

D. Robert DeChaine

## Humanitarian Space and the Social Imaginary: Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders and the Rhetoric of Global Community

*Contemporary processes of globalization beckon consideration of the discursive forces that shape our perceptions of community, group identity, solidarity, and belongingness. The freedoms and limits endemic to life in a globalized world afford a variety of communicative resources for those seeking to promote humane social action. In this article, the author engages the discourse of Médecins Sans Frontières, or Doctors Without Borders, a humanitarian-based nongovernmental organization, to illuminate its stake in contemporary global politics. Through its rhetorical crafting of a public image of neutrality, its use of media channels to publicize events, and its discursive construction of a humanitarian space for social action, Médecins Sans Frontières conscripts the powerful ethos of the social imaginary in an attempt to forge a global community uniting individuals, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and international institutions.*

The turn of the millennium bears witness to a novel articulation of political, social, and cultural discourses mobilized under the rubric of globalization and its discontents. Notwithstanding its simultaneously ubiquitous and contested status as a master term (Beynon and Dunkerley 2000, 2), “globalization” signifies at once a threat and a promise. On one hand, as a result of certain post-cold war geopolitical refigurations, our globalized world is said to represent the effects of a massive “power shift” (Mathews 1997) challenging governmental authority, political autonomy, and traditional conceptions of state sovereignty. On the other hand, the threat of globalization and its challenge to sovereignty also portends possibilities of freedom—of political multilateralism, multicultural inclusiveness, and an effacement of borders, the results of which might effect transformations in the ways we perceive each other and live our lives

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354

together. Moreover, the globalizing process involves a simultaneous broadening of activity and the deepened interweaving of experience, underscoring the fact that globalization necessarily alters the nature of human social life (McGrew 1992, 68). It brings individuals and communities together in ever-intensifying networks of mutuality and, along with it, a growing recognition that our new positionality fundamentally reorients us as global neighbors, away from the insular “communities of fate” which have traditionally anchored us (Held 1991, 202).<sup>1</sup>

For students of culture and communication, the dual threat and promise of globalization beckon consideration of the societal forces that shape our perceptions of community, group identity, solidarity, and belongingness. The collapse of the former Soviet Union, the so-called identity politics of the 1990s, and the recent protests against the major global economic institutions each in its own way calls attention to desires by interested social actors to connect across boundaries in the name of a greater good. Furthermore, a vibrant discourse on the potentialities and contours of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) has fueled an interest in the role of the imagination in social life. For Appadurai (1996), the proliferation of electronically mediated images, together with mass migration and its unsettling of traditional notions of personhood, points to “the work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (p. 3). Indeed, as I will argue, the envisioning of a world without borders, echoed in the current French discourse of *sans frontièrisme* (without borderism),<sup>2</sup> figures heavily in the contemporary ethos of the social imaginary.

A significant manifestation of our contemporary longing for borderlessness is evident in the proliferation of humanitarian-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in recent decades. Fueled by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its mandate for universal human dignity, humanitarian NGOs have increasingly been at the forefront of a broad-based social movement, challenging states’ sovereignty, forging coalitions and partnerships, drafting declarations, collaborating on laws and policies, and assisting in their implementation and enforcement. Watchdogs on the state, they have figured instrumentally in the building of a global civil society, assuming their positions as global governors alongside state governments and international institutions. Humanitarian NGOs “have worked their way into the heart of international negotiations and into the day-to-day operations of international organizations, bringing new priorities, demands for procedures that give a voice to groups outside government, and new standards of accountability” (Mathews 1997, 56).

My purpose in what follows is to engage the discourse of humanitarian social movement politics to illuminate both the political and the social-cultural stakes of *sans frontièrisme* in a globalized world. Believing that rhetoric has an

implicit power to shape public perceptions, attitudes, and actions in the world (Burke 1952; Farrell 1993), I intend to bring to light the discursive practices of humanitarian NGOs that give rise, I argue, to a contemporary rhetoric of global community—a rhetoric that, when efficaciously realized, both mobilizes constituencies and propels social actors. The rhetorical crafting of a global community represents the confluence of communication, imagination, and power, the force of which is altering our contemporary social landscape.

