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Demarcating Boundaries: Against the “Humanitarian Embrace”

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Article abstract

Recent years have seen recurrent calls for bridging the “gap” between the worlds of policy-makers, practitioners, and academic scholars concerned with forced migration and humanitarian aid. This has resulted in growing partnerships between international organisations, governments, businesses, foundations, and universities with the aim of harnessing market economic thinking to create new practice-oriented knowledge rather than out-of-touch theories. This intervention responds critically to these developments and questions the seemingly common-sense logic behind attempts to forge ever closer collaborations across institutional lines. Rather than benefitting displaced communities, bridging divides has often served as a way of consolidating the hegemony of humanitarian actors and inadvertently delegitimized more critical scholarship. Scholars in refugee and forced migration studies have hereby been engulfed in a tightening “humanitarian embrace”. This paper argues that in order to fulfil a scholarly commitment to social justice, anti-violence and pro-asylum politics, it is time to again demarcate the boundaries between the practices and institutions that reproduce humanitarian power and their critics.

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen renewed calls for bridging the "gap" between the worlds of policy-makers, humanitarian practitioners, and researchers in the social sciences and humanities. This has resulted in a growth of partnerships between academics, aid organizations, governments, and businesses with the aim of joining forces to help those in need. In this paper, I respond critically to these developments and question the seemingly commonsensical logic behind attempts to forge ever-closer collaborations across institutional boundaries. I argue that the humanitarian arena, despite its heterogeneity, is by no means a level playing field in which the meanings, power structures, and practices of aid are ever truly "open" for negotiation. Bridging divides has often served as a way of consolidating the institutional and epistemic hegemony of humanitarian actors and inadvertently delegitimized critical scholarship seeking more structural change. Scholars in refugee and forced migration studies have hereby been engulfed in a tightening "humanitarian embrace." I contend that in order to fulfill a more radical scholarly commitment to social justice, anti-violence, and equality, it is time to demarcate the boundaries between institutionalized humanitarianism and politically engaged, slow, and insurgent forms of research that centre solidarity with marginalized, racialized, encamped, and displaced migrants themselves. Towards this end, I propose infiltration, slow scholarship, and accompaniment as alternative methodologies for research in humanitarian spaces.

KEYWORDS

humanization; humanitarianism; partnerships; critical scholarship; refugee studies; solidarity; power

RESUMÉ

Dans les dernières années, des appels renouvelés en faveur du rapprochement entre le monde des décideurs politiques, des travailleurs humanitaires et des chercheurs en sciences humaines et sociales se sont fait entendre. Cela a conduit à une croissance des partenariats entre les universitaires, les organisations humanitaires, les gouvernements et les entreprises, qui ont uni leurs forces afin de venir en aide aux personnes dans le besoin. Cet article adresse une réponse critique à ces développements et remet en question la logique derrière ces tentatives de forger des partenariats de plus en plus étroits par-delà les frontières institutionnelles. Il soutient que le domaine humanitaire, malgré son hétérogénéité, n'est en aucun cas un terrain équitable où les significations, les structures de pouvoir et les pratiques d'aide humanitaire sont vraiment «ouvertes» à la négociation. Les tentatives de rapprochement ont souvent servi à consolider l'hégémonie institutionnelle et épistémique des acteurs humanitaires et a eu pour effet de délégitimer la recherche critique visant des changements structurels. Les chercheurs en études des réfugiés et de la migration forcée se retrouvent ainsi pris dans une «étreinte humanitaire» de plus en plus serrée. Cet article soutient qu'afin de remplir un engagement plus radical en faveur de la justice sociale, de la non-violence et de l'égalité, il est temps de délimiter les frontières entre l'humanitarisme institutionnalisé et la recherche politiquement engagée, lente et insurrectionnelle priorisant la solidarité avec les migrants marginalisés, racisés, mis en camps ou déplacés eux-mêmes. À cette fin, je propose l'infiltration, la recherche lente et l'accompagnement comme méthodologies de recherche alternatives dans les espaces humanitaires.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen renewed calls for bridging the "gap" between the worlds of policy-makers, humanitarian practitioners, and researchers in the social sciences and humanities (Betts & Collier, 2018; Fast, 2017; Sandvik, 2017). The encounters between academics and humanitarians are hereby often caricatured as a clash of **practical** knowledge with **detached** theories, only to be resolved through intensified collaborations. The value of such liaisons is reiterated in publications, grant applications, workshops, and conferences and is explicitly encouraged by funding bodies (DFID, 2011; ELRHA, 2012). Proposals for partnerships also follow on the heels of other demands to overcome a smorgasbord of wider schisms between global and local actors, the public and private sectors, governments and non-governmental organizations, as well as humanitarian assistance and development. Writing about the nascent links between aid organizations and business, former United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees. Sadako Ogata (2000, p. 170) observed 20 years ago, somewhat prophetically, that we may indeed "live in an era of experimentation in partnerships." Debates on the desirability, benefits, and potential drawbacks of collaboration between differentially resourced and situated actors are therefore not new, especially those focusing on disparities in North–South research networks (Bradley, 2008; Landau, 2012; Zingerli, 2010) and international development (Stevens et al., 2013).

