This chapter examines how the ongoing macro-level turbulence in world politics has radically recontextualized political compassion and, by definition, humanitarianism. Humanitarian mobilizations have usually been connected with single, isolated spectacles such as Rwanda and Somalia. My main argument is that this atomization of humanitarian emergencies misses much of the political compassion involved in cases such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Many of the largest recent humanitarian events are connected and better appreciated as parts of overall violent, regressive flows. A large part of political compassion in the age of “war on terror” is not only directed to the suffering of distant individual bodies, but also to the suffering of other political bodies; besides empathy for suffering individuals, this also denotes sentimental worry over the world order and compassion for suffering nations. The emotions felt toward political bodies constitute motions and vortexes, which can be viewed as one single process. It is presumed that, within this circle of motion, the sensing of flow is of crucial importance for the actors. The political emotions involved in this all-important sensing signal changes in the underlying power hierarchies and further intensify the agitation. Such unsteady flow models have impressive yet often ignored history in classical international relations tradition. This necessary background model, which connects large political movements with local crises and individual (e)motions, is reviewed through Thucydides’s work.

Passions, Emergencies and Motions

Thucydides regarded the Peloponnesian War as the greatest movement in human history. He describes how this vortex of war engulfed all of Greece, causing strong convulsions in both big and small poleis.
The intensifying, regressive flow led to strong passions, which, in turn, helped to intensify the flow. Sudden emergencies such as the Stasis of Corcyra and the Plague of Athens, Thucydides claims, were emotion-laden submotions of the overall regression. I intend to argue that this model may be used to illuminate contemporary emergencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are part of the overall macro-motion since the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York City. Building on the Thucydidean model, I will claim that political compassion provides the foremost vector for intensification of the motion that holds different political bodies in thrall.

Compelling feelings for others is a multifaceted and influential, yet inadequately examined, political phenomenon. In the study of humanitarian emergencies, it is common to reduce compassion for distant others to mere modernist, secular, and liberal ethical visions, which derive from enlightened humanitarianism. However, political compassion may equally well be contextualized in much older historical strands, in the sentiments felt toward significant in-groups (e.g., nations and hegemonies or empires). Moreover, it is suggested that the more modernist version of humanitarianism does not work in a void. It interacts with other older traditions of compassion. These complex relationships of co-option have become even more distinct in the post-9/11 world.

It is argued that some contemporary humanitarian emergencies are not recognized as such for two reasons. First, they do not fit the humanitarian emergency paradigm that was created during the 1990s. Second, the term “emergency” does not capture the process-like flow of the highly compassionate events. My aim is to illustrate the inadequacy of present conceptualizations of humanitarian emergencies by examining the flow of events started by 9/11 and leading to perhaps the deepest humanitarian emergencies in Iraq in recent memory.

I intend to look at the flows of emotionality involved in the dynamic disintegrative processes of humanitarian emergencies. Proceeding beyond clear-cut, rational-cognitive imagery into one of political emotions, I will expand the idea that motions between communities and in the overall international setting are naturally unsteady. Unsteadiness of political flows reflects the constant possibility of vorticity, that is, the spiraling circle of inflicting and suffering pain. Within such a setting, the sensing of flows is crucially important for the actors involved. In a sense, emotionality becomes a constitutive element of agency in an emergency situation. It is fed by shifting power relations and positions in the hierarchy. The images of the emergency—for example, eyewitness accounts, news stories, and photographs—turn into triggers of complex emotional judgments: the images of suffering Kosovo Albanian refugees tell stories of the need to