To lend focus and depth to my argument, I limit my analysis to a particular humanitarian NGO—namely, Doctors Without Borders, better known outside the United States as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Among the most well-known of the nongovernmental humanitarian aid organizations, MSF's stated mission is to provide aid to populations in crisis and to engage in *témoignage*, or bearing witness, to crimes against human dignity wherever they may occur. MSF's charter lays out the criteria for its mandate, which include the strict adherence to principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Doctors Without Borders USA 2001a). Formed in 1971, MSF has garnered much popularity in recent times. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 and the object of an impending Oliver Stone–directed film, it has been said that MSF is at the forefront of the *sans frontièrisme* movement, a movement that ostensibly challenges the territorialism traditionally associated with state sovereignty (Fox 1995, 1607). Concomitantly, MSF members have been characterized in the popular press as the ponytailed, stubble-faced “glamour boys and girls of the aid business” (Di Giovanni 2000), a characterization pointing to the media spectacles that MSF volunteers and their crisis interventions have become.

MSF's emergence as a major NGO on the international stage represents a specific historical trajectory. In its early years, MSF lacked resources, in terms of both money and bodies. Brauman (1993a) describes many of its early aid missions, including its missions in Nicaragua and Honduras in 1972 and 1974, respectively, as highly limited and ineffective (p. 206). In the 1980s, MSF experienced a massive growth in both membership and resources. The continued proliferation and globalization of media communication aided the group in its efforts to publicize humanitarian crises, as well as its aid missions. In the late 1980s, MSF added six chapters including Canada and Japan, and in 1990, the U.S. chapter was created. With its international growth, MSF has continued to expand both the scope and the number of its aid missions. In the 1990s, MSF conducted missions in a number of regions including Africa, the Middle East, Central America, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia. It has grown to become the largest independent medical relief organization in the world (MSF 2000, 2), with eighteen international chapters and more than two thousand MSF volunteers serving in more than eighty countries annually (Doctors Without Borders USA 2001b). Through its construction of a public image of neutrality, its focus on media, and its discursive construction of a “humanitar-

ian space” for social action (Paupst 2000), MSF conscripts the powerful ethos of the social imaginary (Appadurai 1991) in an attempt to forge an imagined global community uniting individuals, governments, NGOs, and international institutions.

My analysis will proceed in four parts. In the first section, I examine the means by which MSF endeavors to construct a public image of neutrality that would effectively convince individuals, governments, and organizations of the justness of its cause. Key in this construction is its advocacy of the practice of *témoignage*, a practice by which MSF navigates politics and morality in the name of a transcendent conception of humanity. In the second part, I analyze the impact of the media on humanitarian crises and response. MSF’s conscious promotion of its missions via media channels figures heavily in its public image. Moreover, as a political strategy, the use of media to publicize events serves to highlight the discourses of power that effectively ascribe notions of the truth about humanitarian crises, aid givers, and victims. In the third part, I explore the specificity of MSF’s involvement in the crafting of a humanitarian space for social action. In MSF’s formulation, humanitarian space transcends cultural difference, implies an unequivocal freedom to act, and entails social responsibility. I contend that while MSF’s efforts to transcend borders have advanced humanitarian causes generally, its claims to borderless humanitarian action are problematic. In a movement to efface traditional conceptions of space and territoriality, MSF simultaneously enacts a discursive reterritorialization of spaces, in which events and victims are reinscribed within relations of power. I conclude the study with a consideration of MSF’s conception of humanitarian space and its relation to a broader discourse of globalism.

### Humanitarianism versus Politics: MSF’s Rhetoric of Neutrality

For MSF, the process of persuading others of its worthiness as an agent of global humanitarianism entails the crafting of a language that resonates with the international community. On one level, MSF has only to point to the principles enshrined in its charter. These principles include a commitment to offering assistance to persons “without discrimination and irrespective of race, religion, creed or political affiliation”; a commitment to “strict neutrality and impartiality in the name of universal medical ethics”; and a commitment by its volunteers to maintain “complete independence from all political, economic and religious powers” (MSF 2001). However, the situation becomes more complicated when the actual text of the charter is parsed. On close inspection, the putatively objective descriptives constituting MSF’s stated principles are by no means transparent or self-evident. Given the rhetorical function of lan-

guage, what do terms such as “neutrality” and “nonpolitical” signify in a context of humanitarian action?

