The now renowned, Nobel Prize winning Doctors without Borders, or MSF (Médecins sans Frontières), was born in large part to avoid big, heavy bureaucracies, and top-down regulations – to be free to intervene and help wherever there was suffering. It came into being against the state, against sovereignty, and in the name of equality. And yet, despite seemingly being ‘against government’ it initiated a whole new and powerful form of government, or what Foucault calls the arts of government or governmentality (Agier 2010; Duffield 2007; Fassin 2011; Pandolfi 2003; Ticktin 2011a). In Foucault’s account of governmentality, he suggests that in contrast to sovereignty, government is about the welfare of the population, the improvement of its conditions, as well as its longevity and health (Foucault, 1991, 100). And indeed, humanitarianism is grounded on ideas of welfare of the population – specifically, care for populations in times of emergency or crisis such as conflicts, catastrophes and natural disasters, when the regular state infrastructures are unavailable to their populations. This apparatus of political care has ended up managing greater and greater swaths of the world’s population, rendering it an especially pressing and important form of power/knowledge. It also presents an interesting site through which to examine Foucault’s ideas of governmentality.

Humanitarianism is now a hegemonic, widespread, transnational formation – it can be understood under the frame of what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) have called ‘transnational governmentality,’ focusing on NGOs, activists, international organizations and corporations that now govern in zones that the state has ceded or abandoned. But insofar as Foucault’s idea of governmentality tracked political rationalizations emerging in precise sites and at specific moments, it is worth focusing more specifically on humanitarianism as its own form of government. And because humanitarianism itself has a long and varied history, and because its very definition is debated – it is, among other things, an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene and a form of government – I want to focus on its origins and logics in French (medical) humanitarianism, as represented by organizations like MSF, as I believe this foundational logic of what some call ‘the new humanitarianism’ still resonates in what has become a much wider and expansive form of governmentality. And insofar as political rationalizations are indeed related to specific contexts, I am interested to shed light on French humanitarianism as a specific form of governmentality by thinking about what might exceed it – where its limits are. I do this by briefly exploring emerging political formations. First, I will
lay out the characteristics of French humanitarianism and its forms of government; and second, I will explore its limits.

1. FRENCH HUMANITARIANISM AND ITS GOVERNMENT

To start, we can turn to France in 1968 and the subsequent formation of Médecins sans Frontières, as this is the beginning of ‘humanitarian government,’ or as Didier Fassin writes, how moral sentiments have become an essential force in contemporary politics, directed from the more powerful to the weaker (2011, 1). The year 1968 marked the largest strike in the history of the French workers’ movement, and the largest mass movement in French history (Ross 2002, 3–4). The key players in the formation of MSF were all soixante-huitards (‘68ers): at the time they were doctors or medical students, and Maoists or members of the Communist Party. These revolutionary doctors, who came together with a group of equally radical journalists, founded MSF in 1971.

While initially guided by the belief in a universal humanity grounded in equality and solidarity, MSF and the ‘new humanitarianism’ soon blossomed into and helped to shape an era of moralist antipolitics. After the failure of ‘68 to transform the social and political order and after the disappointment of anticolonial revolutionary Marxist movements, Bernard Kouchner, one of MSF’s founders, and many of his comrades from ‘68 radically changed their views. They turned away from engagement with what they thought of as politics – engaging with power relations in the struggle for a collective future – and instead embraced the belief that one can ultimately address only individual suffering; in this sense, they attended to what they conceived of as a universal humanity composed of suffering victims (Redfield 2013; Ross 2002; Vallaeys 2004). As former executive director of MSF-USA Nicolas de Torrente wrote, ‘Humanitarian action’s single-minded purpose [is] alleviating suffering, unconditionally and without any ulterior motive’ (2004, 5). That is, politics in terms of the anticapitalist, anti-imperialist revolution dreamed of by the soixante-huitards was replaced by a defense of the principles of human rights, and by a view that separated victims from perpetrators, heroes from villains, in order to side with and defend the powerless (Ross 2002). Kouchner and MSF brought a form of action that appealed in its purported ability to avoid Machiavellian politics (Caldwell 2009). It was an ideology grounded in individualism, one that no longer allowed for the possibility of larger political change. That said, it also grew out of revolutionary context in which populations in danger, not simply individuals, were made part of its mandate (Redfield 2013). In this sense, care of the population was expressed through a focus on suffering individuals in crisis contexts.1

