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Humanitarianism's History of the Singular

MIRIAM TICKTIN

In “The New Universalism” Daniel Bertrand Monk and Andrew Herscher bring together global history and global humanitarianism to argue the emergence of a new (perverse) universal singular—a monadological refugee and form of refuge that threaten to efface both. By putting shelter and displacement side by side, they insightfully point us to different global patterns, such as the turn to the principle of the particular. Monk and Herscher read these patterns against the grain, offering us—almost in passing—a new history of humanitarianism.

The usual story attributes the start of contemporary humanitarianism to Henry Dunant in 1863 and his attempt to civilize warfare by providing aid on the battlefield. This resulted in the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 and the Geneva Conventions in 1949, commonly known as the laws of war. Humanitarianism later expanded to include not just zones of conflict but responses to natural disasters. Monk and Herscher, however, tell us that humanitarianism was from the outset about shelter and that we cannot understand humanitarianism without taking seriously the spatial conditions of homelessness. This provocative idea—while immensely compelling—raises several questions.

I want to suggest that humanitarianism is not actually what Monk and Herscher, despite their innovative approach, claim it to be. I say this not to undermine their argument but to show how it could be made more powerful by moving beyond nostalgia for a particular humanitarian moment. I will propose three arguments to complicate Monk and Herscher's account. First, humanitarianism is not the same as modernist forms of care such as the welfare state. Humanitarianism responds in many ways to the loss of modernist ideals and politics. Second, as just one illustration of its difference from forms of modernist care, humanitarianism's investment in the category of humanity has always been grounded in the protection of exceptional, suffering individuals, not in care for the masses. Third, while the more recent turn to voucher humanitarianism draws on neoliberal technologies, it does not create but simply *continues* an extant focus on individuals. Understood in this context, this new kind of humanitarianism may nevertheless offer less-patronizing and less-violent ways of governing.

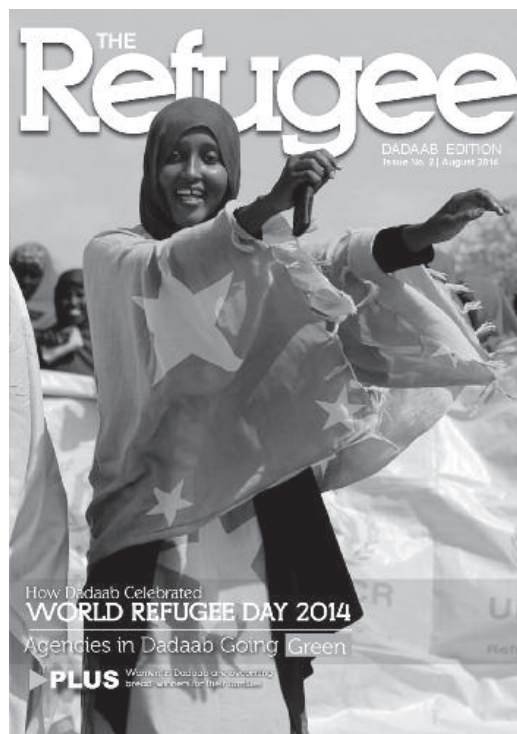
Let me turn to the first point. Even if we agree with Monk and Herscher's important argument that humanitarianism is always also preoccupied by the question of shelter, we must ask if all forms of care for or aid to the suffering or neglected should be considered “humanitarian.” The kinds of action

Monk and Herscher refer to—particularly those that addressed the suffering of the working class in industrializing English cities and those that attended to the working class by focusing on questions of slums—might be better described as part of the larger “government of the social.”¹ That is, these forms of care that resulted in mass housing (and architectural modernism) were part of the invention of the social through techniques such as social hygiene, public health, and moral reform. They targeted, governed, and cultivated masses and turned them into a national *population* in an attempt to counter the self-interest of the modern, economic subject while leaving the economic system intact. Government of the social worked to keep the nation together, as “society,” while simultaneously enabling economic practices that worked to pit people against one another.² Novel technical practices of care managed the newly identified “social” needs of the population by marking each problem as discrete—health or the regulation of housing—and addressing them administratively, each with its own set of experts: psychologists, social workers, public health workers, architects, teachers, and so on.