MSF’s efforts to define its role as a humanitarian NGO turn on a key distinction it attempts to make between the nature of humanitarian and political action. First and foremost, MSF founds itself on a commitment to humanitarian action, a type of action that, it claims, must by nature be independent of politics. The vast majority of MSF’s published statements regarding its aims and motivations make reference to humanitarianism and the giving of humanitarian aid. For example, MSF’s James Orbinski (1999a) asserts that the organization’s primary contribution to the world of humanitarianism is its “adherence to a civilian-based, independent humanitarian action” (p. 16). Orbinski (1999b) argues that humanitarian action is foremost “an ethic framed in a morality” in which the “moral intention of the humanitarian act must be confronted with its actual result.” Orbinski (1999b) cites an example of MSF’s decision to retreat from its humanitarian aid operations in North Korea in 1998 because it was concluded that “our assistance could not be given freely and independent of political influence from the state authorities.” He thus places emphasis on a humanitarian morality that while not neutral in its convictions, is nonetheless said to be independent from any taint of political influence.<sup>3</sup>

MSF’s avowed disengagement from the politics of a conflict or crisis would appear to narrow its scope of influence. Given its self-imposed nonpolitical mandate, MSF must negotiate a form of humanitarian action that by its own terms is free from the taint of politics. A primary objective advanced in its mission statement is to heighten awareness of the plight of those whom it helps, “to provoke a social and political reaction that recognizes the rights and the needs of populations in danger” (Marschner 1999, 19). *Témoignage*, translated literally as testimony or witnessing, is the term employed by MSF to signify its practice of bearing witness to and speaking out against perceived human injustices that its volunteers encounter. The practice of *témoignage* intends to call attention to and denounce the underlying causes of suffering, which may include any violation of humanitarian law. *Témoignage* may take the form of “discreet testimony, open advocacy [or] outright denunciation” (Marschner 1999, 19) of the laws, practices, and/or policies of an individual, a government, or an organization.

Members of MSF are quite vocal in their statements about the place of *témoignage* within their organization.<sup>4</sup> MSF’s impetus for the practice of *témoignage* is said to counteract the notion generally held by the group that neutrality equates with silence. According to MSF’s Rony Brauman, raising public awareness through *témoignage* serves as a tool to “stir up indignation and stimulate action” (MSF 2000). Witnessing on behalf of victims in the name of human rights, according to MSF members’ views, connects moral action to social justice. Tanguy and Terry (1999), for example, argue that

témoignage as practiced by MSF “seeks to combat indifference to the plight of populations and to signal the need for local and international responsibility to uphold basic humanitarian and human rights principles” (p. 32). They quote MSF’s Alain Destexhe in his assertion that “if humanitarian assistance is to be worthy of its name, it must work in parallel with efforts to meet the demands of justice and respect for human rights” (p. 32).

MSF’s characterizations of témoignage demonstrate the precarious distinction between humanitarian and political action which MSF struggles to uphold. As a change agent, MSF attempts to make noise about what it perceives as the commission of human injustices. Its attention to issues of justice, coupled with its moral indignation and its consciousness-raising practices, would seem to point to the group as an embodiment of principled political action. In light of its self-characterization as a neutral agency, avowedly unhindered by politics and ideology, can MSF and its témoignage really be said to be nonpolitical?