How, then, does humanitarianism as a form of moralist, crisis-driven care, function as a form of government? I will explain how this discursive and material field works by dividing it into three components: governable space, governable subjects, and technologies of government.
Space

Governing helps to produce the world; it does not simply act on an a priori version of it. Different forms of government create new, governable spaces (Rose 1999); nation-states divide the world differently than feudal regimes. I turn once again to MSF’s history. MSF infused universalism with new meaning and substance by challenging notions of state sovereignty. The organization’s name itself indicates a desire to put aside conventional borders of nation-states. While MSF never suggested that borders were irrelevant – the name is about overcoming barriers more than borders (Redfield 2005, 352) – the group disavows any political or religious affiliation or identification and asserts its independence from political and governmental bodies. It does not agree that a nation should be free to determine its own destiny. Its vision was always global, determined by notions of ‘humanity’ – human suffering, human dignity and human liberty – and inspired by the fact that illness and injury themselves are not bound by borders.

In this sense, humanitarians work around and bypass nation-states when they can; they negotiate with states to get access to people in need, but ultimately, they intervene when the nation-state cannot or does not protect its own populations. The apparatus of French doctors and their teams function as a network, working with many other organizations: international, national, NGOs, financial organizations, but also military actors, if need be. Indeed, several scholars have insisted that humanitarian government is always paired with militarism (Pandolfi 2003; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010), or in ‘secret solidarity with a police order’ (Agier 2010, 30). The logics of policing operate in zones of exceptionalism, outside the law – in this sense, policing and humanitarianism are two sides of the same coin: both are essential elements of a moral economy in which law as a regime of systematic justice is not central, and where a democratic political realm has been displaced in favor of a regime of sovereign exceptions (Ticktin 2005).

Building on Appadurai’s term ‘mobile sovereignty,’ the space created by this flexible, exceptional and itinerant form of government has been called ‘migrant sovereignty’ (Pandolfi 2008) and ‘moving sovereignty’ (Agier 2010). In other words, humanitarians and their networks come together and congeal in different moments of designated emergency, touching down in different places around the world where they feel intervention is morally necessary. This often echoes the well-worn paths and forms of colonial intervention, intentionally or not – colonial government also acted with a moral imperative to ‘help’ or save others. They stay for a certain time – never permanently, even if interventions are increasingly prolonged (Feldman 2018; McKay 2012) – and leave when they feel they need to: because it’s safe or because it’s too dangerous, or when a region or conflict is no longer designated a priority.

This mobile or moving sovereignty in turn creates spaces of government: most notably, it has created what Michel Agier has called a ‘camp universe.’ There are hundreds of camps around the world – to be sure, they take different shapes, some more official and run by the UNHCR for refugees; others for IDPs (internally displaced people); and still others are more self-organized by undocumented immi-
grants – renamed ‘people-on-the-move’ by these folks themselves, to get away from legal categories built on exclusion and hierarchy, like refugee, asylum seeker and economic immigrant – while remaining under the humanitarian gaze. And there are in-between spaces, such as the camps both formally and informally set up as migrants cross over the Mediterranean; for example, the ‘Moria’ refugee camp on Lesbos, Greece. These can be located at specific ‘hotspots’ or borders, and are established to provide emergency healthcare and aid, but they also regularly function to sort and channel people – to deport, redirect, or generally slow down and contain.

Overall, humanitarian spaces are understood as protected spaces, to provide safety from conflict or disease, and they create the conditions in which care can be delivered; but by the nature of their structure, they also serve to police, discipline and contain the people in them – in the name of protection, people are counted, their movements surveilled. Humanitarians act as sovereign in these spaces, enacting a top-down form of government, regardless of the laws of the nation-state in which they’re located. Their spaces are not democratically run; they are installed in the name of care, and in the name of a suffering humanity. Indeed, we can speak of a universal template for camps, and a humanitarian architecture which is built to be visibly temporary (Siddiqui 2023; Redfield 2016).

