A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention, and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order*

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Les interventions dans les « cas d'urgences humanitaires complexes » sont devenues une partie essentielle de la société planétaire. Le texte fournit un compte rendu de la conception des « urgences » en termes d'imaginaire social qui procure une caractéristique à la fois de la perception et de l'action. Cet imaginaire moule la définition et la rhétorique des urgences, les façons dont elles se présentent et sont reconnues, et l'organisation de l'intervention. Il reflète à la fois l'anxiété face au risque et une foi moderne envahissante en la capacité de gérer les problèmes. Quoique les événements exigeant ces interventions — par exemple, au Soudan — soient souvent rapportés comme étant manifestement convaincants, l'« imaginaire social des urgences » organise conceptuellement ce système.

Interventions into "complex humanitarian emergencies" have become a central part of global society. This article provides an account of the construction of "emergencies" in terms of a social imaginary that gives characteristic form to both perception and action. This imaginary shapes the definition and rhetoric of emergencies, the ways in which they are produced and recognized, and the organization of intervention. It reflects both anxiety in the face of risk and a pervasive modern faith in capacity to manage problems. Though the events demanding these interventions—for example, in Sudan—are often presented as transparently compelling, the "social imaginary of emergencies" conceptually structures this system.

IN THE MIDST OF WORLD WAR II, Pitirim Sorokin (1968) wrote one of the first important sociological studies of "emergencies," *Man and Society in Calamity: The Effects of War, Revolution, Famine, Pestilence upon Human Mind, Behavior, Social Organization and Cultural Life.* Predictably, Sorokin was concerned to situate the immediate situation in relation to long-term social and cultural dynamics. How did different sorts of cultures take hold of calamities, he asked, and how did calamities change

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social and cultural organization? The theme was not altogether new to Sorokin (1975), who wrote on the human experience and impact of hunger in the wake of World War I and the Soviet Revolution.[1] And the theme was enduring. Decades later, Sorokin (1964) brooded over the dissolution of a sensate culture in decline and, especially, the question of what might effect a renewal of ideational and eventually idealistic values. Sorokin sought to do his part to encourage more "creative altruism" and he worried that sociology in general was not doing its part. But he also wondered whether the world would recognize the importance of altruism only when shocked by unprecedented "tragedy, suffering and crucifixion."

Impressive altruism has indeed shaped responses to the world's tragedies in recent years. Since World War II, and especially since 1989, there has been an extraordinary growth in the number of non-governmental organizations devoted to providing humanitarian assistance to those suffering the effects of wars, famines, and diseases. Organizations like *Médecins Sans Frontières* are paradigmatic, and are among the most morally admired in the world. Calamities have always garnered media attention, and this is only more evident in this era of "real time" and heavily visual electronic media. It is also linked to successful charitable fund-raising and pressures for interventions to stop suffering.

But the social sciences have still not paid as much attention to calamities as they might. There is a notable, but still small, subfield of disaster research. But this has remained mostly quite specialized, and there has not been enough integration of attention to disasters with the rest of sociological theory and research. Specifically, there has not been enough attention given to calamities, emergencies, and disasters in the context of sociological accounts of globalization, and it is to this task that I would like to contribute today. I want to outline the way in which I think the emergency—for this, rather than "calamity" has become the standard term—has been woven into a social imaginary, a way of seeing the world that fundamentally shapes action in it.

International and global affairs have come to be constructed largely in terms of the opposition between more or less predictable systems of relationships and flows and the putatively unpredictable eruptions of emergencies. This reflects both the idea that it is possible and desirable to "manage" global affairs, and the idea that many, if not all, of the conflicts and crises that challenge global order are the result of exceptions to it. It also underwrites what I think is most dramatically new in the relationship among governance, violence, and the use of force today: the apparent compulsion to intervene. This, I think, we cannot understand simply by realist reference to state interests or culturalist accounts of civilizational clashes. It is certainly a matter of material interests; emergency relief and intervention is a huge industry if one analyses it thus. And it is a matter of cultural

1. This was originally written in 1917–1919.

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understanding, but not simply the sort of "culture as inheritance" that shapes accounts like Samuel Huntington's. Rather, it is a new cultural construction. As the idea of a global order produced not by empire but by a system of nation-states involved the development of a characteristic way of imagining the world, and was then made real in action, so does the idea of emergencies. "Emergency" is a way of grasping problematic events, a way of imagining them that emphasizes their apparent unpredictability, abnormality and brevity, and that carries the corollary that response—intervention—is necessary. The international emergency, it is implied, both can and should be managed.

The management of emergencies is a very big business and a very big part of what multilateral agencies and NGOs do. It is a central theme in what drives states to spend money internationally. And if its most attractive face is that of humanitarian assistance—by some accounts the most morally unambiguous and respected occupation in the world today—the management of emergencies is also a central way in which force is deployed. Moreover, the notion of keeping the humanitarian and the military sharply distinct has come under enormous stress; it is perhaps a lost cause.[2] In the context of the break-up of Yugoslavia and of the central African wars and genocides, it seemed to many that military interventions were necessary humanitarian responses to certain sorts of emergencies.[3] Even those who sought to keep the work of humanitarian assistance "neutral" found this increasingly difficult, partly because they could not avoid working with armies or in zones controlled by one or another party to combat. And at the same time, campaigners for human rights were commonly unsympathetic to arguments that humanitarian assistance required neutrality.

Both the very extent of demands for humanitarian assistance and problems in delivering it have produced a crisis in the world of humanitarian emergency aid. We shall not deal adequately with that crisis, I want to suggest, unless we can approach it not just as a matter of operational logistics, fundraising, and moral dilemmas, but with attention to the underlying social and cultural dynamics that shape both the production of emergencies and the production of responses. My theory is not Sorokin's, but I think my concern for this problem is very much in the spirit of Sorokin.

