

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAMES ORBINSKI, *An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2008, 431 pp.

Canadian physician and humanitarian James Orbinski received an honorary degree from Queen's University in 2007. His nomination was based primarily on his work as a past international President of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), on behalf of which he accepted a Nobel Peace Prize in 1999; and his subsequent work as co-founder of Dignitas International (DI), a Canadian organization which focuses on community-based treatment of HIV/AIDS in the Zomba district of Malawi and has attracted international attention for the uniqueness of its treatment model. Although I was aware of these contributions, I had really little idea, before reading this book, of the remarkable span and variety of his experiences in zones of suffering throughout the world. To a considerable extent, *An Imperfect Offering* is "a series of stories" (his words) of these experiences – that is, of his struggles as a humanitarian doctor, and those of his fellow-workers, to alleviate some part – often a seemingly small part – of the suffering generated, all too often, by some of the most appalling collective evils of which human beings are capable.

Orbinski was born in England, of Irish parents (his surname originates from an Eastern-European ancestor) who immigrated to Canada in 1967. His family was devoutly Catholic, a fact of some importance, since from the age of fifteen he has, especially in times of doubt and uncertainty, often sought advice and solace from a monk, Brother Benedict who resides at the Oka Monastery outside Montreal. In 1986, he entered the medical program at McMaster University, became interested in immunology, and took time out to go to Rwanda in 1987 to do research on the impact of HIV/AIDS amongst children. He was then in his late twenties (being now in his late forties) and had started on a path which involved humanitarian work in most of the tragedy-filled regions where MSF was engaged. The book, which is divided into three major parts, is therefore almost as much the story of MSF as it is of Orbinski's work. The first part focuses on his childhood and his early experiences in Rwanda, Afghanistan and Somalia. The second part deals with his presence in Rwanda during the genocide, an experience that he calls "my undoing...no illusions or fantasies were possible after this" (163). Part three moves on to his work in Zaire, but also focuses on the efforts of MSF in North Korea, Kosovo and the Sudan. There is also a vital penultimate chapter on "The Fight for Essential Medicines" associated with his founding of the "Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative." Death, mutilation, rape and famine on a vast scale

appear again and again in the pages of *An Imperfect Offering*, including repeated mortal danger to the author himself. But his stories have a Manichean quality in which humanitarianism represents a positive “world of possibility” (431) in the endless fight against the dark side of human nature.

How does one cope with seemingly endless tragedy? Apart from his talks with Father Benedict in Canada, Orbinski notes that, on the job, he smoked too much (in some measure to cover the smell of physical decay), whilst the inclusion of four-letter words in many reported dialogues suggests their use as a sign of, and perhaps relief from, intense stress. He also evidently derived solace from the unconscionable: a brutally mutilated woman in Rwanda who, despite her appalling suffering, told him to move on and help other patients obviously had a profound impact upon him. However, it would be an injustice to Orbinski to focus excessively on such grim cases *per se*, except insofar as they point to the development of a personal philosophy for action; one which overlaps in the book with analyses of MSF policies in the face of frequent clashes between political power-games and calls for humanitarian intervention. It follows, as Orbinski notes, that humanitarian action cannot be separated from politics, a notion about which he admits to a certain initial naivety.

For sociologists, a permeating element of this book is, therefore, the maldistribution of political power and economic resources in a world where “Doctors without Borders” is constantly responding to “Wars without Borders” (the title of a symposium held at Queen’s University in June 2008). Both are elements of globalization – MSF, a response to the flow of war, refugees and disease across increasingly permeable national boundaries. One of the chapters is titled “The Politics of Being Apolitical.” The problem is thus how do humanitarians avoid political commitment to one side or another in seemingly endless conflicts?

One of the great strengths of *An Imperfect Offering* lies in its repeated references to the impact of the colonial legacy (including implicitly the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans) in its subsequent “soft imperialism” shadow, and also the extent to which large-scale atrocities were diplomatically downplayed, or even encouraged, by those very nations which bewailed the fate of the victims. Add to this the abject failure of the countries that intervened on the part of the UN, particularly in Somalia and Rwanda, to understand what they were up against (and Orbinski claims that MSF itself lacked sufficient knowledge of Rwandan politics to be pro-active) and the combination of ignorance and hypocrisy is palpable. Three cases in point. The debacle of the intervention by the US-led UN contingent amidst the anarchy in Somalia in 1992 is well known, not least because of atrocities by UN troops including troops of the since-disbanded Canadian Airborne Regiment. Second, France, with dreams of its imperial past, supplied weapons to the Rwandan government in the midst of the genocide and ultimately initiating and organizing the escape of the genocidal government into Zaire (250). (Orbinski considers the French to have been particularly duplicitous in Rwanda, and I doubt