While camps are identifiable humanitarian spaces that install a transnational form of government, in my own research in France, I found that humanitarian government could also be established in local, sometimes hybrid NGO-state spaces, creating their own enclaves in state-run medical bureaucracies, all the while governed by the logics of humanitarian care. These might be thought of as spaces of ‘graduated sovereignty’ (Ong 1999). This is because French humanitarianism has roots in and overlaps with the French nation-state, even as it exceeds and challenges it. It is intertwined with histories of French colonialism, responding to the inequalities and forms of violence produced by colonialism; it reuses the infrastructures of French colonialism, such as hospitals, schools and government structures, and inherits many of the affective hierarchies of colonial sentiment, including saviorism; but it is also built on French ideas of republican universalism, which it enacts in the name of humanity, rather than empire or the nation-state.

When I followed the institution and application of the illness clause (Ticktin 2006, 2011a) – a humanitarian inspired and produced exception to French law that allowed sans papiers or undocumented immigrants with life-threatening pathologies to get papers in order to get treatment in France – I found that even as it was initiated by humanitarian groups like MSF and its offshoot, MDM (Médecins du Monde), along with other immigrant rights collectives, it played out in state medical offices (la DDASS), where immigrants had to go with doctors’ notes, explaining why they needed papers to stay and get treatment in France. The people who enacted these were local nurses and doctors, along with a host of other healthcare workers and immigrant rights activists who guided immigrants along this path. This created a particular (racialized) humanitarian space, in the state-run bureaucracy (Ticktin 2013). In this sense, French forms of humanitarian government may piggyback on the state, but the crucial and defining feature is that healthcare workers are the prime political,
sovereign actors and the governable spaces are spaces of medical care, first and foremost. To be clear, this does not stop them from being violent or exclusionary, insofar as such practices can be committed in the name of protection and care.

Subjects

Governmentality involves producing governable subjects: there is no unified pre-existing or natural ‘people.’ That is, governing practices are determined by the nature of those they govern – these are co-constituted. Nation-states produce national populations. French humanitariansm acts as its own regime of subjectification, with its own history. Who are the subjects of humanitarian government? Once again, it is helpful to go back to MSF’s founding logic.

As Nicolas de Torrente (2004), former executive director of MSF-USA stated, MSF was built on – and is still guided by – four key principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. **Humanity** posits that all people have equal dignity by virtue of their membership in humanity; **impartiality** directs that assistance is provided based solely on need, without discrimination among recipients; **neutrality** stipulates that humanitarian organizations must refrain from taking part in hostilities or taking actions that advantage one side of the conflict over another; and **independence** is necessary to ensure that humanitarian action only serves the interests of war victims, and not political, religious, or other agendas.

I am interested in the first and primary principle – humanity – as the subject produced by humanitarian government. Humanity is quite different from ‘society,’ the subject of ‘government of the social’ in the mid-nineteenth century, which is what Foucault wrote about in developing his theory of governmentality (Procacci 1989; Donzelot 1991; Rose 1999). That is, while care is absolutely central to both humanitarian government and government of the social, the latter included techniques of measurement like statistics and social interventions and disciplines like social work and psychology, and produced ‘social’ needs, along with a population (‘society’) that needed them. It produced social sympathy to hold the collective together (against the alienation of capitalism), and a form of social welfare. In contrast, humanitarian government produces and protects a concept of universal ‘humanity’ enshrined in the individual human body. That is, humanitarian NGOs and their sometimes co-conspirators, human-rights NGOs, have worked to create and protect a universal ethical collective called ‘humanity’ which is evoked as both an object of care and a source of anxiety (Feldman and Ticktin 2010) that transcends nation-states and enables the crossing of borders.

In the case of humanitarianism, I have argued elsewhere that ‘humanity’ as a population is only perceived and united in its suffering in moments of emergency; that is, it only comes into being during moments of crisis. Acute suffering is considered the universal common denominator, the manifestation of humanity and evidence of its existence (Ticktin 2011a, 2014; Redfield 2013). Humanitarianism is grounded on the belief that this universal suffering can be recognized wherever it is found, that it can be measured and understood, and that, crucially, a response to it is morally mandated.
In some senses, this suffering serves as empirical proof of a universal humanity; and responding to it becomes a universal moral code.