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2. This is a crucial theme in discussions of "crises of humanitarianism," an important theme, but not the one I focus on here. See Rieff (2003), as well as Stedman and Tanner (2003).
3. Arguments for military intervention were by no means confined to left-liberals (or erstwhile left-liberals), but it was novel for left-liberals to be among the most active advocates of military intervention. Arguments were often rooted in a humanitarian agenda, and the Rwandan genocide became a symbol of the implications of failure to act. For many "action" clearly meant military action to stop the genocide after its onset—rather than other kinds of actions initiated much earlier. For various sides in this debate see Brown, 2003; Duffield, 2001; Finnemore, 2003; Power, 2002; Wheeler, 2002. Michael Barnett (2002) addresses the role of the UN in Rwanda. Among the journalistic reports that focussed attention on the absence of intervention in Rwanda, see Gourevitch (1999) and Melvern (2000). Alan Kuperman (2001) makes the case that successful intervention in Rwanda (after the killing had started) was more or less "logistically" impossible.

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The Emergency Imaginary

On the evening news, "emergency" is now the primary term for referring to a range of catastrophes, conflicts, and settings for human suffering. Perhaps even more importantly, it is the category organizing humanitarian responses. Even excluding military dimensions, these cost tens of billions of dollars a year in what amounts to a substantial industry—if still small compared to automobiles, electronics, or the military—and mobilize tens of thousands of paid workers and volunteers through the United Nations, multilateral organizations, bilateral aid agencies, and NGOs. Emergency is thus a category that shapes the way in which we understand and respond to specific events, and the limits to what we think are possible actions and implications. Think for a moment of Rwanda and Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Colombia and Peru, Israel and Palestine, the former Yugoslavia, and, of course, September 11th, the resulting crises in Afghanistan and now Iraq. Each of these is commonly spoken of as an "emergency." But why, and with what distortions?

A discourse of emergencies is now central to international affairs. It shapes not only humanitarian assistance, but also military intervention and the pursuit of public health. Use of the category of emergencies in this discourse is in fact related to how it is used in other settings—for example, in speaking of financial emergencies, though these are usually analysed very separately. I will not take up all the ways in which the word emergency is used; my interest is not so much in the word itself as in a discursive formation that shapes both our awareness of the world and decisions about possible interventions into social problems. It is closely related to the much-analysed notion of "crisis" and emergency thinking has relations to crisis-thinking. But the idea of crisis suggests a determinant turning point that, commonly, the idea of emergency does not. Emergency suggests instead a similar urgency, but not a similar directionality or immanent resolution.

Let me foreshadow three themes: note how the term naturalizes what are in fact products of human action and specifically violent conflict. Note how it represents as sudden, unpredictable and short-term what are usually gradually developing, predictable, and enduring clusters of events and interactions. And note how it simultaneously locates in particular settings what are in fact crises produced, at least partially, by global forces, and dislocates the standpoint of observation from that of the wealthy global North to a view from nowhere.

It is as though there were a well-oiled, smoothly functioning "normal" system of global processes, in which business and politics and the weather all interacted properly. Occasionally, though, there emerge special cases where something goes wrong—a build-up of plaque in the global arteries causes a stroke, there is a little too much pressure in one of the global boiler rooms—and quick action is needed to compensate.

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This notion of "emergency" is produced and reproduced in social imagination, at a level that Charles Taylor (2002) has described as between explicit doctrine and the embodied knowledge of habitus. It is more than simply an easily definable concept because it is part of a complex package of terms through which the social world is simultaneously grasped and constructed, and produced and reproduced, together with others in the social imaginary. Emergency is, in this vocabulary, partially analogous to nation, corporation, market, or public. Each of these is produced as a basic structuring image and gives shape to how we understand the world, ourselves, and the nature and potential of social action. While many factors, material and social, go into the production of specific emergencies, we need to inquire into the cultural processes of the social imaginary to grasp why they are understood through this category and what the implications are.

A "Wave" of Emergencies

At the moment, one international NGO lists 25 emergencies of pressing humanitarian concern; 23 of the 25 are conflict-related (Relief Web, 2004).[4] It is primarily these conflict-related emergencies that led the United Nations University and World Institute for Development Economics Research to speak at the end of the 1990s of "the *wave* of emergencies of the last decade" (Klugman, 1999). The various factors are summed up by the United Nations, which says that countries face "complex emergencies" when they confront "armed conflicts affecting large civilian populations through direct violence, forced displacement and food scarcity, resulting in malnutrition, high morbidity and mortality" (Relief Web, 2001). "Complex" here is mostly a polite way of saying that there are multiple sides in a conflict, not merely victims, and that they are often still fighting. Of course, there is much the definition does not convey, including the fact that this suffering is inflicted mainly on the less developed world, though it also poses huge risks for the more developed world.

The term, "complex emergency" gained currency toward the end of the 1980s. It seems to have been coined in Mozambique where it especially reflected the idea that the UN needed to negotiate simultaneously with the Renamo movement and the government in order to provide assistance outside the framework of its standard country agreements (UNICEF, 1999). Mozambique became a success story in providing effective help for refugees and displaced persons. Whether or not this was the precise origin of the term "complex emergency," it points to a core theme: the idea that some emergencies have multiple causes, involve multiple local actors, and compel an international response. The Sudanese civil war and its related

4. The total of 25 is up from 22 in late 2002. The two "non-conflict-related" emergencies are: 1) the Horn of Africa drought that is clearly conflict-exacerbated; and 2) the "Southern Africa Humanitarian Crisis" in which drought, floods, and both AIDS and malaria are intertwined.

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refugee and famine crises provided another ready example at about the same time. So did population displacements and ethnic fighting in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Neither can stand equally as a success story.

The idea of a wave of emergencies reflects the notion that the global system somehow worked less well during the 1990s. Perhaps, in some ways, this was true, due to the adjustment to the end of the Cold War. Its problems have only multiplied in the current decade. But notice that the imagery of a "wave" suggests not friction within the system, but surges from outside. The other common image is of a need for early warning, as though the issue were the increasing failure rate of established cybernetic feedback mechanisms. What this obscures is that the wave of emergencies arises precisely as globalization is extended and intensified, not as it deteriorates.

The emergency imaginary, the deployment of the idea of emergency as a means of taking hold of these crises, also complements the growth of humanitarian intervention on a new scale. This is celebrated in various theories of cosmopolitan consciousness and the spread of thinking in terms of human rights. On the one hand, these bring out a sense of ethical obligation rooted in global interconnections. This is manifested even in a kind of humanitarian vocation in which many discover their most meaningful orientation to the world. On the other hand, the idea of cosmopolitan politics also reflects a distanced view on the global system, a view from nowhere or an impossible everywhere that encourages misrecognition of the actual social locations from which distant troubles appear as emergencies (Calhoun, 2003b). This is often a complement to a managerial orientation to the global system, as the same emergency imaginary shapes thinking about financial crises and famines. Where there is a discontinuity, there must be intervention to restore linearity.

