

# Antipode

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**Eyal Weizman**, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*, London : Verso, 2012. ISBN: 9781844676477 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781680629 (ebook)

Those familiar with the research of Eyal Weizman will find in *The Least of all Possible Evils* a stimulating continuation and also a departure from his previous work in Palestine, in particular his book *Hollow Land* (Weizman 2007). That book offered an incisive critique of colonial occupation, political violence, and the militarization of planning and architecture in the West Bank. Weizman's new book builds upon the theme of political and military violence through a study of its spatial forms and representations, while bringing an awareness of violence to bear on questions of humanitarianism, morality and the law. Although Palestine remains central to his study, the author enlarges his geographical scope to include cases such as Ethiopia, Bosnia and Iraq. The outcome is a well-written, empirically rich and at times shocking cartography of humanitarian government, the humanitarian-military nexus, and the assemblage of technologies, actors, bureaucracies and spatial forms that constitute what Weizman defines as the 'humanitarian present'. The book is thus a welcome contribution to geographical scholarship on Palestine but also to the burgeoning literature on political geography, critical international relations or security studies that recognizes the blurring boundaries between humanitarianism, militarism and violence in the aftermath of the post-cold war.

At the heart of the book lies an engagement with the age-old question of the 'lesser evil', understood as the acceptability of pursuing an undesired course of action in order to prevent a greater injustice. Drawing on a historical discussion of the origins of the lesser evil, from the early Christian theologian St. Augustine to the liberal thinking of Michael Ignatieff through Arendt's critical stance towards the banality of evil, Weizman lays bare this question and actualizes it in relation to contemporary humanitarian ideology and practice. The central claim of the book is that "humanitarianism, human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL), when abused by state, supra-state and military action, have become the crucial means by which the economy of violence is calculated and managed" (p. 4). The author's main concern is about the

ways most state violence is managed according to an economy of calculations that is often justified as the least possible evil, and thus how the moderation of violence is intrinsic to the very logic of violence. The book is at its best when capturing the intricacies and madness of these calculations as they translate into what Weizman, following philosopher Adi Ophir, calls the ‘moral technologies’ of humanitarianism. That is, the spatial organization, physical instruments, technical standards, and systems of monitoring that have become the means for exercising contemporary violence and for governing the displaced the enemy and the unwanted.

The book’s first task is to explore the potential of humanitarian assistance to become lethal to the very population it tries to help. Weizman emphasizes how humanitarian spaces can be constructed as instruments for governing the displaced as well as targets of authoritarian regimes. The case of the famine crisis in Ethiopia during the mid-1980s illustrates this point. The book shows, through the eyes of former president of Doctors Without Borders Rony Brauman, how the establishment of a refugee camp for displaced populations by international humanitarian organizations eventually facilitated Mengistu Haile Mariam’s population transfer policies. This episode sets the departure point for a larger account about the political rationale, and ultimately transformations, of the European humanitarian tradition during the last few decades. Weizman does this in two ways. First, he explains the centrality of anti-totalitarian ideology during the 1970s for an entire generation of French activists turned humanitarians - such as Bernard-Henri Lévy - whose ultimate goal became to combat any sign of totalitarianism behind political transformations and liberation struggles in the ‘Third World’. The importance of this, Weizman argues, lies in the replacement of traditional solidarity based on the ‘abstract notion’ of political justice with the ‘emotive idea’ of compassion. Compassion found its infrastructure in humanitarian organizations, which in turn were essential in marginalizing political subjects by producing them as passive victims in need of aid. Second, and crucial to Weizman’s analysis, is the way in which humanitarian expertise, particularly medical knowledge, became a tool of political advocacy. By way of their expertise and being indirect witnesses on the ground, humanitarians became ‘expert witnesses’ and the sole legitimate actors to speak out and bear witness on behalf of the ‘victims’ they sought to protect. Bearing witness, as the author argues, became effectively the core mission of a politically engaged humanitarianism defining this stage as the ‘era of testimony’.

Weizman also provides a fascinating reading of how legal questions such as ‘proportionality’ can materialize in concrete spatial and architectural forms. Conversely, in Latourian fashion, he explains how the reverse is also true. That is, how objects such as architectural models, the built environment and urban ruins have the potential to determine and configure legal calculations through a humanitarian register. Proportionality is understood as a balancing act, a moderating principle that seeks to contain the use of force, and, in words of Weizman, the clearest manifestation of the lesser evil principle in IHL. Drawing on the reconstruction of a legal court case that resolved to change the path of a section of the West Bank separation wall, Weizman shows how proportionality becomes embedded in the very structure of the wall; what the author calls ‘material proportionality’. Indeed, as the book shows, the Israeli High Court of Justice was able to depict the wall as a ‘humanitarian wall’ by incorporating legal and humanitarian questions that it deemed necessary to preserve a balance between Israel’s alleged security requirements and livelihood issues for Palestinians. It is in this way, as Weizman aptly puts it, that the behavior of the wall becomes the object of the trial - not its architects - while simultaneously turning a major geopolitical issue into a humanitarian one that ultimately legitimizes the entire wall infrastructure.