Here my focus is specifically on partnerships and institutional entanglements within what is sometimes characterized as the "ecosystem" of global humanitarianism (Betts & Bloom, 2014): the ensemble of agents and organizations loosely connected by their shared involvement in the morally inflected governance of emergency, disaster, and displacement. Hilhorst and Jansen (2010, p. 1120) conceive of this space as an "arena" where miscellaneous actors compete for influence, deploy material and immaterial resources, and thus negotiate how aid is practised. However, in this paper, I argue that the humanitarian arena, despite its heterogeneity, is by no means a level playing field in which the meanings, power structures, and practices of aid are ever truly "open" for negotiation. More precisely, I question the commonsensical assumption that close co-operation between researchers and aid agencies, corporate partners, and policy-makers is necessarily desirable or likely to benefit the long-term welfare and life goals of displaced people and others living under the humanitarian regime. Rather, growing bonds risks not only consolidating the hegemony of humanitarian agencies over the categories and priorities of research (Bakewell, 2008), and reinforcing their control of material resources and funds, but may ultimately streamline and depoliticize the ways in which social research in aid contexts is being conducted. Proximity to corridors of humanitarian power and their corporate affiliates reproduces narrow sets of ideas and self-referential knowledge that can neither hold powerful institutions to account nor adequately engage with the political struggles of those affected by aid governance. I rather heuristically refer to this encroachment of institutional logics, values, discursive frames, solutions, and infrastructures on research engagements with/among refugees and forced migrants as the **humanitarian embrace**.

While academic institutions are themselves equally deeply implicated in upholding inequalities through a Eurocentric geopolitics of global knowledge production on "forced migration" and "aid" (Chimni, 2009;

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Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020), and socially produce the managerial class that runs aid organizations, critical scholarship still has the potential to challenge and disrupt these established circuits of power. This paper argues that to achieve this, we must work towards demarcating the boundaries between institutionalized humanitarianism and more politically engaged, slow, action-based, and insurgent forms of research that centre solidarity with marginalized, racialized, encamped, and displaced migrants in their dealings with the aid machinery. After characterizing the humanitarian embrace, I propose infiltration, slow scholarship, and accompaniment as three potential strategies to do so in practice. Countering the influence of humanitarian institutions and logics is not an innocent call to reinforce exclusionary academic knowledges instead but to imagine alternative ways of researching against the grain of aid institutions.