Complex emergencies—and for that matter financial, ecological and other sorts of emergencies—affect all human beings. But the idea of managing them is a concern and orientation that figures especially prominently in those countries, such as the United States, Japan, Canada, and the members of the E.U., that are large-scale international donors and senders of relief workers. These countries, and a few others, also have special concerns because their relative peace and prosperity depend in considerable part on how well or poorly they and their agents do in reducing both the human cost of emergencies and the social, economic, and political violence and instability of which they are a part and which they make worse. In the background, then, is the fact that one fifth of the world's countries command four fifths of its income—which even the World Bank now stresses as a basic economic and human security problem. As one American commentator writing in *Foreign Affairs* recently put it: "The rich world [has] increasingly realized that its interests are threatened by chaos, and that it lacks the tools to fix the problem" (Mallaby, 2002: 5). This writer goes on to suggest that the solution is to reinstate imperialism in a new form, with the

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U.S. taking the lead. This was perhaps a surprising idea when published in 2002 but by 2003, especially after the invasion and occupation of Iraq, it was a commonplace to describe the U.S. as an imperial power—and if this is more often criticized, it is sometimes proudly claimed.[5] The production of emergencies, and the need to address them, has become one of the rationales for assertion of global power.

This was clearly evident in the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, as in the securitization of many kinds of global flows and transactions following 9/11. Whatever the merits of the invasion of Iraq, though, it should be understood less in terms of defeating enemies or conquering territories or populations (though both may have been involved) and more as part of a project of managing a world of emergencies—actual and threatened. Whether pre-emptive war was a good idea or not, it was not mainly a traditional calculus of either imperial ambition or conflict between opposing geopolitical or ideological positions that guided it. Rather, it was the effort to minimize potential negative consequences of instability. The neoconservative argument that the greatest foreign policy weakness of the U.S. lies in its entanglement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict relates to this, both in the direct terms of the instability of that struggle, which is still termed an emergency after half a century, and in the indirect terms of all the potential terrorist actions, arms trade, and other ancillary effects of the core struggle.

This suggests, among other things, that even if empire is a useful metaphor for thinking about U.S. hegemony in an apparently unipolar world, it is not an entirely precise analytical concept. There are similarities between the extension of U.S. power today and the development of empires in earlier times. Some similar analytic questions may apply, such as whether it is inevitable that "imperial" powers will overreach themselves by taking on military burdens their economies cannot support (Kennedy, 1989). But there is also a sharp difference. The U.S. has been eager to disengage after "policing" states or regions it considers "problems." It is true that, although George Bush campaigned with attacks on the idea of nation-building he has embraced something of that strategy in Iraq.[6] Yet the U.S. commitment to Iraq is limited, with early deadlines for disengagement. Similar issues are evident in the U.S. neglect of Afghanistan, still an emergency for many locally but off the agenda for major U.S. attention (let alone development assistance). And the way in which reconstruction is (or

5. Niall Ferguson (2003) became symbolic of the argument that the U.S. had become an empire and ought to rise to the task. Hardt and Negri (2001) were the most visible left critics of empire (though their argument so minimally underwrote practical action that they were only critics in the most abstract of senses).

6. In some ways the U.S. seems less like the British Empire in its heyday, as idealized by Ferguson, than like Britain and France towards the end of their colonial era, when they decided colonies were too expensive, and that a "developmental" approach was needed to produce nation-states at least plausibly ready for independence and as graceful an imperial exit as possible. See Cooper (2003: 1–3), longer version in Calhoun, Cooper, and Moore (forthcoming).

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isn't) handled in Iraq will also be telling. The U.S. reluctance to rely on the UN has received considerable attention (and as the U.S. apparently has now decided it needs the UN in at least some capacities, it will be interesting to see whether the UN is able to steer its involvement effectively or must merely accept the U.S.-structured environment for its work). Decisions to rely heavily on private, for-profit contractors and to treat non-profit organizations as though they are simply another form of private contractor are also momentous. Should NGOs be measured against standards similar to those used for business corporations—and found either effective or too "soft" for the task of post-conflict reconstruction (as some in the U.S. administration have suggested)? What does this, as well as the fact that work proceeds only under close military or quasi-military administration, mean for the idea of "humanitarian assistance"?

Humanitarian interventions became dramatically more frequent and prominent in the 1990s. They responded to the rise of a world of emergencies and the ideal of responding to human needs in each case without attention to the reasons why suffering had intensified. This has proved repeatedly fraught with potential contradictions, not least between humanitarian action that withholds evaluation of regimes and other actors producing conflict and human rights analyses and advocacy that depend on such evaluations. Humanitarian interventions reflect the refusal to treat "disasters" as merely matters of fate, approaching them instead as emergencies that demand action. But relying on humanitarian approaches alone is in tension with analysis of the factors that make emergencies recurrent and with effective action to change them.

Bad Things Happen

The rise of the new rhetoric of emergencies marks, among other things, a shift from accepting chance or fate as an adequate account of many problems. "Disaster" is among the oldest and most universal of human ideas, but its meaning is shifting. The Latin root of the English word suggests astrology, with its reference to the stars that guide human fate being out of alignment. It evokes the image of the world as structured by ubiquitous correspondences that Foucault traced in the "classical age" and that appear in a variety of premodern guises (Foucault, 1971). Imagining the world thus joins all the different orders of things into a whole, and connects each to all the others, giving one sort of meaning to misfortune. Individual fates are joined to collective ones by their embeddedness in this common system of correspondences, as individuals are joined to each other and to nature even while hierarchically distinguished in the image of a Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy, 1936).[7]

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7. This is the image against which Taylor (2002) contrasts "Modern Social Imaginaries."

