Book Review

**Idealism Beyond Borders. The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954 - 1988**

Eleanor Davey

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Despite its concern with social change, social movement scholarship that tends to focus on distinct social movements, campaigns, mechanisms and organizations can seem oddly ahistorical. Eleanor Davey’s nuanced account of the emergence of *sans-fronti*é*risme* shows how interwoven the development of social movements is and how beneficial a historical perspective. A historian of humanitarianism, Davey traces the birth of Medecins sans Frontiéres (MSF) (Doctors without Borders) and other organizations that constitute *sans-fronti*é*risme* from the experience and memories of the Holocaust and Spanish Civil War to anti-colonial independence movements and their support from the French Left and shows how these movements inform each other. Moreover, students of social movements should take note that humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross / Red Crescent and MSF consider themselves movements. Both the Red Cross / Red Crescent movements and MSF include professional staff and volunteers. Davey is interested in the evolution of ideas and the public debate rather than private memory. She makes a great contribution to Anglo-Saxon literature on humanitarianism by making French thought and literature, on which this book is based, accessible to non-French readers.

Davey’s differentiated account starts out with the founding myth of MSF, which locates the birth of the organization in the Biafra War in 1986. According to this well-known myth, French doctors, who were working in a Red Cross hospital in Biafra witnessed the death of hundred-thousand children from malnutrition, which they perceived – or framed – as genocide. The Red Cross and its volunteers are committed to discretion as a pre-condition to getting access to vulnerable populations in need. However, Bernard Kouchner and other volunteers felt that silence is complicity and therefore broke with the Red Cross and founded a new organization – MSF -- which does not only provide medical assistance (and other disaster relief and emergency support), but is also engaged in advocacy, vocal about human rights abuse and other forms of violence.

Davey does not deny the significance of this event, but she puts it in a much larger context, uncovering its roots in the experience and memories of the Holocaust, resistance and complicity. She argues that the transformation of the French Left must be understood in the “context of the evolving collective memory of the occupation years” and the responsibility of Western intellectuals and militants for supporting ideologies advocating the use of violence (p. 145). *Tiers mondisme* movements – or third worldism – believed that the “third world” represented the “motor for world-wide revolution” (p. 2). The French memory of occupation and resistance emphasized the struggle against fascism and resulted in the support for anti-imperialist independence movements. Davey notes the involvement of Jewish activists in international and universalist causes, *tiers mondisme* and New Left movements, the US civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war.

Davey describes *tiers mondiste* militancy in the context of the Algerian War for independence which she identifies as “one of the most important sites of intellectual mobilisation in contemporary France” (p. 59.) which crystallized the issues of “colonialism, power, revolution, and violence” (p. 65). The support for anti-colonial movements was grounded in memories of militancy as well as mistakes of previous generations. In addition to the Algerian war, the *tiers-mondistes* supported Cuban and Vietnamese struggles. However, Cuba, the USSR, China and Cambodia became – or became perceived as -- repressive and solidarity turned into disenchantment. French activists became increasingly concerned with the situation of foreign political prisoners and the shift from *tiers-mondisme* to *sans-frontiérisme* occurred.

Like *Tiers-Mondisme*, *Sans-Frontiérisme* is concerned with occupation, resistance and holocaust. Davey argues that the memories of the Holocaust informed the humanitarian imperative. Whereas *tiers-mondisme* justified “left-wing violence as necessary resistance to oppression” (p. 177), *sans-frontiérisme* “made human rights the cornerstone of future campaigns” (p. 178) aware that the left was also capable of genocide. The Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia contributed to a growing global refugee population in need of humanitarian relief. Davey describes the “turn against ideology” (p. 212) in the 1970s and the (media) campaign and assistance for Vietnamese boat people, which is highly relevant in the context of the contemporary refugee crises.

Davey’s book brilliantly demonstrates the necessity of a historical perspective to understand how social movements unfold. This prize-winning book is well placed on every social movement syllabus. It does not include a methods section or appendix, although Davey mentions that she in addition to publications and archival material she included some interviews, published interviews and autobiographies. This study is an invitation to social movement scholars to contexualize case-studies in a broader historical context and to complement Davey’s study with biographical research in order to understand how activists made sense of these developments and how they reconciled shifting allegiances and commitments. This remarkable book is highly relevant for students of humanitarianism, of revolutionary and authoritarian movements, of the Holocaust, the Resistance movements, anti-colonial movements, and the Left.

*Silke Roth*

*University of Southampton, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology*

*Silke.roth@soton.ac.uk*

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*University of Southampton, Building 58, Southampton, SO17 1BJ*