that his book will find a ready publisher in France.) Third, and even greater in overall suffering, the chapter devoted to MSF's fight to obtain essential generic medicines at low prices for the millions of very ill people in developing countries is, with rare and shining exceptions, a narrative of the triumph of corporate greed over humanitarianism. Even when the coalition of organizations supporting MSF thought they had won major patent concessions on the export of generic drugs in 2003, the collective lobby-group of the western pharmaceutical companies succeeded in surrounding the export with such red tape that those countries – Canada, Norway and Switzerland – which made seemingly positive changes in their patent legislation, faced “terms so restrictive, costly and bureaucratically onerous that by the end of 2007, not a single pill has legally crossed a border (from these countries) to the developing world” (373). It is this on-going campaign for generic drug access which links Orbinski to the Drugs for Essential Diseases initiative and to DI.

Orbinski joined MSF as a founding member of its Canadian branch because he liked the organization's willingness to speak out, and to confront its own myths and dilemmas. On both counts, the book supplies detailed explanations of the resulting tensions. Notably, the refusal of MSF to recognize national boundaries, or side with the “victors,” brought trouble during the Kosovo crisis when MSF condemned the actions of Slobodan Milosevic, but felt that its autonomy would be compromised by direct support for NATO intervention, pointing rather to the latter's failure to give adequate forethought to the flood of persecuted refugees. Then there is the ethical dilemma of giving humanitarian aid where this aid may be misused. Though enduring much criticism for its decision, MSF thus closed its medical and feeding stations and quit North Korea during the 1997 famine, when it became evident that the government was blocking effective humanitarian action (the current situation in Burma following the cyclone is forcibly brought to mind here). Ironically, the French physician, Bernard Kouchner, a founder of MSF in 1971 who later left over a policy disagreement, loudly supported the NATO “punitive” action against Serbia. Orbinski portrays him, during their occasional contacts, as being both short-tempered and having a predilection for media hype. However, caution is in order here. We are reading an autobiographical account that is always open to alternative interpretations of personalities and events, especially by others with direct experience of them.

NATO provided a humanitarian rationale for its bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo crisis, and Orbinski places this in a wider context when he notes that “since the end of the Cold War, humanitarianism and human rights have become a justification for military intervention by the world's strongest economic and military powers when their national interests are at stake” (386-387). He is bitterly critical of such misuse of “humanitarianism” and suggests that its language and practice need to be reclaimed: in his words, humanitarians must “refuse to participate in an abuse of compassion” in which the Bush administration is particularly complicit (chapter 10, *passim*). Here we move some way to an understanding of Orbinski's hard-learned personal philosophy of humanitarian action. It should be based on a solid understanding of the

underlying politics without taking sides in crisis situations except insofar as repressive state action, or the murder of humanitarian workers, necessitates a critical response. The humanitarian offering may also be “imperfect” (the title of the book draws on a Leonard Cohen lyric) but this does not obviate the value of action. As a case in point, Orbinski notes that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda saved 30,000 lives in Kigali in fifteen weeks, even though MSF alone lost hundreds of its national staff. In sum, do what one can as humanitarian and citizen, insist on independent action, respect international humanitarian law, and bear witness to the plight of those one assists.

The book ends with an epilogue “What You Can Do” in terms of practical action, and a list of organizations which Orbinski supports. This should be required reading for all charitable organization workers, just as his chapter on generic drugs should be included in any university course dealing with the role of corporate lobby-groups in influencing political decision-making. Sociologists interested in international development issues as well as the roles of clan and tribe, and colonial heritage, in the generation of genocidal conditions will also have much to learn. If Orbinski had been writing a different kind of book, I could see some scope for an expanded discussion of some issues – for example, the extent to which the bad press which UN humanitarian interventions have faced during the past fifteen years is primarily a consequence of the reluctance of powerful member-states to provide adequate support (the unwillingness of the United States to label Rwanda a genocide is a case in point). In his text, maps might well have supplemented the many photographs, notably one showing the major regions and towns involved in the complex Rwandan-Zaire situation. These are, however, relatively minor considerations.

James Orbinski is still a relatively young man, though old in experience. He seems to have the sense to know when to withdraw in order to avoid total burnout. So may he long continue to work ceaselessly for the benefit of those, who like the mutilated Rwandan woman, speak for millions in “the clearest voice I have ever heard” (395).

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