As alluded to above, much effort has been expended by MSF to define “humanitarian action.” However, very little time is spent defining “politics” beyond passing reference. More often, the term is employed as a divisive marker, that is, as a means of delineating politics from the neutrality embodied in (MSF) humanitarianism. In their public rhetoric, MSF members’ use of the term “politics” serves not so much as a symbolic bridge between governments and NGOs but rather as an ideological marker against which the constituents of true humanitarian action are to be measured. If humanitarianism is measured by its neutrality (read ideological and political purity), then politics for MSF is measured by its potential threat of corrupting that neutrality. Invoking “the political” is a strategic move that banks on the term’s imputed connotation as a counterpoint to the purity signified by MSF’s rhetoric of neutrality. In this way, MSF can pit the purity of neutrality against the tainted, corrupting tendencies of political action, while eliding the difficulties of having to pin down exact denotative meanings. Consigning a blurry meaning to the political also keeps the organization from having to make a direct good versus evil distinction between humanitarianism and politics, per Orbinski’s (1999b) admonition. “Politics” clearly serves as a devil-term in MSF’s vocabulary; despite Orbinski’s (and others’) claim that humanitarian action and political action must be seen as counterparts in a pursuit of social justice, MSF’s rhetorical constructions clearly privilege one term over and against the other.

MSF’s practice of témoignage contributes to its public image as a just group. Viewed as a rhetorical strategy as well as a practice, témoignage serves as a moral discursive articulation of its aim to “alleviate human suffering, to protect life and health and to restore and ensure respect for the human beings and their fundamental human rights” (MSF 2001). Through its steadfast public disavowal of political interest in the name of moral aims and practices, MSF



mobilizes “neutrality” as a master term to signify its credibility as a champion of humanitarianism. Neutrality becomes for MSF a marker of purity and status within civil society, the antithesis of corruption. MSF’s rhetoric of neutrality can be seen at work throughout its speeches, documents, and editorials. Indeed, neutrality is one of the organization’s key “ideographs” (McGee 1980)<sup>5</sup> and profoundly informs both its avowed and publicly ascribed group identity.

### The Role of the Media in MSF’s Humanitarian Interventions

MSF must work diligently to convince individuals, governments, and other organizations that its intentions are worthy. MSF must cultivate and maintain an ethos of political independence and ethical commitment among the international community while at the same time securing its economic viability. In this, MSF faces competition from other NGOs, and it must effectively compete for widespread attention in the publicizing of its cause. Given such a challenge, MSF must engage and even exploit the channels of mass media. The challenge MSF faces is not only to bring attention to the events but also to ensure its visibility as a primary player on the global stage. Humanitarian crises can become popularized through their promotion by humanitarian organizations and their representatives as well as globalized by extensive media coverage. Many humanitarian organizations, MSF included, acknowledge the exploitation of media channels as a productive and even vital part of their duty as humanitarian change agents.<sup>6</sup> Stressing the pedagogical element in the popularization of MSF’s *témoignage*, MSF’s Tanguy states in a recent interview that “media and education are the keys to making tomorrow’s citizens” (*Toward global health 2000*, 75). Along with logisticians, MSF deploys press officers to locales and on their missions whose job it is to compete for media attention as well as to dramatize the situation in question. However, MSF’s (and other agencies’) use of the media is routinely criticized, both within and outside of the humanitarian aid arena, as a means of “commodifying tragedy,” of sensationalizing events in the name of media coverage (Leyton 1998, 166–68). The term “catastrophe babes” has been coined in reference to humanitarian press agents whose motives are said to be driven more by the market than by the crisis (Leyton 1998, 167).

MSF’s advocacy of mass media exploitation in the name of humanitarian action raises certain questions. First, does media exploitation amount to politicization of MSF’s cause, thereby compromising—if not outrightly violating—its mandate of neutrality? Tanguy (1998), pointing to editorial policies in the United States that she argued were responsible for ignoring the situations in Rwanda, the Sudan, and Kosovo, asked, “Can’t [MSF] lose what we have gained in political independence, by our total dependency on whether the media brings a given crisis to attention?” Here, Tanguy indicates the relative

dominance of media institutions and their role in the popularization of crises. However, she is also questioning MSF's doctrine of neutrality in recognizing that it implicitly resists any forces that would compromise MSF's autonomy. Is media exploitation, then, a political act? A second set of questions concerns the ethical implications of using media to publicize humanitarian crises. Is there a line to be drawn between publicity and sensationalism, and if so, how is it to be drawn? At what point does publicity encroach on or even jeopardize the physical and cultural integrity of a population in crisis? There is a danger, as some scholars have pointed out, that humanitarian groups may willingly or unwillingly contribute to "numbing humanity in the name of humanitarianism" (Fox 1995, 1612-13). As Leyton (1998) argues, press officers representing humanitarian organizations must make a convincing (visible) showing at a crisis site to gain a portion of airtime and, by extension, to persuade prospective donors that their organization is worthy of investment. "Thus, the misery of victims of famine, flood, war, and plague must be underlined, perhaps even exaggerated, if [the organization] is to attract sufficient public attention" (p. 167). In this way, NGOs can be viewed as products in a cycle of commodities, a media-driven system (via the economic imperatives of capitalism) in which both the hero and the victim of a crisis situation are implicated (see below).