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Locating individual and collective fortunes amid these ubiquitous correspondences offered a way of making sense of them, as the Great Chain of Being made sense of other aspects of existence. This did not mean that fate thereby became easy to accept; the order in the system was not always self-evident in nature and often required some notion of an incomprehensible God determining apparently arbitrary reality. In a Christian vocabulary, God's grace was beyond human understanding; to Neoplatonists, the chain of being could be one of decline, as emanations of the divine were merged with matter and more perfect causes issued in less perfect effects. In other traditions, the issue was more one of gaining or losing the favour of the gods. "Fortuna," thus, was the Roman goddess of fate and chance. Fortuna looked after the fates of mortals and it was hubris to think that mere human actions could control the destinies decreed from on high. Yet, Fortuna's statue was kept veiled, because she was held to be ashamed of the capriciousness of the fates she bestowed on mortals.

We moderns are less likely simply to accept fate, less likely to see meaning in disasters than to see precisely the absence of meaning. The imagery of a "risk society" suggests something of this, and indeed a sense of risk is pervasive. This evokes not just a sense of potential harm—emphasized in much discussion of "risk society"—but a specifically statistical understanding of the "chances" of harm.[8] This may produce a pervasive sense of insecurity, though it is hard to compare ontological insecurity across time and space and culture. While it is clear that human beings have a historically unprecedented capacity to destroy the world, it is not clear that we live in greater daily fear as a result. That in many senses we—at least people in the developed world—face *less* risk than our ancestors is manifested in longer life expectancies. It seems important to look, then, not simply at the prominence of risk, but at the specific ways in which risk and threat are conceptualized. This shapes the social organization of fear and the distribution of a sense of vulnerability.

Moreover, we moderns are apt not only to rail against fate but also to believe we can alter it. The notion of risk is immediately joined by that of risk management. And certainly, through technology, trade, scientific understanding and creative energy, we have in fact remade the world in many ways. We have time and again traversed what seemed to be the limits of human existence. We are reluctant to believe that any aspect of fortune is out of our control, dictated by stars or gods. Yet we certainly have not escaped disasters.

To start with, we have not even escaped some of the oldest kinds of collective disasters: crop failures, earthquakes, fires and floods. These continue, and indeed many recur with new severity because changing patterns

8. Much has been written of the "risk society," usually in terms of the ontological anxieties that drive moderns to dream of community, and of how the autonomy that individuation offers is undercut by a pervasive sense of vulnerability. Environmental concerns provide primary examples. See Beck, 1992; Baumann, 2001; Giddens, 1990.

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of human settlement and economic production make us more vulnerable. That the earth's population has grown so dramatically in recent years is testimony to our ability to defeat diseases, improve nutrition, and heal wounds. Yet, this burgeoning population is too often housed in flood plains, and too often concentrated in cities that cannot withstand earthquakes. This population demands quantities of food and firewood that lead to deforestation and use of dangerous pesticides and farming practices that leech the nutrients from land until, eventually, famine strikes. At the same time that economic growth is needed, production for export undermines the resilience more diversified traditional economies had.

We commonly speak of fires, floods, earthquakes, and famines as "natural disasters." We distinguish them thus from the divine or diabolical visitations of the Book of Revelations and attribute them to the order of a non-human world working of its own inner impetus. Yet, in important senses it is misleading to speak of "natural disasters." Disasters often occur precisely because we have meddled with nature and they kill and injure on a large scale because of risks we take in relation to nature. As the saying goes, "God makes droughts, but people make famines."

In any case, natural disasters—or, as the International Red Cross terms them, "*Un*/natural disasters"—have in fact increased in recent years; they killed at least 665,598 people between 1991 and 2000. Official statistics predictably underestimate. The Red Cross reports an official total of 280,000 deaths from famine in the 1990s. Yet this may be as little as a fifth of the true total. Observers estimate that between 800,000 and 1.5 million famine deaths occurred in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea between 1995 and 1998; they simply were never officially reported.[9] The North Korean famine also exemplifies how nature and human activities are increasingly intertwined in the production of disaster. Concentration of population also matters: during the last decade, 83 percent of those who died in ostensibly "natural" disasters were Asians (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2001).

During the same period, what the Red Cross calls technological disasters accounted for another 86,923 deaths. Nuclear reactor failures, factory explosions, and train crashes are clearly not just natural. But deaths from both ostensibly natural and technological disasters are dwarfed by deaths from clearly human conflicts and their impacts on civilian populations: more than 2.3 million during that decade. Here, the geography or disaster mortality is different: Africa figures prominently, along with the Balkans and Central and South Asia.

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9. And here note an instance of the tension between effective international action—even the collection of data, let alone the delivery of help—and the constitution of the world as a collection of putatively sovereign nation-states and of organizations like the UN (and the International Committee of the Red Cross) on the basis of national members. The long failure to call the Sudanese government to account for producing the current Darfur outrage reflects this. Membership organizations find it hard to speak *against their member states, and in any case telling the truth may only result in state action to block* the access of humanitarian organizations to those they would like to help.

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It is crucial, though, to recognize that the distinction among the three categories of disasters (natural, technological, and conflict-based) is partially—and perhaps increasingly—artificial and misleading. Ecological crises are worsened by wars and ethnic conflicts, and also help to fuel them, as victims fight over scarce resources. Technological failures figure in both. And the secondary effects of natural disasters are huge. Hundreds of millions who are not killed are displaced or suffer the loss of homes or livelihoods.

It is worth repeating the figures I have just cited because we are numbed to them. One of the features of the emergency imaginary is precisely the simultaneous sense that this is huge to the point of being overwhelming and yet safely held at arm's length from our more routine and secure lives. And the figures cited substantially underestimate the death toll and costs of "emergencies."

Consider HIV/AIDS, which now appears as less an emergency to most North Americans in the wake of antiretroviral drugs. This may be foolish complacency in Canada or the U.S., but when we speak of the AIDS emergency now we speak most immediately of Africa. Indeed, an "emergency" is precisely what President Bush evoked in his 2003 State of the Union address promising increased U.S. action on AIDS. The implications of the pandemic are quite staggering, though distanced for most of us by the location of the emergency on that continent. According to UNAIDS (2002), 28 million of the world's 40 million HIV-positive people are in Africa.[10] But most of the more than 5 million new infections each year are outside Africa (with China, India, and Russia leading the way and each poised to experience dramatic acceleration as the epidemic breaks out of initially containing population groups). Three times as many people die of AIDS each day as died in the September 11 attacks. Of course, the social organization of vulnerability and the social organization of access to care and medication are basic determinants of who these will be. The so-called emergency is, in fact, a basic social transformation in many African societies and, potentially, elsewhere. In several countries, more than 30% of the population will die of AIDS, but live long enough not only to infect others but also to need substantial care. This care is not only costly to governments but to families. Women provide most of it, taking them out of school and paid employment to become unpaid caregivers. At the same time, the infection rate among women is growing faster than among men; a dramatic new gender inequality is being created. And add in last the numbers of orphans—some 14 million—and the loss of cultural transmission, as well as care, they suffer. Agriculture is threatened with collapse, partly because traditional techniques are not passed on from parents to children and partly from simple labour shortages—an unimaginable idea only a few years ago.