CHARACTERIZING THE "HUMANITARIAN EMBRACE"

Researchers studying forced migration and humanitarianism have reflected more carefully on their positionality, ethical responsibility, and unequal power relations vis-à-vis refugees (Clark-Kazak, 2017; Krause, 2017; Lammers, 2007; Mackenzie et al., 2007) than on their relationship with aid organizations, despite a long methodological concern for "studying up" (Hyndman, 2000). This is surprising as humanitarian spaces are administered by power-laden infrastructures of care that include a mixture of aid and state agencies that regulate and monitor levels of access afforded to academics (Pascucci, 2017). Humanitarian channels of mobility, transport, security, communication, accommodation, and sociality are often key in facilitating the presence and comfort of researchers, regardless of their structural critiques of aid intervention (Smirl, 2008). Information sharing, everyday co-operation, socialization, and somewhat "embedded" research approaches are common pragmatic choices to gain access. However, the growing professionalization of "field visits"[1] for donor delegations, journalists, rights advocates, consultants, humanitarians, private contractors, and academics under the aegis of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has also further blurred already thin lines between different forms of engagement. Understandably, for many refugees and forced migrants themselves who inhabit intensely visited locations like camps or other aid spaces, distinctions between researchers and humanitarians are often impossible to make. After all, researchers actively shape, and are shaped by, the arena of humanitarian intervention and its racialized mobilities. At the same time, visible slippages between aid networks and those who follow in their wake are often surface-level expressions of humanitarianism's deeper currents as a site of particular moral politics and reasoning.

Beyond its incarnation in aid organizations, humanitarianism operates as a "liberal diagnostic" that identifies problems and discursively frames suitable solutions to determine "how those who suffer today are to be thought about" (Reid-Henry, 2014, p. 426). Thus, it mobilizes a dual logic of organizational efficiency and a liberal will-to-care that reproduces the Western-centric political order from which it has sprung. Humanitarianism is a site of institutional politics of compassion, as well as

[1] For example, UNHCR Kenya has produced official "visitor guides" for the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps, including "sightseeing," suggestions for "souvenirs," and lists of local fixers who can deliver "the right" informants for a particular piece of research or news article.

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an epistemic community that spans various organizations and political processes imbued with its rationalities, be it refugee protection, domestic poverty relief, immigration, military interventions, or policing of urban violence (Fassin, 2011; Reid-Henry & Sending, 2014; Ticktin, 2011; Weizman, 2011). Sociologists speak in similar terms of "institutional isomorphism" when organizations and actors in a particular environment progressively adopt resembling structures and norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mackay et al., 2009) but at the same time risk "becoming entrapped in a self-referential knowledge creating machine" (De Waal, 2015, para. 2). Zingerli (2010, p. 219) cautions that joining collaboration in a field dominated by powerful institutions inevitably imposes their values and rules with which other partners tend to comply. In studies on forced migration and humanitarianism, there is a tendency among some academics to uncritically adopt "categories, concepts and priorities of policy makers and practitioners" (Bakewell, 2008, p. 432; Skilbrei, 2020). In extreme cases, aid organizations can even leverage their position to "pre-screen" research projects for their "benefit" to both refugees and their own operational demands (Pascucci, 2017).

Thus, the humanitarian embrace exceeds the practical reliance of academics on the facilitative aid infrastructures "in the field." Rather, it encompasses rationalities, questions and modes of thought imparted by well-positioned actors in the ecosystem of humanitarian aid. Recent appeals for bridging gaps between academics and practitioners inadvertently exacerbate this encroachment by dismissing particularly critical social scientists, who aim to craft independent and conceptually informed critiques of power structures that underpin the aid industry as overly theory-focused, "esoteric or idealistic" (Betts & Collier, 2018, p. xiv), or even "completely out of touch with reality" on the ground (Ferris, 2012, p. 578). This reductive depiction follows a wider idealization of so-called pracademics (Stevens et al., 2013), who traverse the academic and policy worlds, speak multiple organizational "languages," and, crucially, move from uncomfortable "problem-raising" to institutionally supported "problem-solving" approaches (Skilbrei, 2020, p. 562; Bakewell, 2008). Meanwhile, insistence on policy relevance, direct impact, and institutionally legible forms of knowledge has often made disciplinary discourses in refugee and forced migration studies themselves complicit in legitimizing the containment and epistemic ring-fencing of racialized southern refugees in the geopolitical interests of Global North countries (Chimni, 1998, 2009). Academic–humanitarian partnerships are always entangled in these complex power relations, yet they usually expect mutual gains in credibility, data access, impact, and ability to test theories under the sanguine premise "that there can be a greater impact by joining forces" (ELRHA, 2012, p. 13).