Along with the difficulties associated with MSF's exploitation of media channels, there is a related issue involving the reciprocal relationship between the humanitarian actor and the media in relation to the event. Not only does MSF use the media to publicize events; various media forms, in turn, exploit events for commercial purposes as well. Fox (1995) suggests that there are occasions wherein less than altruistic global media networks search out "humanitarian opportunities and victims," which in effect makes MSF an "accomplice" to the commodification of tragedy (pp. 839-40). A major problem, suggests MSF volunteer Morris, is that "so few television people have a sense of history or any awareness of what goes on in the modern world, and all they are really looking for is a media-worthy event" (Leyton 1998, 176). Morris cites the situation in Rwanda as a prime example of how an event, once it is deemed good television, can monopolize media attention. More damaging, Morris contends, is the tendency for such mediated events to effectively define what is genocide and what is not. In his view, a situation such as that of the Tutsi massacre in Rwanda becomes a true genocide only once it is media authenticated as such, regardless of any political/legal status (Leyton 1998, 177).

Many of the questions raised by MSF's mediated engagements serve to illuminate the ways in which discursive practices are constitutive of knowledge and truths about people and events. MSF's rhetorical production of a moral discourse relies not only on particular words for its authority. It also contributes to the construction of heroes, villains, and victims as essentialized, cate-



gorical types. MSF's credibility as a humanitarian agency turns in part on its ability to establish a perception of its volunteers as courageous, ideologically pure, morally committed agents of change. They are saviors, champions of the voiceless, who knowingly and willfully face the morally unrighteous enemies of humanity. To the degree that this perception is achieved publicly, MSF constructs a heroic persona for its members. Aided by the purity bestowed on the volunteer by way of the rhetoric of neutrality, the hero is counterpoised against the villain, the ideological nemesis of the (MSF) humanitarian, who becomes an easy target for condemnation. Such a discursive counterpositioning of good and evil represents a kind of "identity freezing"<sup>7</sup> for both hero and villain, who are perceived to engage each other in a moralistic, high-stakes passion play. Meanwhile, the fate of the victim (or victims) hangs in the balance. The categorical status of the victim, as Brauman (1993b) points out, is instrumental to the construction of an "international event" that would command the attention of a mediated public (pp. 150-57). The ideal, authentic victim is pure inasmuch as he or she has been deprived of basic rights and meaningful agency. Moreover, the victim is public insofar as the conditions for his or her situation have become an object of discourse. The victim is thus "he or she who finds himself/herself the subject of 'objective' or public damage" (Debrix 1998, 833). The discursive construction of and play between the hero, the villain, the victim, and the event punctuates much of the published accounts of MSF's *témoignage*. It operates at a low level of abstraction, naming villains and victims by name. Its narrative authority is underwritten by the established morality of the MSF hero, who dances his or her *témoignage* in a carefully choreographed production.

### A Community without Borders? MSF and the Construction of Humanitarian Space

Along with its insistence on political neutrality and its strategic use of media, a major feature of MSF's discourse is its role in the creation of humanitarian space, a supposed boundless zone or zones of action in which challenges to traditional conceptions of sovereignty are made. MSF was founded on a principled commitment to the giving of aid to populations in danger, based on a professed *droit d'ingérence*, or "right/duty to intervention" (Fox 1995). In this way, MSF claims its right to move through and across traditionally delineated sovereign spaces. It espouses the belief that universal human rights, as they are articulated with MSF's definition of humanitarian action, transcend such spatial configurations—indeed, MSF's humanitarian action seeks to reconfigure space to accommodate a new human rights–based borderless global vision. As such, MSF does more than pit humanitarian action against political action; it also pits the borderlessness of humanitarian space against the power and force

of political space. In so doing, MSF propounds its intention to recast humanitarian aid in its own image. In the name of a transcendent, universal humanitarian action, MSF professes to be without political borders. In its claim to the bracketing of cultural (i.e., religious, ethnic, socioeconomic) experience, MSF professes to be without ideological borders. By recognizing yet willfully traversing bounded spaces, MSF professes to be without geographical borders.