Now, in some sense, this is clearly an emergency—though in fact, for all the talk of an AIDS emergency there has been precious little action. But

10. The number grows annually.

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to imagine this only as an emergency is to systematically underestimate both the extent to which the disease is a long-term, perhaps endemic factor in much of the world, and the extent to which it is producing basic social transformations. It also encourages approaching it with attention only to the immediacy of short-term efforts to prevent the spread of infection or to manage the disease with treatment regimes. It impedes longer-term attention to social change, inequality, and reconstruction.

Though the term dates from the 1980s, complex emergencies are of course much older. They have come in the wake of wars, for example, including not least the Second World War, and in cases of chronic conflict like that in Palestine.[11] Civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and, even more centrally, refugees and population displacement make emergencies complex—even when the origins of a crisis are partly "natural." Thus, the Sahel drought of the 1980s was a natural disaster, made worse by bad social policies. It contributed to a flow of refugees across borders, and added complexity came from the refusal of certain states (notably Ethiopia) to aid those it considered politically rebellious, and from the involvement of various liberation fronts in humanitarian aid, as well as independence struggles. Sadly, this was also an example of the high human toll exacted by complex emergencies, as hundreds of thousands of people died and millions fled their homes. Recent assessments of Ethiopia suggest, moreover, that twenty years later, and even with a better government in place, the situation remains almost as bad. The Horn of Africa has remained a prime example of complex humanitarian emergency. Consider Sudan.

Sudan has been torn by civil war for all but 11 of the nearly 50 years of its independent existence. One reason for this is the way European colonial powers carved up Africa, arbitrarily creating countries that had no prior history as states and often no common culture. Sudan was divided in many ways, including in particular between an Arabic-speaking, mainly Muslim North and a non-Muslim, non-Arabic-speaking (but not internally unified) South. But the reasons don't end with these divisions, and this is important to remember, because when faced with complex emergencies analysts fall back on faulty explanations. Perhaps the most common of these is "it's a matter of ancient ethnic conflict." This analysis is false on many levels. It fails to address the reasons why ethnic differences become important or conflictual only at certain times, the ways in which ethnicity is not just inherited but made and remade in the course of both cultural production and politics, and the extent to which specific leaders pursuing interests of

11. As Nicolas Van de Walle (2001: 60) notes, the number of countries in which emergency seems a misnomer and "permanent crisis" more accurate has grown in recent years: "Much of the intellectual apparatus of policy reform analysis was ill-designed to understand countries in which there appeared by the mid-1990s to be a permanent crisis, or in the words of one observer a 'tradition of adjustment.' In much of Africa, by then, the management of economic crisis had institutionalized itself with, for instance, the establishment of permanent 'stabilization ministries' and almost annual and certainly routinized recourse to debt rescheduling exercises that had once been considered exceptional responses to major emergencies. What could be the meaning of terms like *crisis* or *government commitment* in countries that had been officially adjusting for two decades?"

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their own are usually deeply involved in stirring up ethnic conflicts.[12] The "ancient ethnic hatreds" explanation also serves to excuse the international community, implying there is nothing it can do, that the causes are purely local. But they seldom are.[13]

Race, religion, language and ethnicity have all been factors in the Civil War between Northern and Southern Sudanese, even though none of them explains it. Beyond local differences of religion, language, and ethnicity, there were many international factors. Some of these involved neighbouring countries—like the destabilizing effect of wars in Ethiopia and Uganda, which both pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees into Sudan and provided ready access to military training and arms. Others connected Sudanese events to richer and more distant countries, most importantly the discovery of large supplies of oil in Southern Sudan, which dramatically increased the North's interest in hanging on to that region and which by now provides more than $1 million a day to sustain the government's arms purchases and other military expenses. And of course, the oil goes mainly to the world's richer countries, reminding us of one of the reasons why chaos in the poorer ones is a constant concern.

How serious is that concern? Since fighting was renewed in 1983, 4 to 5 million Sudanese have been made homeless—an extraordinary one-seventh of Sudan's population. And more than 2 million have been killed—more casualties than the *combined* total of the conflicts in Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Liberia, the Persian Gulf, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Rwanda. Most of the casualties have been civilians, not combatants (though that is, of course, a complex and contentious distinction). Sudan has served as a base for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. And it has made UNICEF and other UN agencies, several governments, and a wide-range of NGOs what Randolph Martin (2002) calls "unwitting accomplices" to the slaughter. It is not that they kill anyone, of course, but that even while mitigating some human suffering they may help to prolong the conflict. As they care for the victims of the war—and the floods, droughts and other concurrent calamities—they allow both the government and the rebels to ignore these needs and responsibilities and, at least in Martin's opinion, reduce pressure to resolve the conflict. The flow of international aid actually rivals the estimated $500 million a year that oil brings the Sudanese government. Both sides to the struggle have proved adept at manipulating the international donors—something made easier when donors rush in following

12. See Sharon Hutchinson (1996) for an account of this complexity with regard to one, ostensibly unified, Sudanese identity. Also see the different discussions in Brubaker and Cooper (2000) and Calhoun (2003a).

13. This is, of course, a central theme in the discussions of Rwanda and Central Africa noted above. A variety of outside government actions were important—including a U.S. program to try to boost civil society and democracy that started some processes of change and then was cut off, helping to destabilize the Rwandan government. Another precipitating factor was the collapse of prices on the world coffee market. Similarly, in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and the plunge toward ethnic war in Bosnia (another important symbolic case for humanitarian intervention), international actors were involved at each step of the way and important background conditions included the collapse of the former Soviet Union and—less widely recognized—the high level of debt that weighed on the central Yugoslavian government.