Yet is this suffering body always and universally recognizable? As critics of humanitarianism have noted, humanitarianism often requires suffering persons to be represented in the passivity of their suffering, not in the action they take to confront and escape it (Boltanski 1999, 190). Indeed, innocence has become the necessary accompaniment to suffering, required in order to designate the sufferer as worthy. That is, the suffering victim is best and most easily recognized by humanitarians when considered innocent – pure, outside politics, outside history, indeed, outside time and place altogether (Ticktin 2011a, 2017). This figure is distinctly counterposed to the previous political protagonists of the 1960s and 1970s such as the worker and the colonial militant, in that both these subjects are highly situated, geographically, historically, racially and of course politically. Children often serve this role of ‘generic human beings,’ those who are innocent of politics and history, and hence also of war and enmity; they are considered in no way specific: politically, culturally, historically (Malkki 2010). MSF itself asserts that children are seen as ‘the icon of innocence, the victim of man’s folly’ (Le Pape and Salignon 2003). As blameless, children are the ideal recipients of care. We do not see them as responsible for their predicament: agency is absent. With just a little scratching of the surface, then, we see that certain forms of the universal suffering body are more appealing and recognizable as exemplars of ‘humanity’ than others – and indeed, they are more subject to its government, for better or worse.

If humanity is the subject of humanitarian government, then, it must be configured and manifested as an innocent victim. As Didier Fassin notes in his book on humanitarian reason, humanitarian government tends to set up a ‘scale of innocence and vulnerability’ that works to privilege some, like HIV-positive children who are the ultimate innocents, but in the process, it also works to penalize others, like their mothers (Fassin 2011, 67). While humanitarianism purports to serve and protect a universal suffering humanity, with the conceptual help of innocence, it nevertheless enacts hierarchies on the ground (Ticktin 2017).

Technologies

If governmentality works by designing spaces and producing subjects, how exactly does it do this? As a political rationality, it must be translated into practices that shape space and conduct; it needs to attach itself to technology for its realization. As Nikolas Rose (1999, 52) writes, a technology of government is ‘an assemblage of forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement’ and so on, ‘in order to achieve certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed.’

I want to mention two primary technologies of humanitarian government: one affective, the second, biological. The first technology is compassion – it plays a leading role insofar as humanitarian government has been defined as the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics (Fassin 2011). This form of gov-
ernment is usually enacted by the more powerful but focused on the poorest and most disenfranchised – and in this sense, compassion and its related sentiments like pity and sympathy play a special role, as they are more successfully elicited in situations of hierarchical power relations.

Compassion is the sentiment evoked to address the suffering of the world; the technique to kickstart the process of help and care for those most in need. On the one hand, scholars argue that compassion was the key to creating the sentimental bonds of humanity, making the category not just a biological, but an ethical subject (Laqueur 2009; Feldman and Ticktin 2010); on the other hand, compassion in not an equalizing sentiment. It is not evoked by everyone or for everyone. Indeed, according to Arendt, by its very definition, compassion is unable to generalize. Arendt’s only exception to this rule is Jesus Christ, as portrayed by Dostoevsky; the sign of Jesus’s divinity was his ability to have compassion for all men in their singularity, without lumping them together into one suffering mankind (Arendt 1990, 85). Insofar as it focuses on individuals and not structural realities or collectives, compassion cannot by itself further a politics of equality. Government by way of compassion, therefore, involves exceptions rather than rules, generosity rather than entitlement. It involves engaging people in relationships of sympathy or pity, and in this way performing one’s common humanity. This is the case, even though racialized, classed and gendered regimes distribute compassion unevenly.

In its current, institutionalized forms, humanitarianism actually maintains inequality, in that it separates out two populations – those who can feel and act on their compassion and those who must be the subjects (or objects) of it; those who have the power to protect and those who need protection. This is mapped onto global, racialized inequalities (Benton 2016; Ticktin 2016). Because it is discretionary and depends on specific, grounded social relations, this is a form of governmental care that, when taken to the extreme, can involve selling one’s suffering, bartering for membership in humanity with one’s life and body – emphasizing injury, illness or harm in order to evoke compassion, or even creating that harm in order to elicit the requisite feelings of care.