While humanitarianism is descended from government of the social, it is not identical to it. That is, humanitarianism enacts its own form of government, drawing on the techniques developed through government of the social, including a central role for moral sentiment, while simultaneously rejecting the idea of bureaucratized charity. The “new humanitarianism” of the 1970s (developed by Médecins Sans Frontières [MSF]/Doctors Without Borders and now the dominant approach to humanitarianism in the contemporary world) looked instead to emotive responses, not rational or institutionalized ones.³ While care is central to this form of government, these forms of care produce and protect not society (or the social) but a concept of universal “humanity.” They often fill in gaps in social services in the absence of a state or governing body, but they do this only in the context of emergency and only for those excluded from state care. That is, they can provide care only in very limited situations. Their care is of the temporal present—beyond that, no promises are made, no long-term human condition supported. Similarly, they do not purport to provide long-term housing. While humanitarianism has morphed in the last decade, it is nevertheless still distinguished (especially from other forms of doing good, such as development or human rights) by its particular focus on crisis and emergency. Humanitarianism has no long-term plan to address inequality.

Herscher and Monk understandably mourn a form of collective care, one wherein shelter was built for the masses, and they mourn this as a loss of a particular humanitarian moment. While a shift away from care and shelter for the masses has undoubtedly occurred, this loss coincided with the decline of the welfare state in the Global North and the decreasing importance of technologies of the social. The rise of humanitarianism already marked that moment of loss.

Second, while humanitarianism is fundamentally about the category of humanity, it is characterized by a tension between a focus on the exceptional individual and a collective humanity. Humanity is accessed and treated through individual, suffering bodies, even as it is also figured or imagined en masse, particularly in the Global South.⁴ Humanitarianism is practiced on humanity conceived of as a set of singular individuals facing exceptional circumstances. So, when Monk and Herscher suggest that a shift from a concern with the masses to a triumph of the singular has occurred—a shift in humanitarianism as much as architecture—I wonder whether this is actually something new. We need only think of the classic humanitarian subject: the refugee. As Hannah Arendt wrote in 1951 in her classic chapter on “The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man,” asylum as a category was always only meant for the exceptional cases, never for the masses. As she states, “the

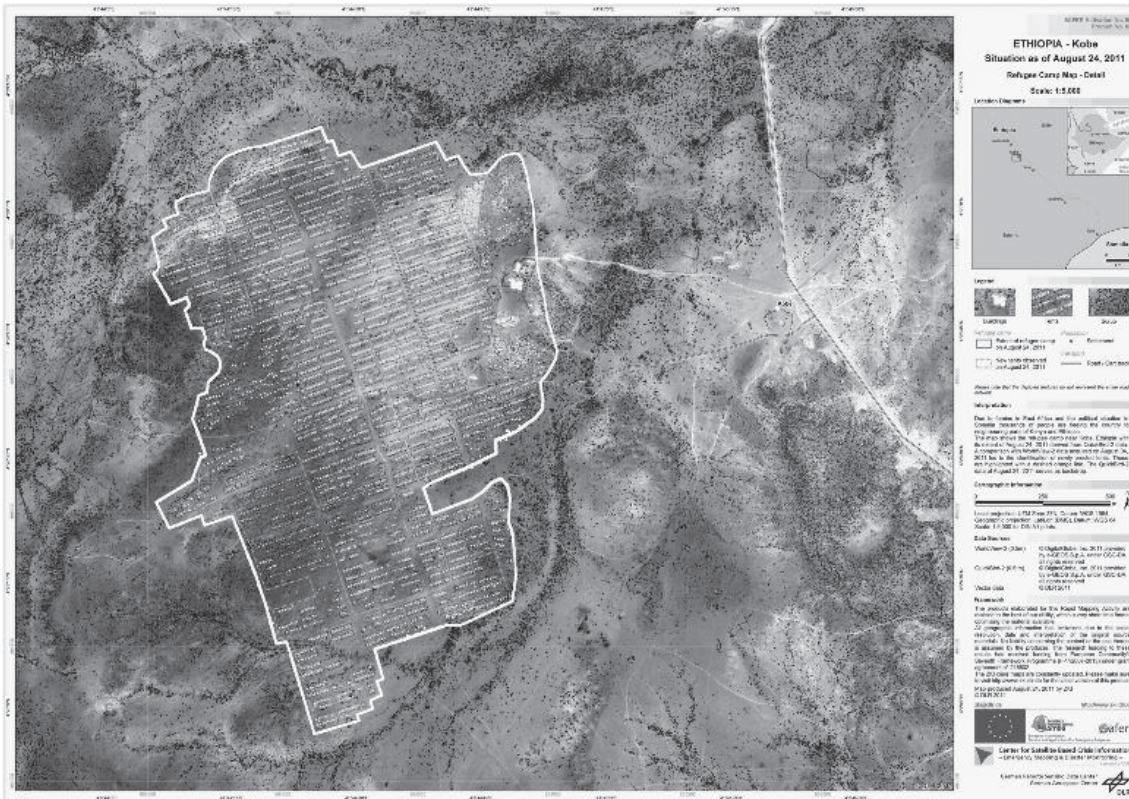


Cover of *The Refugee* magazine, Dadaab [Kenya] edition, no. 2 (August 2014), featuring “A woman dancing at the World Refugee Day celebrations in Ifo camp.” Photo: Kepha Kiragu for UNHCR.