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the TV cameras, rather than building a long-term presence and knowledge base. Perhaps the most bizarre and pathetic aspect of this is the obsession of some evangelical Christian groups, especially in the United States, with the notion that a central problem is slavery, and that they make this better by spending millions of dollars a year buying the "freedom" of women, children and sometimes others held as slaves. The evidence seems clear that this only fuels a system of abductions (and sometimes swindles).

As the war between Northerners and Southerners approached resolution, a new tragedy began to unfold in Western Sudan. Tens of thousands have died, hundreds of thousands been displaced, and close to half a million risk death in Darfur as I write. Without going into detail, it is instructive to note how readily the international agencies, NGOs, and media all employed a rhetoric of racial and ethnic hatreds. This was portrayed, by people who should have known better, as first and foremost a conflict between "Arabs" and "Black Africans." Among other things, this misses the fact that there are few, if any, visible "racial" differences between the groups (though there are linguistic and other distinctions, and certainly different webs of solidarity). More importantly, this construction of the conflict as primarily racial helps the government perpetuate the myth that present the mass killings areas due to local militias—the Janjaweed—that it has trouble controlling. But this obscures the fact that the government set the militias in motion, armed many, and easy flows between official uniformed services and the militias. The government itself is directly behind the killings and—even if it is no longer able to control the process it started—it set mass murder in motion because of worries about political opposition not race. And not least of all, the "race" frame fits with the notion that the government itself confronts an emergency it could not predict.[14] The "international community" colludes in the misrepresentation in the hope that it can influence the Sudanese government, and because it is unwilling to be explicit about the collision between the nation-state system and the problems of complex humanitarian emergencies. For its part, the Sudanese government did not hesitate to demand the withdrawal of one of the few senior UN officials who openly called the killings "genocide."

I should admit that I have a personal connection to the Sudanese crisis. I was working in Khartoum when the fighting resumed in 1983, and indeed lived briefly across the street from the office of John Garang, who left his position in the University of Khartoum's Center for Regional Studies to head the Sudanese People's Liberation Front. An Oxford classmate of mine headed Chevron's Sudanese operations at this time, developing the initial

14. It is worth noting too, that use of the race frame makes it easier for the Sudanese government to claim that it is being abused by outside critics because it is Arab—something *all* the easier to claim *in the* context of the Iraq war and its discrediting of allegedly humanitarian motives coming from the US and its allies. The race frame also facilitates eliding the conflict in the West with that between North and South, missing such important points as the fact that those the government and Janjaweed kill in Darfur are fellow Muslims.

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oil wells and pipeline. For a time, on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development, I worked for the now-deposed Sudanese government on a project that has direct relevance to complex humanitarian emergencies. The Sudan was all but overrun with NGOs and bilateral donors in the 1980s, so much so that the Sudanese government literally could not keep track of them or of the commodity assistance it received. Even middle-level officials of the donor agencies demanded personal attention from ministers and top civil servants. In addition to its own troubles, the Sudan had taken in refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and other countries equivalent to ten percent of its own population. Aid was overwhelmingly directed towards emergency assistance, rather than longer-term development. It became increasingly hard for the aid-dependent government to function—which, ultimately, was one reason the government fell. My colleagues and I developed a management information system to track the aid itself and the activities of the donors; we also struggled—unsuccessfully—to secure co-ordination among the donors (Calhoun and Whittington, 1988; see also Woodward, 1991). Instead, different national aid agencies and donors quarrelled over the "right" to deliver aid in different places. Most knew little about the Sudan, though, because the donors insisted on creating new projects and new TV appeals rather than funnelling funds to organizations that had worked effectively in the country before the emergency (or even for longer during it).

This is not simply a historical reminiscence. The same issues remain current in complex humanitarian emergencies around the world. State failure is one of the most important causes of these emergencies, but the way emergencies are handled commonly contributes to further state failure and thus to recurrence of crises, rather than development out of that cycle. And while the work of donors is evidence of global humanitarian concern, it is astonishingly chaotic in its own organization. As Arthur Helton (2002a; 2002b) commented on aid to Afghanistan and central Asia (shortly before his death in the bombing of the UN mission in Iraq): "How coordinated can the effort be when donors will give money through both multilateral and bilateral channels, international organizations and NGOs will jockey for roles and money, and relief work will run up against recovery and development plans?" Too little emergency relief will be organized through international NGOs that maintain a long-term, rather than episodic, presence in crisis-prone regions. Much too little will build local capacity of either government or civil society.

Even within the United Nations, a host of agencies compete for opportunities—and funds—to work on humanitarian emergencies. In 1992, the UN created the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This office has loomed ever larger in the work of the UN, partly because of the UN's increasing reliance on special appeals and voluntary contributions from its member states. The UN's "core" budget, based on

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the assessments of member states, accounts for a relatively small fraction of total UN expenditures—especially for the operational agencies like UNICEF or the High Commission for Refugees. Perceptions of emergencies drive national contributions to the UN as much as they do private contributions to charities. Although there is a consolidated appeal for support, different agencies inevitably compete for donor attention and funds. And donors are fickle and undependable. Many make pledges of aid that they fail to deliver. Most of the money pledged four years ago to help East Timor, when that was the dominant humanitarian emergency of the moment, was never delivered.[15] The donors who gathered in Tokyo to make those pledges were not so much insincere as organizationally incapable of following through on their own good intentions. They were also caught up in a ritual in which pledging support affirms certain beliefs about the world—like the idea that crises can be managed—and about the goodness of our nations and ourselves as much as it indicates a program of action. They sought to propitiate certain "gods" of the new world order, including the angry god of threatening chaos.

The figures make obvious that human beings are still vulnerable to disasters, that the various sorts of progress we associate with modernity have, at the very least, not eliminated disasters and probably increased some kinds of them, as well as the scale of some consequences. This reality sits uneasily, however, with the extent to which modernity has also brought the expectation of effective action to stop such intrusions of fate into the world of human organization. We tend to think of disasters as in principle avoidable, even while we contribute to them and while the death toll grows. The idea of "intervention" is thus almost as basic as the idea of "emergency." Today, people all around the world respond to emergencies. Yet, we insist in thinking of them as exceptions to the rule, unusual and unpredictable events.