This last point brings us to the second technology used to enact humanitarian government, specifically French humanitarianism, insofar as it is most significantly focused on health, and the lives and well-being of populations: medico-scientific techniques, based in the field of biology, and biological measurements. Biology plays a particular role in claims to political recognition, and in the very basic management of humanitarian populations. To be clear, I mean ‘biology’ as a signifier within the larger fields of biomedicine, biotechnology and genomics, one which is constantly being renegotiated and understood. Biology refers to the material life processes of human beings, from the material to the species level, but it can refer to many things at once: a genetic profile, anatomy, or a white blood cell count. That is, insofar as health is increasingly understood in biological terms, whether through genetic testing or immunology, biology comes to play a role in humanitarian government, used as a technology to render suffering legible and treatable wherever it is found. This is especially the case for French humanitarianism, since it is based on intervention by
doctors and healthcare workers. As Liisa Malkki first argued in 1996, the refugee as a universal humanitarian subject is one whose corporeal wounds speak louder than words; political history is rendered irrelevant (Malkki 1996).

Take, for example, immigrants and refugees. They have been increasingly recast as suspicious – and nation-states in the Global North consistently function on the basis of a belief that immigrants lie and cheat – but insofar as sick immigrants present themselves as ‘bare,’ biological life, they are seen as legitimate (Fassin 2001; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005; Ticktin 2005, 2006; Agamben 1998). In this logic, their bodies tell the truth; biological measures cannot dupe the system. Indeed, humanitarian government presumes that biology is the domain of the incontestable; it derives legitimacy from the belief in biology’s fixity. Scars in the right place attest to torture, and immunity levels cannot lie about one’s HIV status. In this logic, DNA tests and dental records supposedly confirm the age of a refugee, and if they should be considered a minor. The problem is that biology is in fact not incontestable; for the subjects of humanitarian government, bodies and biological measurements can be the quintessential domain of action. Biology is the domain of possibility and of hope, just as it is for those designated modern liberal subjects (Ticktin 2011b; Rose 2001). Despite having to present themselves as passive victims, people are for the most part actively engaged in shaping their lives within existing constraints, and certainly, in trying to make them better. This has various, sometimes unintended consequences; in my own work I have seen clearly how this has made biology – measured as a medico-scientific technology – the field of political struggle for those who want or need humanitarian aid or exceptions. I came across examples of immigrants not treating their illnesses in order to keep their papers; or infecting themselves with severe illness. Indeed, there was a huge range of creative ways in which undocumented immigrants worked with and on their ‘biologies’ to obtain papers (Ticktin 2006, 2011b).

In this sense, because of French humanitarianism’s grounding in health, universal suffering is translated into and recognized through biology, and medico-biological grammars and measures function as political technologies. This can mean focusing on illness, injury or famine, but it can also mean looking for biological traces of gendered harms, like rape (Ticktin 2011b). One does not need to feel compassion for the individual, unique person herself; one can feel compassion for the idea of the raped person, as manifest by a rape kit, and physical evidence of injuries like fistula. By way of such technological measures, humanitarian government is impelled into action. Stated differently, biology is another way in which compassion is evoked; this in turn can produce a humanitarian response – it depends on the moral legitimacy of the biological condition. Both compassion and biology therefore play a critical role in the way humanitarian government functions, and both can produce unintended and sometimes violent results.

To recap, humanitarian government is a mobile form of top-down care, one that often reproduces racial and colonial hierarchies even as it tries to challenge the forms of suffering that are generated by these enduring pasts. For protection, it creates spaces outside of ordinary and everyday life – these are supposed to be zones of peace in the midst of conflict. But even in zones of emergency, these are complex
places, and often sites of the formation of new politics, nationalisms or rivalry, or new forms of suffering and violence. Such humanitarian spaces may create new divisions and antipathies within societies: for example, people-on-the-move from sub-Saharan Africa are recurrently put in detention centers, prisons or camps in Morocco, and kept in extremely difficult conditions. In these cases, humanitarian aid has been made available to them; but this creates resentments in the local populations, who are also deeply in need, yet are not considered in a ‘state of emergency’ and cannot access humanitarian aid. Humanitarian government both creates and works in the service of a suffering humanity, yet this humanity only comes into being in moments of crisis, and it is most recognizable when in the form of innocent victims, a position more available to some than others, according to race, gender, religion and so on (Ticktin 2017). Finally, compassion and medico-biological assessments are two key political technologies by which humanitarian government functions – helping to distinguish those who need help from those who do not. These work according to discretionary power, which can result in new forms of suffering.

