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## **Shaping the future and the past of humanitarianism: the history and epistemic communities of emergencies**

The concept of emergencies is consubstantial with that of humanitarianism. A swift response to an acute crisis defines what humanitarians claim to have engaged with throughout their long history (however one defines it: through legal frameworks and norms, institutions and international sovereign bodies). In the 1970s but more particularly in the 1980s, Médecins Sans Frontiers founder, Kouchner, defined it afresh, as *urgences*, and as a moral imperative of incontrovertible importance. The present tense of urgency defined its a-historicity and also a certain type of response --pragmatic and utilitarian -- yet principled and overriding obsolete notions of sovereignty (if only to replace them with new ones).<sup>[1]</sup> Locating humanitarianism outside of history was a political act responding and reacting to a certain type of Genevan history making -- manifest since at least 1867--and, arguably, the bureaucratization of humanitarian systems, the premises of which were visible in the 1980s. Yet the archives of MSF like those of other major NGOs reveal a wealth of prolonged emergencies, crises that lasted over a generation, shaping the habitus of entire groups of humanitarian subjects and practitioners, allowing epistemic communities to grow through endogamous exchanges between humanitarian agents and recipients of aid. The discursive role of emergencies and its operational relevance shaped a range of ethical and pragmatic positions. These were later framed in programming terms and which shaped the future of humanitarianism, but emergency discourses lack of engagement with the past, historical writing and the duration of humanitarian action which reveal a range of innate ethical tensions within the humanitarian project.

This paper will therefore discuss briefly this relationship between urgency and past, through a discussion of how humanitarians have exhibited and debated their past from the earliest days for the Red Cross, arguably before they had a past. It will then move onto discussing the notion of prolonged emergency and the shaping of humanitarian futures through the case study of the Thai border camps only to conclude with the commemorative efforts of the beneficiaries themselves and their attempt to shape historical consciousness of their experience.

[1] Sovereignty as defined by Karl Schmitt, see Nguyen for an illuminating discussion.