The particularity of MSF's *sans frontièrisme* is most visible in its deployment of the term "humanitarian space"—an oblique, affective signifier embodying the group's professed borderlessness. MSF forcefully attempts to mobilize humanitarian space as a value-laden symbol of a transcendent global civic religion and, in so doing, gain public adherence to its cause on a global scale. Explanations and accounts of the nature of humanitarian space occur frequently in MSF's public discourse. Within it, three general themes emerge. First, humanitarian space is described as a space for the ethical and humane practice of humanitarian action (as defined by MSF). Underwritten by the language of universal human rights, humanitarian space is claimed to transcend difference. As Orbinski states, "our imperative is to create a strong humanitarian space that acknowledges the humanity of 'the other'" (Paupst 2000, 55). A second feature implicit in humanitarian space is an unequivocal freedom to act. It requires an ability of humanitarian actors to access populations, assess their needs, and secure protections against victims as well as aid workers (Tanguy and Terry 1999, 32). This theme dovetails with MSF's rhetoric of neutrality, which designates independence as both a right and an ethical imperative. Finally, MSF's conception of humanitarian space entails a specific kind of responsibility, one that according to the group is not to be equated with morality as such. In his discussion of what he feels are the particular responsibilities of aid organizations, Bouchet-Saulnier (2000) makes a distinction between those organizations that claim no accountability for their actions aside from the quality of their practices and those that claim an "operational responsibility" reflective of their interpersonal and public as well as individual conduct (i.e., MSF). Echoing MSF's ethic of *témoignage* and its refusal "to accept that silence is a precondition for its operational freedom," Bouchet-Saulnier argues that MSF's public statements should be seen not as moralizing rhetoric per se but rather as characteristic of the responsibility that is endemic to humanitarian space itself:

such statements must focus on the quality of humanitarian space rather than respect for human rights. . . . They derive not from general moral or legal considerations, but from the knowledge that there is an operational responsibility that is specific to humanitarian organizations.

MSF's discursive effort to deterritorialize and "humanitarianize" space prompts a consideration of the general implications of humanitarian space as a

site for the circulation of power relations. In his article “Deterritorialized Territories, Borderless Borders: The New Geography of International Medical Assistance,” François Debrix (1998) examines the ethic of *sans frontières* propelling MSF in an effort to determine the specificity of operations involved in a deterritorialized frame of medical humanitarian action. Debrix is particularly interested in what he argues is MSF’s double movement between freedom and containment, or what he characterizes as its “strategy” of deterritorialization. For Debrix, there is a dialectical interplay between MSF’s discursively constructed volunteer or “member”—the adventurous, humanitarian “global trekker”—and the hapless “victim,” such that the space of their interaction becomes a ground and necessity for the implementation of a “space of global victimhood”:

As pre-programmed “members” of global altruism supported by humanitarian actions, MSF “members” re-invest the deterritorial nature of their work with a new form of bordering or marking practice: going where no one has gone before to create new zones inside which potential victims can be cured or taken care of. (P. 837)

For Debrix, what is most interesting about MSF is that it represents not simply the new spirit of global *sans frontières* but, more important, an agency of control over social-spatial topography. Indeed, he argues, “deterritorialisation may be its own territorial strategy, another geopolitical marking, a new spatial demarcation with its own regime of power and knowledge” (p. 830). Debrix’s critique is instructive in its recognition that space, however unencumbered it may be imagined, is always invested with power. Part of that power is an effect of discourse: if MSF can effectively persuade the international community that its humanitarian action is pragmatic and morally justified, and in so doing effectively define the very terms of its engagement (“member,” “victim,” “assistance”), then those within the community become party to the discursive relations framing the action.