In fact, emergencies have become normal. I do not mean that these "emergencies" are not real and devastating, for they clearly are, nor even that they do not demand urgent attention. They are not merely mobilizing or fear-inducing tactics in the manner of fascism or the governments of Orwell's *1984*—or, I fear, the colour-coded terror alert system of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. But neither are they exceptions to some rule of beneficent, peaceful, existence. In 1940, when Walter Benjamin (1969) famously wrote; "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule," he wanted to stress the underlying continuities joining fascism to modernity, against those who would treat it as a deviation and so assure themselves that progress marched on nonetheless. We now see not one large emergency dismissed as an exception, but innumerable smaller ones still treated as exceptions to an imaginary norm, even though repeated so frequently as to be normalized. Events supposed to be extraordinary have become so recur-

15. See the more general discussion in Foreman et al., 2000.

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rent that aid agencies speak of "emergency fatigue." Refugees? Infectious diseases? Ethnic conflicts? These are all certainly aspects of contemporary emergencies and yet none could be said to be rare. Indeed, each of these sorts of emergencies is at least partially predictable, and specific cases may last for years.

Interventions into complex emergencies are not "solutions," because emergencies themselves are not autonomous problems in themselves but the symptoms of other, underlying problems (Terry, 2002). At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that humanitarian response should, or could, simply be abandoned in favour of working directly on the underlying problems. Assistance in dire circumstances is important, not least because the underlying problems usually admit of no ready solutions. For some it is also demanded by what Weber (1922), following Aristotle, called "value rationality"—doing that which is right in itself. In emergencies, this means bearing witness, as well as saving lives or alleviating suffering. Each is understood to be immediately good, rather than simply productive of the good in some longer-term fashion.

But to ignore the limits of emergency assistance is to divert attention from those problems and also to forfeit opportunities to make responses more effective. We need to grasp more clearly why emergencies are "normal"—however paradoxical that may sound—not only in order to study something else, but also to improve how we deal with emergencies. And we need to make this the starting point for building better institutions and plans for dealing with emergencies (as well as working on the underlying problems). In analysing technological disasters, Charles Perrow made a similar point: accidents are normal (Perrow, 1999). They are normal not because individual events will cease to be surprising and sometimes disastrous, but because it is inevitable that things will sometimes go wrong, and the very complexity of certain socio-technical systems guarantees accidents. Rather than trying to engineer an accident-free system, planners will often get better results by building in the expectation of accidents—minimizing them as best they can—as well as coping mechanisms and responsive organizational structures. In the same sense, seeing emergencies as normal would point our attention towards planning better for dealing with them as well as towards reducing their frequency.

Private charities and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also a central part of the story. As I suggested near the outset, the prominence of the idea of complex emergencies reflects not only new kinds of crisis in the world but—and perhaps more importantly—a new willingness to intervene. This willingness is shaped by several factors. The importance of global news coverage cannot be underestimated. While this may have helped to create awareness and sympathy, it does not, in itself, produce the sense that "something must be done." Equally important are three other factors.

First, the growth of an international field of humanitarian organizations and activism is one of the major developments of the 1990s (though,

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of course, with older roots), and central to what has come to be called "global civil society." NGOs are a primary organizational vehicle for this concern, but it also shapes the aid and foreign policies of many countries. Basic to this field is the spread of "human rights" as not merely a single idea but a whole framework for responding to social and political issues. This is sometimes criticized for alleged Western bias, but despite this the range of asserted human rights has grown and the vocabulary of human rights has become nearly ubiquitous outside, as well as within, the West. And without being cynical, we should remember that human rights and humanitarian intervention are not merely ideas, but they are enshrined in organizations with employees and media departments and fund-raising operations. Hundreds of thousands of people make their careers in the world of aid and interventions.

Second, willingness to intervene has been encouraged by the notion that in a world ever more interconnected by globalization, reducing crises is a necessary and self-interested goal. Public health, rather than human rights, may be the paradigm here. AIDS is only the most prominent infectious disease pressing a concern for international health on citizens and governments in the developed world. Malaria kills a million people a year, mostly in poor countries. Tuberculosis is once again spreading rapidly, and most cases in rich countries have roots in poor ones—and most cases there come from emergencies. But the sense of interconnection extends also to impacts through migration and markets, and illegal flows of each as trade in drugs and weapons becomes a basic concern. Indeed, it has often been the presentation of health issues as security concerns that has mobilized action (but this is also a limiting frame).

Third, we should not underestimate the extent to which interventions into complex humanitarian emergencies were encouraged by the sense that it was not only right and necessary to act, but potentially effective. The combination of new levels of wealth and new confidence in technology also encouraged new confidence in social engineering. Citizens of the richer countries—and often their governments—began to think of humanitarian emergencies as solvable problems. This raises two concerns. One is that, in approaching these as practical "engineering" problems, well-intentioned activists disconnected them from a deeper analysis of the global order that brought them to prominence. The other is that, when forced to recognize that efforts have not always succeeded, that social problems are more complex, governments and others may too easily lose their confidence and give up.

We are aware of disasters in new ways. The media present calamities from around the world to us not just as stories but in compelling pictures, and not just eventually but almost in "real time" as they happen. As a result, there are new images of large-scale disasters to contemplate nearly every day. The media inform us, but very unevenly, with a terrific preference for the immediate over the long-term, the new disaster with dramatic video footage over the struggle to deal with the aftermath. This itself reflects the competition for audience share in a market in which "news" is, if not a

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commodity itself, a tool for selling viewers' attention to advertisers. There may be "media effects," as, for example, television informs differently from print, but intensification of this market is also a source of the way we perceive emergencies.[16]

Such media exposure helps to generate charitable donations and pressures for national governments to act. But it does not necessarily encourage the most effective action. It is a powerful factor in pushing "emergencies" to the forefront of public attention—but also in diverting funding from long-term development to emergency assistance, and making even emergency assistance troublingly short-term.

Indeed, this is a basic question about the idea of American empire. America has military bases around the world, and its policies have been dramatically interventionist. It is not clear, however, whether the desire to intervene at will is in fact enough to justify the word "empire." I would suggest keeping the image of emergencies in mind in trying to understand America's specific sort of imperialism. The U.S. usually seeks to intervene to "fix" emergencies and contain the threats they pose. It may get caught, unable to extricate itself from wars it enters. But its vision of the world—at least most of the time for most people—is less one of expansion, or of a civilizing or developmental mission, than one that combines hopes of economic benefit with those of ending emergencies.