2. THE LIMITS OF HUMANITARIAN GOVERNMENT

While humanitarian government has changed and developed over time, it has nonetheless been a consistent force in the world since the 1990s – coming into being at the end of the Cold War, hand-in-glove with forms of neoliberalism and capitalism (Whyte 2018), and it has only grown in relevance as it has been coupled more and more tightly with militarism. But with the rise of right-wing populisms and forms of illiberalism, an unprecedented global pandemic, and the rise of powerful global justice movements like #BLM and Defund the Police, are there ways in which we see the limits of humanitarian government – is there pushback? Are there other political formations of care that challenge it, overlap with it, or reveal its edges? To be sure, the legitimacy of humanitarianism itself has been increasingly challenged in the last 10 years by militias and other warring factions: workers have been attacked, kidnapped and killed, most recently in places like Ethiopia, Cameroon, Yemen and Afghanistan. But are there emerging alternatives to forms of humanitarian government, that work in the name of care, rather than simply attacks on it?

I will briefly mention two examples from France – retaining the emphasis on French humanitarianism but narrowing the focus to immigration. People-on-the-move are some of the more significant populations subject to humanitarian government, insofar as the deepening inequalities between haves and have-nots – largely mapped onto the Global North and South – have resulted both in people-on-the-move traveling to Europe, North America and Australia, and in the subsequent erection of border walls, barriers and other violent technologies to keep people out. This has created situations of mass death en route, in seas like the Mediterranean, and in deserts from the US to North Africa. In this sense, people-on-the-move are often managed by forms of humanitarian government – in detention centers, at hotspots or in informal camps. They have to work to qualify as part of a ‘suffering humanity,’ insofar they
are governed by technologies of compassion and biology. To be clear, this is only one element of governmentality that people-on-the-move are subject to; the ‘governmentality’ of migration includes many other aspects, such as ‘the multi-layered and heterogenous set of technologies, discourses and policies concerning the production of borders … and at the same time the regulation of people’s movements’ (Tazzioli 2015, xi). Yet, as scholars have shown, these forms of governmentality respond to and evolve with the creativity and agency of migrants (Tazzioli 2015, 2020; Walters 2015; De Genova et al. 2018; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). In a similar manner, I suggest that people-on-the-move are attempting to challenge the humanitarian apparatus, insofar as it often reinforces and reproduces inequalities, for instance, by providing people with aid but not stopping deportations. As Michel Agier stated, humanitarian government regularly functions as the left hand of Empire (Agier 2010). So how are people challenging this regime of care? My first example is one in which a challenge is posed to humanitarian government, even as a humanitarian logic prevails in the end; the second example offers a potentially more effective challenge.

I start with an example from Calais, an area in which migrants have gathered at least since the 1990s to cross into the UK. This has also been a recurring location for humanitarian government; for instance, the Sangatte refugee camp was put in place by the Red Cross in 1999, and then dismantled in 2002 by then President Nicolas Sarkozy, under pressure from the UK government. Informal encampments have cropped up over the years, served in part by charity or humanitarian organizations, and have been cyclically shut down by the government. Looking at these occupations of land and these informal living spaces, I am interested in how people-on-the move have tried to move beyond humanitarian government – its forms of surveillance, its hierarchical forms of organization, and its complicity with policing by the French state.

**A Makeshift Camp**

In particular, I look to the makeshift camp on the outskirts of Calais called ‘The Jungle,’ established in January 2015, and in place until to October 2016, when the French state violently dismantled it. ‘The Jungle’ was not a refugee camp; it was settled, organized and run by migrants themselves, as they stopped on their way to the UK, or elsewhere (Agier 2019; King 2019). NGOs were not the ones who set it up, even if it was subsequently taken over by them; it was both a claim to and a launching pad toward freedom. The name itself reveals this history: it derives from the Pashto word ‘dzjangal’ which means forest or woods, which was then bastardized into ‘la Jungle,’ with all its racist overtones. Indeed, the name paved the way for a form of racial innocence on the part of the humanitarians, who came in later to help and protect people living in ‘uncivilized’ conditions. People-on-the-move claimed the area starting in 2015 as a place they could live for however long it took them to cross over to the UK, by way of trains or ships or trucks; they made a home of it, created communities. The communities were not organized according to ideas of moral worth, protection or innocence, as is the case for humanitarian spaces; it
was not about who is a ‘real’ refugee, and who is not. Anyone could set up a tent, participate in the local economy of makeshift shops and services – there were restaurants, barbershops, and regular shops – and stay for a day or a year. In this sense, it was a community of care by way of practice – we might call it ‘commoning’ (Ticktin 2021) – and it was entered into by labor and by action, in a very broad sense of action which does not require able-bodiedness. Labor and action replace communities based on blood, ethnicity, nationality, or any other such identity category, including ‘humanity’ – community here is simply a quality of relations, one that is ultimately non-exclusionary.