### MSF, Humanitarian Space, and the Social Imaginary

MSF’s ethic of *sans frontières* exhorts the global public to the value of humanitarian space and, in so doing, influences public attitudes, which in turn influence the terms of humanitarian engagement. Together with its crafting of a public morality founded on an unwavering commitment to neutrality, MSF contributes to the shaping of community in a globalized world. Two concluding general observations regarding MSF’s articulation of humanitarian space can help to illuminate the group’s relevance to the shaping of global community. The first has to do with the collective forces that motivate the group. There is evident in MSF’s ideographic purchase on humanitarian space of what

Appadurai has described as the profound role of the imagination in contemporary social life. Nodding to Durkheim and his recognition of the “social fact” of collective representation (Appadurai 1996, 5), Appadurai argues that the proliferation of new media technologies has aided and abetted in a major shift in global culture, a shift that involves the practices of imagination in society. As Appadurai (1991) explains,

until recently, whatever the force of social change, a case could be made that social life was largely inertial, that traditions provided a relatively finite set of “possible” lives, and that fantasy and imagination were residual practices, confined to special persons or domains, restricted to special moments or places. In general, they were antidotes to the finitude of social experience. In the last two decades, as the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas has taken on a new force, this weight has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies. (P. 198)

Appadurai is not saying that the world is a more cheerful place as a result of the expanded force of fantasy and imagination. Rather, he means that the imagination now mediates all forms of experience; often, it functions as “the ironic compromise” that marks the distance between the hope for a better life and the reality of concrete circumstances (Appadurai 1991, 198). Appadurai (1996, 5-9) argues that three main characteristics define the imagination in modern life. First, imagination has metastasized beyond its traditional domains of art and mythology to attain the status of a quotidian practice; that is, the imagination has become a staple practice of everyday life, guiding personal life choices as well as affecting national migration patterns. Second, in contradistinction to fantasy, imagination is viewed by Appadurai as a vibrant source of agency. He suggests that mass mediated images—a protean force of the modern imagination—far from being a socially arresting opiate, can provoke contemplation, irony, anger, and resistance. Contrasted with fantasy, which implies a separation of thought from action and is easily dissipated, the imagination “has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression...the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action” (Appadurai 1996, 7). Finally, the imagination has been transformed by mass media into a collective property. The act of collective reading and criticism enabled by new media technologies gives form to “communities of sentiment,” affect-charged groups with the potential for transnational movement “from shared imagination to collective action” (Appadurai 1996, 8).

Following Appadurai’s (1996) insights, the collective imagination can be seen to permeate MSF’s discursive theatre of operations. As has been shown, MSF volunteers have harnessed electronic media to publicize their causes and

to unite constituencies. Through the double-edged force of the media of its aid missions, MSF as an NGO has sought to mobilize popular sentiment, in the service of a “political humanitarianism” that is “concerned with advocating against injustice and indifference” (Tanguy and Terry 1999, 34). The horizon of MSF’s collective imagination serves as a potential form of agency for the group, holding out the possibility of uniting group members with members of the larger social collective. At a deeper level, the proliferation of mediated images—of happiness, of tragedy, of shame—conspires to make all of us humanitarians within MSF’s purview, at least potentially. We have seen the horrors of Auschwitz via actual filmed footage and filmic representation; we have heard the testimony of perpetrators and victims of crimes against humanity; we can participate in an electronic global town hall meeting about the consequences of inaccessibility to essential medicines by entire populations. The global “we” now spans geography and socioeconomic class; we have the capacity to imagine entire identities and entire worlds. MSF’s discourse in this way capitalizes on the play of the imagination: its constituency, whether unwittingly or deliberately, works to harness the forces of the collective imaginary/imaginary collective, of the global we.