trouble arose when it appeared that the new categories of persecuted were far too numerous to be handled by an unofficial practice destined for exceptional cases.”⁵ Refugee laws stipulate that those who claim asylum must demonstrate both that their persecution is due to their membership in a particular social group and that their case is exceptional.

In thinking about the emotions that inform and undergird humanitarianism—the two most important arguably being compassion and pity—sociologist Luc Boltanski also draws on Arendt to argue that compassion is directed toward particular individuals, particular suffering beings, without seeking to develop the capacity for generalization. Compassion is actualized only when those who do not suffer come face to face with those who do.⁶ In parsing these emotional logics, Boltanski also points out that the subjects of humanitarianism are at once

hypersingularized through an accumulation of the details of suffering and, at the same time, underqualified: one particular child elicits our compassion, yet she or he could very well be any other child. While singular, these cases are also at once exemplary.⁷ This is precisely the logic on which MSF is grounded: after the failure of May 1968 to transform the social and political order and after the disappointment of anticolonial revolutionary Marxist movements, the cofounders of MSF, including Bernard Kouchner, and many of their comrades from 1968, radically changed their views. They turned away from engagement with what they thought of as anti-imperial, anti-capitalist politics and instead embraced the belief that one could ultimately address only *individual* suffering. They attended to what they conceived of as a universal humanity



composed of individual suffering victims.⁸ If the turn to the monadic singular is taking on new forms, we should nevertheless see this as part of a longer continuum of humanitarian principles and practices, one where the focus on the (often exceptional) individual has a long history.

Finally, Monk and Herscher speak of “voucher humanitarianism” as part of this turn to the monadic singular. Voucher humanitarianism undoubtedly represents a shift toward technologies of neoliberalism. Yet as noted, humanitarianism already focuses on the individual—the monad. This being the case, we might see the turn to the technologies of neoliberalism (such as cash transfers to the poor) as opening up a politics that is less patronizing, less about surveillance and control. As anthropologist James Ferguson notes, the technologies and tactics of neoliberalism can be separated from neoliberal political

Kobe Refugee Camp, Ethiopia, 2011. Image modified to highlight extent of refugee camp as of August 24, 2011. Center for Satellite Based Crisis Information (ZKI), German Aerospace Center (DLR).

projects and right-wing ideologies.⁹ In the case of refugees, our only option is to turn to the specific context of each instance of voucher humanitarianism to determine whether it should be seen as part of a conservative neoliberal political future or as one that offers more dignity to the refugees. That is, does it enable them to participate in larger polities instead of being imprisoned in camps? Does it give them the means to obtain what they themselves deem absolutely necessary, instead of having to rely on standardized humanitarian kits developed in foreign locales? Refugee camps can be places of extreme violence, hierarchy, and dehumanization, so we need to think carefully about when and under what conditions we want to preserve their architecture.

Humanitarianism has always been saddled with the problem of the singular. If we want to follow the powerful and thought-provoking critique of neoliberalism that Monk and Herscher are offering by reading global history alongside global humanitarianism, we should look well beyond humanitarianism and not try to recuperate its earlier days.

Notes

1. Jacques Donzelot, “The Mobilization of Society,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 169–80.

2. Giovanna Procacci, “Sociology and Its Poor,” *Politics and Society* 17, no. 2 (1989): 115–62.

3. On its way to becoming the dominant form of humanitarianism, MSF was gradually institutionalized and bureaucratized. See Peter Redfield, *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013). This was called the “new humanitarianism” because it sought to distinguish itself from the ICRC. One of the ways it did so was by insisting on the duty to bear witness. See also Peter Redfield, “A Less Modest Witness,” *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006): 3–26.

4. As Liisa Malkki argued in 1996, refugees, especially African refugees, are figured as “a ‘sea’ or ‘blur of humanity’”—as “a spectacle of a ‘raw,’ ‘bare humanity.’” See Liisa Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 387.

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1951), 291.

6. Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6.

7. Boltanski, 12.

8. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Anne Vallaëys, *Médecins Sans Frontières, la biographie* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

9. James Ferguson, “Uses of Neoliberalism,” *Antipode* 41, no. S1 (2009): 166–84.