Without romanticizing it, many agreed it was a burgeoning experiment in different forms of being together (Agier 2019; King 2019). Ultimately, in the name of humanitarian care, the state razed the Jungle, replacing it by a limited number of shipping containers that they could manage in recognizable ways: they could be cleaned, controlled and counted. As Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated, in classic humanitarian language, they had to get people out of the ‘squalid’ and ‘filthy’ conditions of the Jungle, into these containers, ‘because we, in France, cannot allow people to live in such wretched conditions’ (September 2015). The Jungle was co-opted by a form of humanitarian government, which promised to help and protect, and in the process, separated out the deserving from the undeserving – expelling those who were not deserving enough. Most of the inhabitants did not fit in the containers, and they were deported out of the country, or displaced to other areas in France. In contrast, the Jungle was an attempt at a form of unruly but non-judgmental, non-moralist, non-innocent care. To be sure, this instance of humanitarian government included a mix of humanitarian NGOs working in consort with the French state; as already mentioned, the history of humanitarianism in France has included a very particular permeable border between state and non-state government: humanitarians regularly move from the NGO to the state realm. The exemplary case of humanitarianism as both a form of national government and transnational governmentality is MSF founder Bernard Kouchner, who later became Minister for Foreign and European Affairs under François Fillon from 2007–2010.

Ultimately, a form of humanitarian government supplanted the supportive and mutually caring communities that had developed in this situation of deep hardship. The space was transformed into a more typical humanitarian space (i.e. camp), governed in top-down fashion, with a focus on surveillance and policing. The shipping containers provided by the French state did not include communal spaces for people to gather, and the camp was fenced in, requiring fingerprinting to enter. Its subjects were required to perform the innocence of refugees in order to stay – and the whole camp was portrayed in the media through the lens of pity and compassion and framed by a form of ‘celebrity humanitarianism’ (Richey 2016). It is likely that the history of Calais as a location for humanitarian government played a role in this; the infrastructures were already in place. While informal, the Jungle was still a camp-like space, and its initial incarnation was sanctioned by the French state: the government set up an official day center to help people-on-the-move, including three military tents in the car park of a former children’s holiday camp, called the Jules Ferry Centre.
Les Gilets Noirs

My second example potentially poses a stronger challenge to humanitarian government, developing a different set of logics based more on a horizontal arrangement of support reminiscent of mutual aid (Spade 2020), rather than the more top-down forms of humanitarian care. I am referring to what I see as the latest incarnation of the sans papiers movement (see Lecadet, this volume), Les Gilets Noirs or Black Vests – a play on the Gilets Jaunes or recent Yellow Vest movement – and one of the latest attempts at what I see as a non-innocent politics in the French context. The sans papiers movement began in the 1990s and called attention to – and objected to – the fact that people were criminalized simply based on movement, nothing else. This is why they changed their name from ‘clandestins’ (clandestine) to ‘sans papiers’ (without papers) – shifting the framework about innocence and guilt to one about imperialism and capitalism. The movement began by occupying churches, as a demand for rights and papers, before it got hijacked and reframed as a humanitarian problem, and managed by a form of humanitarian government (Siméant 1998; Ticktin 2011a). I see the Gilets Noirs, along with their organizing partners, the collective ‘La Chapelle Debout,’ as potentially revive this aborted future, by posing a challenge to the three elements of humanitarian government I discussed in the first half of this chapter: its government of space, subjects and its preferred political technologies.