A final general observation has to do with the kind of community that MSF (intentionally or unintentionally) embodies. In line with Appadurai’s (1996) description of the collective property of the modern imagination, an important part of what the group imagines its *sans frontièrisme* to be is a global collectivity of persons committed to the justness of humanitarian action. As has been shown, such a collectivity is imagined to be founded on principles that are said to transcend ideology, politics, and culture. It is, to borrow from Appadurai (1990), a “constructed landscape of collected aspirations” (p. 5) that binds together MSF’s disparate membership. Moreover, MSF’s particular imagining of a global humanitarian collectivity represents an articulation of space, ideas, symbols, and action, an articulation that forges a unity of persons and commitments. Despite its moniker (“without borders”), it is nonetheless bounded and boundary setting. It “encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions” (Fernback 1997, 39), and by and large its members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1983, 6). As such, MSF is demonstrative of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) conception of a uniquely “imagined community.”

The discursive landscape of our globalized world evinces the fact that we have entered into an “altogether new condition of neighborliness” in which persons, money, commodities, and information circulate in uneven flows of power (Appadurai 1990, 2). As I have attempted to demonstrate, the rhetorical crafting of humanitarian space and its habitation in the social imaginary has a consequential role to play in the new global topography. In this article, I have

not meant to dismiss or demean the role of MSF or other humanitarian NGOs in their struggles to claim a stake in global politics. Rather, I have hoped to bring out something of the tension between MSF's achievements, which have been real and meaningful for the tens of thousands of people it has helped, and the significance of the symbolic resources that it mobilizes in the name of its cause. Ultimately, the often risky desire to act out against injustice in the name of humanity—a risk that MSF demonstrates on a daily basis—entails not only strategy and commitment but often, as I have hoped to suggest, a simple willingness to imagine a better world.

## Notes

1. Held (1991) describes a “community of fate” as one “which rightly governs itself and determines its own future” and argues that globalization and its “nature and pattern of global interconnections” represents a fundamental challenge to such a notion (p. 202).

2. The term *sans frontières* has been invoked by scholars such as Fox (1995) to describe a fairly disparate movement of groups such as Europe without Borders, Reporters without Borders, and Doctors Without Borders (herein discussed) whose ethos adheres in a willingness to transcend sanctioned geographical and social boundaries.

3. In another context, Orbinski (2000) elaborates on the distinction between short-term (humanitarian) assistance and long-term (political) solution: “Humanitarian action . . . is civilian-based action to provide assistance in the wake of crisis, but does not itself attempt to solve the crisis” (p. 10).

4. In light of the subsequent discussion, it should be noted that Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF’s) official position on publicizing its *témoignage* is to treat it as a “rarely used but indispensable tool” (Bouchet-Saulnier 2000) to be employed “only when [MSF] is the sole witness of an exaction or when its testimony is the last recourse” (Brauman 1993a, 218). Many within MSF’s ranks, however, continue to vocalize their opinions and experiences despite the organization’s official position.

5. Condit and Lucaites (1993) describe an ideograph as “a culturally biased abstract word or phrase, drawn from ordinary language, which serves as a constitutional value for a historically situated collectivity...Ideographs represent in condensed form the normative, collective commitments of the members of a public” (p. xii). They are, McGee (1980) argues, “one-term sums of an orientation, the species of ‘God’ or ‘Ultimate’ term” (p. 7). Since they exist in discourse, ideographs reflect ideological commitments and are bound to discursive rules that both enable and limit their possible meanings. Each particular ideograph will thus exhibit a set of key terms that serves to demarcate the range of acceptable meanings and attitudes it can embody in a given group or culture. As such, ideographs function as a shared “vocabulary of public motives,” which justify and legitimate public action (Lucaites and Condit 1990, 18).

6. See, for example, Fox (1995), who asserts that MSF considers the exploitation of media channels in its missions to be an essential element in what it calls its “new humanitarianism” (p. 1612).

7. A term coined by Cupach and Imahori (1993), “identity freezing” denotes the act of effectively fixing or essentializing an identity via communication interaction. It occurs “when one interactant imposes an objective and public identity (like a stereotype, whether positive or negative) on the other” (Yep 1998, 82).



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*D. Robert DeChaine (Ph.D. cultural studies, Claremont Graduate University) is a lecturer in the liberal studies program at California State University, Los Angeles. His published work includes studies of the discursive practices of social movements, the rhetoric of decorum, performative dimensions of queer activism, power and the imagination of community space, the relationship between music and affect, and the rhetorical contributions of Walter Benjamin.*