

Book Review: The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism

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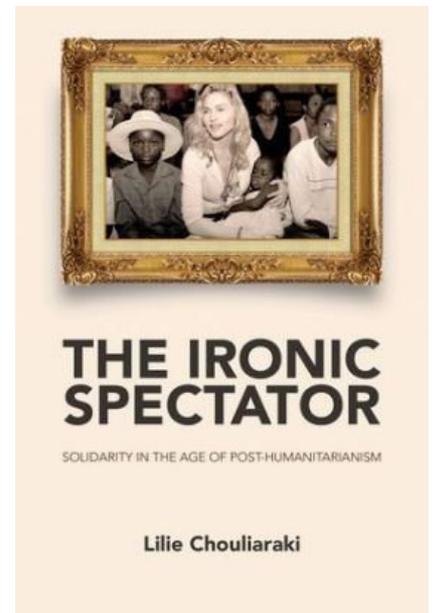
*This book explores how solidarity towards vulnerable others is performed in our media environment. By showing historical change in Amnesty International and Oxfam appeals, and in the Live Aid and Live 8 concerts, in the advocacy of Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie, this book shows how solidarity has today come to be not about conviction but choice, not vision but lifestyle, not others but ourselves – turning us into the ironic spectators of other people's suffering. Much of this important book does not present comfortable reading – but that indeed is as it should be, finds **Suzanne Franks**.*



The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism. Lilie Chouliaraki. Polity Press. December 2012.

Find this book:

On the front cover of this book, pictured inside an ornate golden frame, there is a glamorous photo of Madonna clutching an African baby, and gazing passionately into the camera. It is this somewhat uncomfortable juxtaposition which is at the heart of [Lilie Chouliaraki](#)'s compelling new volume; celebrity glamour and the way we relate to unnamed distant suffering victims.



The author is professor of media and communications at LSE and on the back cover of the book she is described as the 'Aristotle of mediated humanitarianism.' That might be slightly far fetched, but certainly she qualifies as a high priestess of the representation of suffering and how we engage with distant others. This is a subject that was first explored in depth by Luc Boltanski, in his groundbreaking *Distant Suffering*. But in subsequent years Chouliaraki has taken up the baton and in several publications examined closely the development of our relationship to faraway disasters, beginning with *The Spectatorship of Suffering* in 2006 and now in this latest volume. Here she identifies a new 'post-humanitarian' phase and explores the implications of those most up-to-date ways in which audiences and supporters are being encouraged to express solidarity, from clicking online petitions to wearing fashionable wrist bands.

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Chouliaraki dissects with great clarity exactly what is taking place in this post humanitarian sensibility and how supporters are now being drawn in to apparently care and show solidarity with distant sufferers. The ubiquitous means of contemporary empathy, whether it is attending a concert, tweeting a message or identifying with the angst of a favoured celebrity, appear increasingly hollow under this analysis. The uncomfortable conclusion she reaches is that we have reached an ironic form of solidarity which is all about the self rather than truly engaging with the suffering of the other. And crucially this kind of feel good activism, which is born out of a neo-liberal transactional culture, is one that is also distinctly anti-political when compared with the more traditional forms of solidarity. It side steps the crucial questions of justice and eschews wider moral frameworks that might pose uncomfortable questions when contemplating suffering others. According to Chouliaraki this new style of engagement hyper emotionalizes the subject but without ever challenging the underlying power relations of humanitarianism.

Unsurprisingly the world of aid agencies which mediate these forms of post humanitarian solidarity are subjected to criticism. The triumph of branding, corporate messages and techniques for pursuing consumer loyalty are cited as key exemplars. She criticizes for example 'post humanitarian appeals that are mobilizing a momentary activism at the expense of cultivating a deeper understanding of why humanitarian action is important.' And there are separate chapters which critique those all too familiar charity icons: in particular the rock concert and the select A List celebrities, as distinct examples of the way that contemporary empathies are being engaged. They are the currency of this transfer to a scenario where the 'orientation of the public towards vulnerable others is articulated through a technologized economy of pleasure towards the self.'

The book has a very clear structure with careful signposting of the argument at each stage. There is also a useful historical framework to much of the analysis which helps demonstrate how these modes of empathizing and identifying have developed; for example in the contrasting of Live Aid with Live 8 or the comparisons made between Audrey Hepburn and Angela Jolie in the way they performed as celebrity ambassadors.



Make Poverty History wristbands. Credit: [Twm™](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Much of this important book does not present comfortable reading – but that indeed is as it should be. The overall argument is gloomy – sometimes even despairing at the thin promise of a public concerned with only narcissistic comfort derived from a cool form of lifestyle politics or an impoverished conception of humanitarianism as spectacle, which treats distant others as voiceless props. But Chouliaraki also does her best to extract a positive message, trying to demonstrate how we may retain through a sense of theatre a valuable communicative structure that helps us rethink the relationship between humanitarianism and politics in a positive way. And here she is probably at her least convincing, urging us to engage in an exercise of perpetual reflexivity in order to keep on challenging the liberal roots of humanitarianism and best preserve the possibility of real change. This form of ‘agonistic engagement’ should ideally keep us asking the difficult and challenging questions. We may only hope that her optimistic framing is ultimately justified.

Nevertheless she does conclude with interesting evidence of how some of these more unfortunate post humanitarian tendencies have been overcome, giving credence to the framework of a new ethical imperative; citing as examples those cases where solidarity activism in the South has itself gone on to generate celebrity status in the West, such as the prominence accorded to Nobel prize winners Desmond Tutu or Rigoberta Menchu Tum. Meanwhile the Guardian’s long running [Katine project](#) which engaged in a down to earth and frequently warts and all version of discussing development is also seen as a model counteracting all those unfortunate tendencies of what can become little more than voyeuristic sentimentalism of celebrity or therapeutic reverberation of online emotion. So there is indeed some prospect that the post humanitarian future may yield alternative versions of a hope that we can still change the condition of suffering others.

Suzanne Franks is a former BBC TV journalist who is now Professor of Journalism at City University, London and where she also teaches a course on Humanitarian Communication. She recently published *Reporting Disasters: Famine, Aid, Politics and the Media* (Hurst). [Read more reviews by Suzanne](#).

