



Introduction: Vernacular Humanitarianisms

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Decentering humanitarianism

This thematic thread aims to contribute to the anthropology of humanitarianism, by focusing on vernacular humanitarianisms – local, grassroots forms of helping others that are less visible and less dominant than the international ones. Vernacular humanitarianism refers to practices of help that are called humanitarian, although they do not fit with the work of organizations and



agencies such as the UNHCR, *Medecins Sans Frontiers*, World Vision, Red Cross (...) or their local partners.

In the past several decades, humanitarianism has become a hub for business (De Lauri 2016) and a powerful industry of aid (Bornstein and Redfield 2011). Anthropologists and historians focused on the large-scale, international humanitarianism, illuminating its entanglements with global politics, international relations, and contemporary forms of power. By “large-scale international humanitarianism” I refer to a particular form of relief that developed since the late 1980s. While historians often look for continuities in the three-centuries-long field of humanitarianism (Barnett 2011, Kind Kovacs 2016), anthropological research suggests that something fairly new started happening in this field towards the end of the twentieth century. Humanitarianism marks a new logic of governance and a new politics of life (Fassin 2012); adhocism, or a rule of randomness (Dunn 2012); an intrusion of compassion into state politics and welfare systems (Ticktin 2011); a new form of mobile sovereignty (Pandolfi 2003), and so forth. Less analytical attention has been dedicated, up to this point, to other enactments of humanitarianism – those that may be more vernacular, grassroots, and grounded in local ethical traditions.

This thread showcases a strand of research that focuses on vernacular enactments of humanitarianism, demonstrating that local voluntary associations (Rozakou 2012, 2016), a single-person’s surgery (Brković 2014, 2016), an orphanage and religious gifts (Bornstein 2012), or even peace reconciliation projects (Weiss 2015) present legitimate instances of humanitarian concern.

In India, co-existence of incompatible ideas about humanitarianism – including unofficial or unregistered aid and religious donations – means that “a tremendous amount of humanitarian activity is off the radar of humanitarian organizations” (Bornstein 2012: 19). Vernacular humanitarianisms often seem to be off the radar of academic research as well.

The thread on vernacular humanitarianism strives to provincialize the



humanitarian tradition (cf. Weiss 2015). “Provincialization” here refers to an analytical move which aims to decentre a particular, dominant imaginary figure, in order to open up room to imagine its alternatives. This famously refers to decentering Europe as the only possible model of a future for societies of political modernity (Chakrabarty 2000).

Provincializing humanitarianism means assuming that there is no single humanitarianism “as such” and that everything people in a particular place call “humanitarian” presents a legitimate instance of humanitarianism.

The thread consists of four pieces on humanitarianism in contemporary US, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in communist Poland and Czechoslovakia. Read together, the four texts highlight several things about humanitarianism.

Multiple histories of humanitarianism

First, the thread reminds the readers of multiple histories that the term “humanitarianism” has had in various places. For instance, several communist countries had developed particular forms of humanitarianism, such as “Marxist humanitarianism” in China, “aimed at ‘safeguarding the dignity and rights of the working class’” (Krebs 2014: 11). Traces of such communist imaginaries and practices of humanitarianism are today largely forgotten. One authoritative history of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) glosses over decades of dedicated work of the Red Cross in socialist countries, suggesting that “most communist governments gave it little or no cooperation during the Cold War, seeing the organization – not entirely incorrectly – as a bourgeois organization of the liberal West” (Forsythe 2005: 53). The same author locates the roots of the ICRC “in Christian charity and the Swiss bourgeois variation of noblesse oblige” (Forsythe 2005: 251) and argues that “only toward the end of the Cold War did the ICRC manage to carry out significant activities in a communist-controlled area” (Forsythe 2005: 54). Such accounts erase the rich history of humanitarian work that the Red Cross conducted in socialist Yugoslavia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia – to mention just some countries where national Red Cross



societies operated in full force. The story of socialist humanitarianism – including the ways in which these Red Cross societies combined socialist and humanitarian principles in their work – is yet to be written (but see Hachmeister 2015 and her contribution to this thread). Unearthing such stories and their contemporary vernacular counterparts may help to decentre imaginaries and practices of the international humanitarianism and to figure out how they continue to shape contemporary practices of giving throughout the world.

Chaos of vernacular humanitarianism

Second, the texts in this thread demonstrate that contemporary grassroots forms of humanitarianism are as chaotic as their large-scale, international counterparts. Large international humanitarian projects today are enacted by many different actors. Their lack of coordination, fuelled by the sense of humanitarian urgency, results in numerous inconsistencies, paradoxes, and ambiguities. A closer look at vernacular expressions of humanitarianism in Greece, the US, and former Yugoslavia indicates that change of scale does not necessarily introduce order and predictability into humanitarian endeavours. Quite the contrary.

Small-scale, everyday forms of helping discussed in this thread are largely compassionate, chaotic, and confusing.

They are fine examples of what Dunn (2012: 2) calls adhocracy, “a form of power that creates chaos and vulnerability as much as it creates order”. Writing about the work of Bloomington Refugee Support Network, a local organization in Indiana, USA, that facilitates resettlement of refugees, Dunn shows that “vernacular humanitarianism is often held hostage to the emotional and social needs of its donors, leaving aid delivery uneven and unstable in both space and time” (contribution to this thread). This vernacular enactment of humanitarianism offered compassionate responses to systematic problems of refugee resettlement. In doing so, it imploded. Adhocracy seems to be present in many large-scale international humanitarian operations, and in grassroots, local expressions of humanitarianism, although for different reasons.



Local, but universalist

The third point emphasized by this thread is that vernacular forms of humanitarianism are embedded into very particular local frameworks of morality and sociality. Vernacular humanitarianism cannot be fully understood if we do not take into account local ideas on humanness, personhood, and how one ought to behave towards others. This point is highlighted by Rozakou, who writes about culturally and historically specific ideas on how best to help refugees in contemporary Lesvos, Greece. Tracking how “humanitarianism proper” emerged in this context, Rozakou recounts how her interlocutors contrasted professionalism (and presumable disinterestedness) of “humanitarians” to culturally and historically informed actions of “solidarians”, producing various sorts of moral and social distinctions in the process.

Importantly, although vernacular humanitarianisms are grounded into local social worlds, they can also be thoroughly universalist. Grassroots forms of helping may not be able to reach people across the globe, like the large-scale international humanitarian projects do. Yet, their ideological underpinnings may have just as globalist and universalist pretensions. For instance, humanitarian actions in former Yugoslav countries are made possible through a socio-culturally specific notion of “humanness” (*ljudskost*, *čovječnost*, meaning a particular moral stance towards others). This understanding of “humanness” theoretically extends to all members of human race. The fact that humanitarian actions are actually organized for family, neighbours, and friends of friends – people firmly located in their local social communities – does not jeopardize conceptual universality of this vernacular form of humanitarianism.

There are many aspects of large-scale international humanitarian projects and vernacular instances of humanitarianism that can be compared: from their ideological frameworks to their materialities, procedures, and infrastructures. My contribution to the thread suggests that cultural recognition of those who need help as political subjects with unique histories is important – but not necessarily enough to erase grievances of humanitarianism. Those who depend on



humanitarian actions in former Yugoslav countries routinely express a mixture of gratefulness and dissatisfaction – gratefulness for the help, dissatisfaction with the randomness of compassion.

Their grievances reveal that both large-scale and vernacular expressions of humanitarianism often lack openly-discussed, democratically agreed-upon, standards, procedures, and objects – and instead offer ad hoc, immediate, something-is-better-than-nothing solutions.

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