Syria in particular, showed that they could produce devastating effects right here. 9/11 had already been an alert. But it concerned the United States, a country militarily exposed, with many in Europe thinking, without speaking aloud, that if it was now vulnerable, this had been in a way sought out.

Whereas us, we consider ourselves as innocent. More, even, as good. Haven’t we sought during all these years to do good, support development, alleviate the suffering of victims of all catastrophes, whether natural or provoked by human passion?

And this is how we are thanked! By hitting us cowardly. By assassinating peaceful cartoonists, by killing debonair and peace minded youths, sitting at café terraces, gathering tightly in the sweet fraternity of a Rock concert. Those who have done this can only be monsters. They are attacking our values. They mistake our kindness for weakness. And now politicians, always ready to polish their tarnished emblem, shout the supreme cry: “Its war.” War rhetoric is everywhere. Speeches now all start by these words pronounced with forceful chin postures: “We are at war. We will not bend in face of the menace”. And up to this antiphrasis – “We will continue to live as before” – which means on the contrary: nothing will ever be like before.

Are we at war? The answer is not purely theoretical. It is heavy with consequences.

Without developing the analysis too length-ily, I would say that our present alert is only the other side of our past blindness. Contrary to what we had wanted to believe, the world has always been at war. The difference is only the end of an exception, of a peculiarity, of an abnormality: we are not out of the game anymore.

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We are subject to violence, as the others. Like America, Russia, Lebanon, Africa, the Indian sub-continent, etc. We are caught up by the tragedy of history and from now on we cannot allow ourselves more or less irresponsible moral gesticulations. The world is dangerous. We have interests to defend, our survival to ensure. We have enemies and alliances, which are sometimes confused...

The failure of warlike rhetoric

There are territories in the world in which we are engaged in wars: Mali, the Central African Republic, Iraq and Syria. Is France herself, for this reason, at war? It seems to me that it is useless and dangerous to proclaim it. Other European countries, Spain or Great Britain in particular, also hit by terrorist attacks, did not declare themselves at war for that purpose. Of course we must act for our security but all the while avoiding boastfulness as George Bush did. The “war against terrorism” is a slogan that Americans themselves do not use any more since Obama and with reason. This does not mean that they do not carry out offensive operations (that go up to targeted assassination) but they do it without saying so. Whereas we speak a lot, with the risk of adopting the posture of main enemy for the terrorists. And compared to these theatrical effects, our weakness is all the more ridiculous. The case of the deprivation of citizenship was its most miserable illustration². Much ado for nothing...

There is worse: by proclaiming that we are at war, we make the population believe that the response, in France, could be of a military nature. Nothing restores better the virility of our politicians than to assign “Alpine hunters” (*chasseurs alpins*) in railroad stations³. Khaki quick! And the main effect of this deployment is to weaken our military capacities, to sabotage troop morale, all this for a rather limited profit. Who has ever seen a soldier on patrol arrest a terrorist?

Let's be precise: we are attacked. That is the word. If an answer is required, it is on the side of the police and of intelligence agencies. It is there that the effort must be made. It is also social and educational. It is more difficult and takes more time to obtain results in these fields than to spread out soldiers on sidewalks.

Alas, the harm is done. The theme of war has entered minds. From the point of view of humanitarian action it must be taken into account. Because there also exists here a great danger. Since we have developed our charitable zeal in a period of peace, we can fear that it will fall back brutally, now that we have been convinced that we are at war. Security imperatives take priority over any other consideration, in particular solidarity. This shift can be witnessed in advertisements: when aiming to reach young people who want to do something for others, it is not to incite them to join NGOs but to suggest that they volunteer for the army.

This atmosphere, added to the new questions arising from the influx of migrants and security concerns for expatriates in many places in the world, announce difficult times for humanitarian engagement.

It will be necessary to invent new forms of action, adapted to these new circumstances.

More than ever, humanitarian engagement carries these democratic values that one risks destroying while pretending to defend them. Let us not be mistaken. A major crisis looms ahead.

² French Parliament turned down at the beginning of 2015 a presidential proposal to deprive of French citizenship any convicted terrorist holding dual nationality (editor's note).

³ Elite military units based in the Alps (editor's note).

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It is up to us to make it understood that the solution is not war but a new and powerful mixture of security, solidarity and humanity that can alone allow our societies to live without betraying their spirit.

Translated from the French by Philip Wade

Biography • Jean-Christophe Rufin

Jean-Christophe Rufin is a medical doctor and a writer. Starting with an essay (The Humanitarian Trap – *Le Piège humanitaire* –, 1986), he went into novel writing with the Abyssinian – *L'Abyssin* – in 1997, obtained the Goncourt prize in 2001 with Red Brazil – *Rouge Brésil* – and was elected to the French Academy in 2008. His writings have been translated into numerous languages. He accomplished his first humanitarian mission in Eritrea in 1976 and was, in particular, advisor to the Secretary of State for human rights (1986-1988), Cultural and cooperation Attaché in Brazil (1989-1990), Advisor to the minister of Defence (1993-1994) and French Ambassador to Senegal and Gambia (2007-2010). He has also been Vice-president of Médecins Sans Frontières (1991-1992) and President of Action against Hunger (2003-2006) being today its President of honour. As a member of the Action against Hunger Foundation, he is on the Steering Council of the *Humanitarian Alternatives* review.

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