The Image of Emergencies

The imaginary construct of "emergencies" organizes attention to social life and indeed organizes dimensions of social life itself. In this it is like "nation" or "corporation" or "person" or "individual." Each of these terms structures objects in the world, how they are understood and how action is organized in relation to them—including, not least, in law and governmental affairs. The imaginary and conceptual construct "emergencies" (along with close analogues like "crises" and "catastrophes") is beginning to assume a similar status. It is not merely a description of the world, more or less accurate, but an abstraction that plays an active role in constituting reality itself.[17]

We have seen that thinking in terms of emergencies reflects a view of these events as immediate in ways that obscures their mediations—for

16. I refer here to the mainly commercial media that are prominent in the OECD countries and much of the rest of the world. There are, of course, other media systems, and they may respond to emergencies in different ways. For example, the Afghan crisis looked different on Aljazeera (the largest international Arabic broadcasting service) than on CNN. The Internet is also an important medium of communication and significant, in particular, for quick access to information about emergencies. But it is broadcast media that are the leading force in the dominance of the "emergency" as a frame for understanding world affairs.

17. The famous "Thomas theorem" (so labelled and thus constituted by Robert Merton) posits that "if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences." The issue is not merely whether people accurately represent the "external" truth of situations in taking action in them, but the constitutive role played by the ways in which they grasp and bring order to their situations. See Thomas and Thomas (1928: 572); Merton (1973: 267–78); Merton (1995: 379–424).

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example, by global economic institutions and inequality. We have seen that the emergency imaginary encourages an image of sudden, unpredictable and short-term phenomena, when the reality commonly involves longer-term development, considerable predictability, and a duration through decades.

We have seen also how the idea of emergency informs a managerial perspective, as well as a humanitarian one. Each is depoliticizing in important ways. To manage the global "system" is not to open it to democratic decision making. To respond in purely humanitarian terms often involves precisely trying to alleviate suffering without regard to the political identities or actions of those in need (an often acute tension, these days, as humanitarian aid workers who are also concerned about human rights question whether they should minister to those who might go on to continue a genocide as soon as they are well enough).

I want to note a few other features of the emergency imaginary. First, one dimension of this has to do with the way understandings of connection and obligation are organized in global society. Here the emergency imaginary reflects several features Taylor has presented as part of modern social imaginaries more generally (Taylor, 2002). The emergency imaginary is, first off, a secular view. Emergencies are identified with regard to this-worldly causes and effects, even if they mobilize people committed to more transcendent notions of the good. And emergencies may also reflect a notion of purity that Taylor has analysed in connection with monotheism and the idea of purging evil from the terrain of an ideally pure good. Working in humanitarian response to emergencies, helping to purge humanity of this evil and its consequent suffering, is one of the few apparently altogether morally pure and attractive vocations available in the contemporary world. And I too admire those who devote themselves to it. Yet, this is enabled by an imaginary that occludes much of the way in which emergencies are produced and reproduced. "Bracketing" politics and economics has effects.[18]

Second, emergency thinking presents humanity as an extensive population of equivalent members—something Taylor has pointed out in relation to the ideas of individuals as market actors and individuals as citizens. But here there is an interesting distinction. Taylor has suggested how some of the new social imaginaries provide for a strong sense of collective agency that is basic, among other things, to democracy. Thinking in terms of humanitarian emergencies draws on this sense of agency in promoting intervention to minimize suffering. But it denies agency precisely to those who suffer. These are victims (ideally presented as children and women, not active men) lacking dignity and being humiliated. Conversely, even while

18. Politics and economics matter not just as underlying causes of emergencies but as immediate contexts and conditions of relief work. Where they are not addressed clearly, humanitarian interventions risk complicity either in conflicts or in depoliticizing anti-democratic approaches to stopping them. The value-rational orientation is also in tension with instrumental analysis of the impact, efficacy, and efficiency of humanitarian assistance.

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interventions are, at one level, managerial, they are represented, at another, as gifts, or as acts of charity. They follow, it would appear, from an idea of humanitarian responsibility, but not from more specific, socially located responsibility.

Third, accounts of emergencies often bring cultural factors—notably ethnicity—into consideration on an *ad hoc* basis to explain violence and conflict, while implying that the stable functioning of the global order is more or less independent of culture. More broadly, the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism in political theory implies that culture is basic to local loyalties and tensions, while inhabiting the global ecumene depends on rising above culture, rather than mastering certain sorts of culture. It often seems to imply not only a systemic view of the world, but also a view of the emergency shaped by medical pathology; emergencies are like diseases to be treated. In this connection, as in other ways, the emergency imaginary reflects the perspective of an ostensibly detached outsider. But the outsider detached from any concrete situation of struggle is not free-floating—the NGO representative no more than a Mannheimian intellectual. On the contrary, he or she is embedded in a specific niche constructed by both culture and more material forms of empowerment.[19]

Fourth, emergencies are also often approached as though what they do is simply take away the supports of "normal" life. This leads even those who work in them, let alone others who consider emergencies at more of a distance, to imagine them as involving "regressions." Some will even suggest that modernity recedes and traditional coping mechanisms are all that is left—as though most emergencies did not challenge tradition as much as modernity.

Finally, and not least of all, the emergency imaginary serves an important function as a mirror in which we are able to affirm our own shaky normality. That is, by recognizing emergencies and organizing attention to problems around the world as emergencies, we—especially citizens of the world's richer countries—tacitly reinforce the notion that the normal world of globalization is one of systems that work effectively, that shore up the world we inhabit, rather than destroying it, and that can be counted on to work in predictable ways. Approaching conflicts as emergencies is, perhaps, the least unpalatable way of accepting their ubiquity, but it feeds unfocussed fear even as it reassures, and it encourages responses that may do good, but usually not deeply.

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19. See Calhoun, 2003b: 869–97. In thinking of emergencies, as in contemplating nations and many other aspects of the contemporary global order and disorder, we partake of aspects of what Heidegger called the "world picture." That is, we adopt a synoptic view of the whole from a distance, rather than particular situations from within.

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