First, the Gilets Noirs refuse the camp-like spaces of humanitarian government, spaces which result in spatial segregation from the rest of society. Rather, they are changing the dynamics of the city, putting themselves at the heart of it, reclaiming space. They organize from the ‘foyers’ or migrant hostels where they live, working with other groups in their neighborhoods. They have followed the sans-papiers by using a strategy of occupation, albeit a slightly different one – they have claimed the various spaces not for protection (as the sans papiers did with churches), but to render inequality and exclusion visible. They started their occupations with Charles de Gaulle airport in May 2019, as the country’s largest airport, from which many migrants are deported. They then moved on to occupy the lobby of the multinational catering company, Elior, in June 2019, in La Défense business district of Paris. It was targeted in part because the company hires sans papiers to provide services for France’s immigration system: its detention centers, court rooms and airports in which migrants are detained, judged and deported from. They were using undocumented migrants against each other. But Elior also represents the heart of French neo-imperialism: the Gilets Noirs have pointed to Elior’s role in making profits from selling weapons to Africa, feeding conflicts which in turn have led many of these very same sans papiers to flee to Europe. They argue that their fight is both against racism in France and imperialism in Africa; they refuse to let Elior, or the French more broadly, claim racial innocence, ignoring the links between colonialism and contemporary racism and inequality. For instance, they point to France’s repeated role in regime change in African countries from Libya to Burkina Faso, its investments in strategic raw materials such as oil, gas, gold and uranium, and the fact that 14 African nations are still obliged by a colonial pact to put 85 percent of their foreign reserve
into a French bank. Finally, the *Gilets Noirs* occupied the famed Panthéon which is a mausoleum for distinguished French citizens – and a potent symbol of the French Republic and its values of equality, fraternity and solidarity. These are values that the movement is explicitly fighting for. This was the last straw; the police violently expelled them. Their occupations and struggles challenge the assumed ahistorical position of humanitarians, who intervene just to help stop suffering in the immediate present, regardless of cause.

Second, the *Gilets Noirs* refuse the subject position of humanitarian government: they refuse to be victims. They emerged in force in 2018 in part because of new laws that doubled legal detention periods, limited asylum and sped up deportations. But theirs is a much broader fight. They do not pretend to use the language of innocence and victimhood. They do not want to be saved. Two of the organizers explained to me that they have shifted the affective regime of struggle away from a focus on suffering, toward an unrepentant and strident struggle for dignity and equality. Rather, they prefigure a new political subject: that of a decolonized collective. They call for a politics that goes beyond identity, beyond deservingness – they insist that theirs is a movement for all, not just for *sans papiers*, against a system that produces inequality, police violence, racism, capitalism and imperialism. When they occupied Elior, for instance, they joined the striking cleaning workers. It is a movement that recognizes histories of exploitation and extraction and pushes for freedom of circulation.

Third, they challenge hierarchical political technologies such as compassion. They evoke a very different affective register: while they build on the *Gilets Jaunes* movement against deepening forms of inequality, they insist that they took their name because they are ‘black with anger.’ In other words, they channel political outrage, rather than attempting to elicit moral sentiments such as compassion – they mobilize their own and others’ feelings of injustice, anger, and a demand for respect, rather than asking for help from humanitarians. While they use a form of spatial politics – organizing in place, with common goals – they do not argue for solidarity, admitting to forms of difference and conflict – just common cause (see Plateforme d’Enquêtes Militantes 2019). In this sense, they are building new forms of being together that are not easy or innocent.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Whether this movement will eventually be co-opted and managed by a new form of humanitarian government is an empirical question. But both the organizing by people-on-the-move in the Jungle and now the *Gilets Noirs* point to the ways in which this form of humanitarian governmentality is hitting up against a limit: those whom it governs are not satisfied with its form of political care and they are developing their own new forms of government. They are working to organize political space in a more integrated manner and to use new, more egalitarian and horizontal technologies of government. Whatever the outcome of these two cases, it behooves
us to watch how these new technologies of government and new formations of power/knowledge, travel and develop.

NOTES

1. There are many books written on MSF which tell this story in detail; two of the most important include Vallaeys 2004; and Redfield 2013.
2. At the time of this writing (June 2022), the two collectives had taken different paths, but the Collective ‘La Chapelle Debout’ had recently occupied an abandoned building in the 9th arrondissement in Paris, calling it ‘L’Ambassade des Immigrés’ (Immigrant Embassy) and hanging a banner out front, stating, ‘Immigrant Lives Matter.’ Eighty sans papiers were living in it as of June 2022.

REFERENCES