The latest articulations of this longstanding belief in collaboration are discourses on "humanitarian innovation" that emphasize merits of market economic thinking and tech solutionism as ideal-type models for aid (Betts & Bloom, 2014). The groundwork for this was laid in part during Sadako Ogata's stint at the helm of UNHCR, when she proclaimed that businesses and humanitarians are bound to partner up in a shared quest for prosperity, sustainability, and security while "helping those in need" (Ogata, 2000, p. 167). Scott-Smith recognizes this long engagement of humanitarians with market dynamics and logics but contends that the recent turn towards "innovation" has even further obscured distinctions between aid agendas, corporate interests, and state

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machineries (2016, p. 2233).

While not emblematic for all existing partnerships in the field, the innovation trend has complicated academic–practitioner relationships as the humanitarian embrace itself has increasingly been defined by a focus on refugee resilience, mitigation, management, and the use of "creative models of institutional design" (Betts & Collier, 2018, p. 10) rather than identifying structural inequalities and global capitalism as the preventable root causes of displacement. Therefore, innovation is not unique but reflective of a wider systemic shift from a humanitarianism focused on emergencies to one that readily accepts crisis as a "new normality" to be efficiently managed (Hilhorst, 2018, p. 5). Critical social researchers experience the pressures of these institutional tendencies in the form of incomprehension at their lack of appetite for cozying up to neither humanitarian bureaucracies nor corporate partners. This sensitively shapes the conditions in which research takes place but also generates exciting opportunities for methodological disobedience.

DEMARCATING BOUNDARIES: INFILTRATION, SLOW SCHOLARSHIP, ACCOMPANIMENT

Given the tenacity of the humanitarian embrace, there is a growing need to demarcate, and not macerate, the boundaries between institutionalized aid and critical scholarly inquiries. While tightening bonds between researchers, humanitarians, and corporate businesses may in theory seem mutually beneficial, these bonds disproportionately serve those who wield the most power in the form of financial, political, and institutional resources. Refugees are, at best, celebrated as "resilient" partners and participants, though their role is often circumscribed by limited powers to actually set agendas, mobilize resources, or meaningfully influence decision-making (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Brankamp, 2018; Turner, 2020). Meanwhile, critical research on migration and aid time again highlights the enduring coloniality, racism, and epistemic erasures of academic practices in studying or "producing knowledge" about people governed through humanitarian administration (Benton, 2016; Chimni, 2009; Pailey, 2020). While alternative methodologies are too numerous to be comprehensively exposed here, I sketch three interrelated "subversive acts of scholarship" (Pailey, 2020, p. 736) that may guide this insurgent work within humanitarian spaces: **infiltration**, **slow scholarship**, and **accompaniment**. Together, these methodological acts aim to affirm scholarly commitments to social justice, anti-violence, and equality and to question privileged "partnerships" that risk depoliticizing and streamlining research and preclude more grounded solidarities with the struggles of displaced communities themselves.