This particular reading of how legal and humanitarian concerns, relations of power and violence become inscribed and folded into materiality, is what brings Weizman to ‘forensic architecture’. This notion, the most novel aspect of the book, refers to the ways in which expert witnesses unpack and present spatial analyses in a legal context. Forensics, Weizman argues, revolves around the legal constitution of a public forum where an expert is required to make material evidence legible. The emergence of forensics, according to Weizman, is fundamentally related to the urban nature of contemporary warfare and to an epistemic shift within IHL that focuses on the reading of urban ruins as witness. To illustrate this point the book presents the case of Marc Garlasco. A consultant for Human Rights Watch, Garlasco was hired, ironically, to decipher the legality of the urban destruction his own ballistic methods had created during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when he was working as a military analyst for the Pentagon. Garlasco, Weizman notes, signifies the intimate relations that today exist between military and humanitarian organizations that increasingly share the same methods and goals. Yet, he also exemplifies the role of the forensic expert as an emerging type of human rights analyst whose role is to study the mechanisms of violence by reading urban ruins and the weapons that created

them. This is significant for it reveals, as Weizman contains, a shift of emphasis from testimony to evidence, from speech to medical data, and sometimes from the accounts of living people to the testimony of forensic experts on behalf of ruins and dead bodies. This object-oriented juridical culture, founded as a reaction to the legal concerns associated to human subjectivities, defines a new era in humanitarianism that Weizman calls the ‘era of forensics’.

While *The Least of All Possible Evils* represents an original contribution to scholarship dealing with questions of violence and humanitarianism, it is not without its shortcomings. First, despite Weizman’s understanding of the legal as an active arena of contestation, the book takes categories such as human rights or the law at face value. Yet these are not objective or neutral but rather constructed fields of knowledge embedded within complex and contingent power relationships that need to be disentangled. Indeed, is the problem simply that states *abuse* human rights or IHL, as Weizman claims, or is there a more fundamental problem hiding behind the all-too-often taken for granted fidelity to their founding ethos? Problematizing these fundamental categories, particularly as they are embodied in the legal expert, the court or even in the idea of the universality of human rights is, in my opinion, crucial to unraveling their political nature and the historical trajectories that shape them. This exercise can contribute to disrupting, complicating and opening up Weizman’s analysis of ‘humanitarian violence’ in new and interesting directions.

Second, and related to the previous point, the author could have decentered and pushed further his reading of the ‘humanitarian present’ to reveal its persistence and inescapable relations with the colonial past. In doing so the novelty of certain arguments advanced in the book could have found in its historical and colonial precedents a source for a more comprehensive and nuanced reading. Colonial medicine is just one example of this. For instance, as Richard C. Keller (2006) argues, an analysis that takes into account colonial medical interventions helps to trace the symbiotic relation of medicine, humanitarian aid, and military warfare back to the European colonial expansion of the nineteenth century, if not before. Colonial medicine, medical knowledge, and related public health and sanitation projects are in many ways, Keller further explains, precursors of humanitarianism in that they enabled expansion, introduced indigenous populations to the purported benevolence of modern European rule, and provided medical experts with tools for the mapping, ordering and surveillance of colonial spaces and populations. This instance highlights the significant historical ties that exist

between the military, medicine and compassion as well as the violence that expert knowledge plays in dealing with the very 'subjects' it studies and attempts to assist. The question remains how is humanitarianism different from the white man's burden?

Third, in comparing quite distinct cases for the sake of crafting a general argument about contemporary 'humanitarian violence', Weizman sacrifices a more grounded understanding of the articulations of power and violence that define the specificity of each context. Indeed, as Weizman himself notes, although state violence is often measured and calculated in relation to the corpus of IHL, the driving logic of that violence might differ significantly from case to case. For instance the long-term economy of calculations made in a settler colonial context such as Palestine is possibly different from the calculations that inform the military intervention in former Yugoslavia or the invasion of Iraq. Acknowledging these differences might thus be useful for a more subtle reading of the conjectures that inform humanitarian violence and the ways it is constituted and enacted in different places across the world.

Fourth, while the book is in many ways a meticulous examination of how governmental and non-governmental experts - from humanitarian workers and medical doctors to lawyers and military personnel - deal with what they consider to be lesser evil situations, Weizman remains rather vague and inconclusive with regards to his views on this point. This is particularly so in relation to the very expert practice he unveils in the book, *i.e.* forensic architecture. If forensics, as the author explains, elevates expert and object over human witnesses as political subjects then what does this say about forensic architecture and the 'era of forensics'? Does not this epistemological shift mark a problematic and dangerous affirmation of the rule of experts and expert knowledge that in turn leave political subjects in extremely vulnerable positions? And what are thus the larger implications of this consolidation of 'expertise' - which Hannah Arendt (2006) categorically refused in her 'report on the banality of evil' - to our understanding of an increasingly perilous and 'humanitarian' world? Perhaps a concluding section bringing together the many layers and arguments advanced throughout the book would have helped in clarifying these and other questions.

Despite these shortcomings, which are to be expected from what appears to be a work in progress, I found Weizman's book to be full of provocative and engaging ideas that have broader relevance for questions of space, law, humanitarianism, violence and morality. It surely is worth the read.

## References

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*Omar Jabary Salamanca*  
*Middle East and North Africa Research Group*  
*Ghent University*  
*omarjabary@gmail.com*

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