

capturing cultural meanings in a society and how to analyse fieldnotes. The importance of revealing and incorporating people's meanings into the final analysis is vital for getting a better understanding of the society in focus. The final chapter discusses how one can produce a complete ethnographic manuscript, through an approach that concentrates on balancing the analytic proposition with local meanings.

On the whole, these instructions on how to write ethnographic fieldnotes and how ethnographers can avoid certain mistakes make clear that ultimately it is a matter of experience and training. Nevertheless what distinguishes this book from others on the same topic is the way it presents ideas by way of illustrations in a coherent manner. In addition, the authors provide a distinctive guide for creating a work plan and time schedule for those writing fieldnotes for the first time, and for those striving to enhance their own way of writing. This publication is thus highly recommendable for students and teachers of anthropology as well as for researchers in related fields interested in employing ethnographic methods in their work.

NOURA KAMAL

Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences (Austria)

Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian reason. A moral history of the present*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. xvi + 336 pp. Pb.: €22.99. ISBN 978-0-520-27117-3.

For some time now, social scientists have noted a resurgence of ethics in contemporary social, economic and political discourse, with humanitarianism constituting perhaps the most striking manifestation of this ethico-political entanglement. Among the existing literature on the topic (e.g. Humanitarian Studies Unit 2001; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010), *Humanitarian reason* stands out for its rigorous and lucid analysis of the logics and contradictions underlying Western humanitarianism. Didier Fassin's double background

– as a social anthropologist having studied humanitarianism in various contexts over the past decade and as former vice-president of Médecins Sans Frontières – is visible not only in the unique ethnographic access this book draws from, but also in its skilfully balanced critique of compassion, treading a fine line between moral judgement and cynicism.

Humanitarian reason traces the recent emergence of humanitarianism as a particular form of government, and critically explores its inner workings and consequences in nine detailed case studies. The book's first part focuses on France's domestic politics concerning the poor (chapters 1 and 2), undocumented immigrants (chapter 3), and asylum seekers (chapters 4 and 5). Although this part may seem of limited interest to non-French readers, it offers an insightful analysis of the politicisation of medicine and the human body in the contemporary moral economic context. The second part focuses on international humanitarianism through the examples of child AIDS victims in post-apartheid South Africa (chapter 6), the 'Tragedia' disaster in Chavez's Venezuela (chapter 7), Palestinian teenagers during the second Intifada (chapter 8), and the work of humanitarian organisations such as MSF (chapter 9). It is in this part, besides the introduction and the conclusion, that Fassin offers the most pertinent analytical reflections on humanitarianism per se. Even though all nine chapters have been independently published before, they have been substantially rewritten and converge well in offering a larger picture and critique of contemporary humanitarian reason.

Humanitarianism, for Fassin, is based on the notion of humanity as a global moral community in which all lives are considered equal, and needs to be understood as a mode of governing. Humanitarian government, then, refers to the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics (p. 1), replacing a politics of rights and justice with an ethics of suffering and compassion. Both despite and because of this ethics, however, humanitarianism unavoidably ends up instituting inequality or even perpetrating violence by rendering some lives more valuable than others.

Humanitarianism's victims (in both senses) are often reduced to their bare, biological lives while their subjectivities, histories, and thus their humanity are ignored in the quest to ensure their survival. Ultimately, humanitarian reason tends to oversimplify or even conceal complex realities of suffering and injustice, which, Fassin argues, are better understood and addressed through the register of political economy.

As a political analysis of humanitarianism as the predominant moral economy underlying modern Western societies, identity and politics, *Humanitarian reason* achieves its objective brilliantly. Its analytic style is clear and compelling, its ethnographical material well researched and organised, and its argument timely and well balanced. Nevertheless, it is worth noting some of this book's limitations, apart from the incorrect German translations on page 247 (mankind should be 'Menschheit' and humaneness 'Menschlichkeit'). Firstly, it should be stressed that its analysis only applies to contemporary *Western* societies, not to contemporary societies in general, as Fassin argues in a somewhat too generalising manner. As anthropologists are well aware, there are many ways in which the human is conceived, and different ways in which moral sentiments do or do not inform politics globally. Implicitly taking Western notions of the human as universal (despite providing an insightful genealogy of their Christian roots), Fassin ends up ignoring cultural and moral diversity where they would appear to be most pertinent, namely in international humanitarian governance.

A second important limitation lies in *Humanitarian reason's* rather one-sided analysis of Western moral economy, neglecting its economic dimension in favour of politics and morality. This is unfortunate, given the clear economic agenda behind most humanitarian interventions of international agencies and nation states, and the neoliberal conflation of economic and moral values more generally. The most common moral act in the contemporary world is the donation of money, and a large part of humanitarianism consists of generating and channelling this material flow of compassion. No moral history of the present can afford

to ignore the extent to which contemporary ethics are tied to the form of money, and thus to capitalist economy.

Within the territory demarcated by these limitations, however, *Humanitarian reason* constitutes an outstanding study of contemporary Western moral and political economy, and an excellent example of the critical contribution public anthropology can make by engaging ongoing public debates on larger social, moral and political issues. This book is highly recommended for graduate students and scholars of political and moral (and to some extent medical) anthropology, sociology, political science and related subjects, as well as for political analysts and moral theorists outside academia.

References

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STEPHAN KLOOS

Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences (Austria)

Fedele, Anna and Ruy Llera Blanes (eds.) 2011. *Encounters of body and soul in contemporary religious practices*. New York: Berghahn Books. 252 pp. Hb.: \$85.00/£50.00. ISBN 978-0-85745-207-8

The chapters gathered together in this valuable collection of ethnographic reflections on the concepts of body and soul in contemporary religious cultures were originally presented in a workshop at the 2008 EASA conference in Ljubljana. The book is divided into three parts, including a section on Roman Catholic