Critical feminist anthropologists have long advocated for "studying up" to analyze the inner workings of institutions and power structures and their effects on the people they govern (Billo & Mountz, 2016; Nader, 1972). Priyadharshini writes that "the more closely we engage with power, the closer we come to examining our own reflections in the powerful and even our own complicities as we go about producing knowledge" (2003, p. 434). A host of studies has focused on the everyday governmental powers of humanitarian and immigration bureaucracies to discipline, organize, and make the bodies of "sufferers" and migrants legible (Farah, 2020; Hyndman, 2000; Ticktin, 2011). Extrapolating from Ann L. Stoler (2009), studying up thereby always requires reading both **against** and **along** the grain

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of institutions and powerful bureaucracies. "Reading against the grain" means turning these institutions' and bureaucracies' hegemonic discourses, narratives, and practices upside down to reveal the silences and epistemic casualties, while "reading along the grain" makes visible the granular—and often unexpected—contradictions within the networks of power themselves (Stoler, 2009, pp. 47, 53; Simon, 1992). Research in the humanitarian arena can productively employ similar tactics to analyze and confront the hierarchized logics of aid institutions and their continuous encroachment on other social spaces.

Education scholar DeLeon (2012, p. 314) proposes a "politics of infiltration" as insurgent methodology. Complementing the necessity to "study up" institutional hierarchies with a will to resist their exploitative workings, he argues that privileged access to the corridors of power can be usefully harnessed for "creating, finding and exploiting 'cracks"' within the system itself (p. 313). "Infiltration" constitutes a highly embodied way of engaging powerful actors and institutions through often stealthy, playful, and disobedient forms of research that excavate and register dynamics of power as well as performatively disrupting them while still being embedded within them. The fact that many researchers have recognizable symbolic capital and careers that are commensurate to those of aid workers, yet have more freedom for systemic analysis, enhances their capacity to infiltrate privileged spaces, unearth their injustices, and bring into view the underlying operations of power (Madison, 2012). However, "infiltrating" spaces of aid is, perhaps counterintuitively, not about spying, disguise, and clandestine operations, but rather utilizes the tightening humanitarian embrace and embeddedness as a "crack" to critically interrogate institutional realities of aid governance from within. This renders infiltration a methodological compromise that exploits the privilege often afforded to researchers as part of their participation in circuits of humanitarian power to subvert these very structures and ultimately work towards their undoing.

Relatedly, the promise of efficiency, technological solutions, and mutual gain from academic–humanitarian partnerships has impacts on availability and valuation of time. Managing refugees involves use of biopolitical technologies to order and assess the bodies, biographies, mobilities, and needs of the displaced (Hyndman, 2000). Humanitarianism is hence both a system of emergency resource distribution and acts as "a machine that elicits and administers testimonies" (Guilhot, 2012, p. 90). More often than not, refugees are expected to disclose intimate details of their flight histories, injuries, health conditions, and vulnerabilities to humanitarian bureaucrats in exchange for statuses, recognition, material benefits, and sometimes paths to resettlement in a third country. Researchers seeking easy, safe, and quick access to "refugee experiences" in humanitarian settings are partly able to do so because of this enabling social environment in which "stories" are a form of currency (Pittaway et al., 2010). Infrastructures of aid have become a key (and often the only) means of accessing people on the move in a time-efficient and economized manner, rendering their life stories a sought-after commodity. Defying this extractive yet enabling capacity of the humanitarian embrace is often difficult, especially given similarly productivity-centred logics in contemporary academia. Yet the deliberate deceleration of research is methodologically useful and has potential to radically subvert power hierarchies while imagining alternative ways of **doing** research.

