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Vernacular Humanitarianism

Vernacular humanitarianism refers to aid provided by various local actors in tune with their socio-historically specific ideas of humanness, as a response to an emerging need that cannot be adequately addressed through conventional channels of help. It encompasses practices of helping that follow the universal humanitarian logic, but in a different form to the international humanitarian organizations.

A range of new terms has been offered recently to analyze these small-scale practices of helping. For instance, Anne-Meike Fechter and Anke Schwittay (2019: 1769) speak about “citizen aid” and “grassroots humanitarianism” in order to encompass “forms of aid and development ... which are not orchestrated by large donors or aid agencies, but are initiated by ordinary citizens, from the Global North and South.” Elisa Sandri (2018) suggests that volunteers helping the refugees in France who refused any financial or other support from the international aid agencies and national governments enacted “voluntary humanitarianism.” Darragh McGee and Juliette Pelham (2018) discuss “grassroots humanitarianism” in the context of the Calais “Jungle” in France as an alternative to the large-scale, professionalized forms of aid delivery. Katerina Rozakou (2017) writes about “solidarity humanitarianism” in Greece, referring to the work of the volunteers who helped the refugees and, in doing so, established a clear opposition between their solidary and self-reflective work and that of the professional humanitarian and state workers. Alexander Horstmann (2017) discusses “everyday humanitarianism,” which emerged at the intersection of grassroots, local, and international humanitarian practices after a violent conflict in Myanmar.

The term vernacular humanitarianism was also coined (Brković 2017) as a way to capture under the same conceptual umbrella the diverse forms of helping that combine local notions of gift, duty, and responsibility with a universalizing claim to aid humanity. A good example of this is an orphanage in India that was “at once, a realm of Hindu *dan*; a form of nonreciprocal giving that does not demand a return; a site of state welfare, where citizens enjoyed certain rights; and a place where volunteers responded to social obligations and

the impulse to help others" (Bornstein 2012: 11–12). Other good examples are the small-scale experiments in helping refugees that exist throughout the West and do not fit neatly with more traditional forms of support (Feischmidt, Pries, and Cantat 2018). These practices show the junctures as well as the tensions between humanitarianism, philanthropy, development, public welfare, religious charity, and political activism.

These vernacular ways of providing aid have several things in common. First, all instances of vernacular humanitarianism posit a universalizing notion of humanity. Just like international humanitarianism, its vernacular counterparts are grounded in the idea that all people deserve help simply because they are human beings, irrespective of their particular identities (including, for example, their race, class, citizenship, ethnonationality, gender, age, and sexuality). Secondly, vernacular humanitarianism interweaves this universalizing notion of humanity with socio-historically situated frameworks of giving, such as French ideas of how a good citizen ought to behave towards others (Sandri 2018); Greek understandings of hospitality (Rozakou 2017); relational empathy in India, which "challenges liberal models of humanitarian activity oriented towards the needs of strangers" (Bornstein 2012: 149); and post-Yugoslav ideas about what a state ought to give to its citizens (Brković 2016). The interweaving of different frameworks of giving forges new responses to these novel needs. Thirdly, vernacular humanitarian practices are ad-hoc, non-professional, non-bureaucratized forms of helping that tend to ignore legal distinctions between citizens and aliens or bureaucratic framings of vulnerability and deservingness (Dunn 2017).

Čarna Brković

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Victim

The fundamental prerogative of humanitarian organizations is to ensure that protection and relief are provided to the most vulnerable: victims of war, illness, genocide, natural disasters, torture, displacement, famines, rape. As part of this endeavor, media-friendly portraits of “the victims” and their rescuers are deployed globally to arouse empathic responses, foster solidarity, legitimize military interventions, and raise funds. Taxonomies of victimhood are also developed on the ground as map charts and classificatory tools, in order to plan, monitor, and execute humanitarian programs in favor of the “eligible victims.” In practice, bureaucratic transactions, paperwork, and official artifacts such as medical reports documenting “trauma” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) mediate the formal allocation of “victim status.” Experts and practitioners such as lawyers, physicians, police officers, cultural mediators, and mental health professionals thus have the final responsibility for certifying an individual as a victim in a number of areas.

While the humanitarian production of the victim is based on naturalistic assumptions of objectivity, universality, and equality, a set of moral, political, and ethical dilemmas continuously arise at the interface between theory and practice, self-definition, and external impositions of victimhood. Notions of victimhood vary enormously across time and space and are differently framed and contested by a range of actors, religious practices, socio-political, and gender norms (Ronsbo and Jensen 2014).