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Recent calls for "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al., 2015) as a radical alternative to compressed and oppressive time regimes of neoliberal education are instructive here. The widening movement for **slowing down** academic labor stresses the benefits and necessity of engaging carefully, thoughtfully, thoroughly, and more equitably with ideas, fields, and each other (Hartman & Darab, 2012; Kuus, 2015; Martell, 2014; Shahjahan, 2015). The descriptor **slow** is decidedly not only about reversing accelerating time regimes but also positively challenging relations of power that are easily reproduced through such modes of research (Martell, 2014). Slowing scholarship in the humanitarian arena aims to rethink and reorganize power terrains linked to the minimal time budgets within the humanitarian economy. Recognizing the limits of time investment in a knowledge economy with rising expectations (Mills & Ratcliffe, 2012), time-intensive and deliberate scholarship in aid contexts is becoming increasingly difficult to pursue. Kuus suggests that analyzing social processes always entails uncertainty and ambiguity, is time-consuming, and "cannot rely on a ready-made conceptual or methodological toolbox" (2015, p. 839). Here, the boundary that slow scholarship demarcates is between temporal disposability and deeper, more meaningful, and reciprocal engagements over time. Yet slowing down research, and working in spite of oppressive aid efficiency logics, can only succeed if a shared understanding is fostered between researchers and the inhabitants of aid spaces that long-term social change is readily attainable not through institutional "fixes" but rather political struggles. Gilmore reminds us that only with patience can theories and practices circulate, enter into true dialogue, and enable people "to see problems and their solutions differently" (2007, p. 243).

My last point builds on this attempt to **see** and **research** differently, against the odds of the humanitarian embrace. Freire's idea of "liberation education" (1993) is useful here as it critiques conventional knowledge economies for treating students as "containers" in which scholars "deposit" knowledge and reproduce existing hierarchies of power rather than challenging them. Instead, he states, "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1993, p. 45). While this may at first sight justify calls for closer "partnerships" and bridging "gaps," it also implies that not just **any** partnership will do. Humanitarian agencies may be nominally receptive to inputs from refugee communities and social researchers, and thus depart from logics of social engineering, but continue to hinge on the premise that displacements and disasters are to be mitigated and managed but not solved by addressing the structural violence of imperialism and capitalism. Institutionalized humanitarianism continues to be an exercise of domination and unequal valuation of life, which, in Freire's words, "serves to obviate thinking" (1993, p. 49; Fassin, 2011).

Strategies of accompaniment may offer inroads for disobedient methodologies, alternative forms of research, and dialogical co-production of knowledge and struggle (Bejarano et al., 2019; Madison, 2012; Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013). Here, the workings of power need not be "unearthed" because those affected by them are well aware of injustices and unfreedom. For Fischlin and colleagues, "accompaniment envisions political action as a journey taken together" and may therefore work "best when it engages people in unpredictable and ephemeral yet meaningful acts of listening

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and sharing" (2013, p. 235). These deliberate acts of togetherness, solidarity, listening, and mutual recognition are crucial in humanitarian settings characterized by the inequality of care, hierarchies of humanity, depoliticized intervention, and the perpetual diffusion of humanitarian logics. While it does not preclude or resolve the contradictions between the "researchers" and "researched" per se, accompaniment can contribute to opening up spaces of possibility for more "syncretic analytical practices that join disparate struggles, people, and places" (Mei-Singh, 2020, p. 76). Intentionally working alongside displaced communities in humanitarian contexts aims to avoid replicating well-rehearsed forms of domination that forfeit the potential for emancipatory change. This can be a tedious, slow, and open-ended process of learning and building stronger relationships but ultimately produces better and more critical analyses (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013).

This work of doing collaborative research otherwise starts by making studies more intelligible to the people with and among whom the research is conducted (Waal, 2015) or by paying attention to existing political dissent and struggles, and actively supporting them (Olivius, 2017; Smith, 2015). Rather than representing a ready-made methodology, this is an ongoing and, ultimately, uncertain effort to combine research with political action and worldmaking as it enacts the very relationships that it seeks to build. Accompanying people under humanitarian control is a messy, drawn-out process that seeks to eventually substitute managerial logics of humanitarian assistance with solidarity and recognition of the ongoing violence of humanitarianism. Challenging harmful systems of compassion and their asymmetrical relations of power, which are part of any dispensation of aid, is only possible if critical scholarship joins displaced communities in their everyday struggles to challenge this oppression in "pursuit of a fuller humanity" (Freire, 1993, p. 21). Only then will genuine partnerships and escape from the humanitarian embrace become a real possibility.

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