

Humanitarianism: Keywords

Humanitarianism

Keywords

Edited by

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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).

Outside legalistic frameworks that take victims' identities for granted, academics have criticized the primacy of "pathetic" representations of victimhood (the passive victim) that simultaneously fetishize, dehistoricize, and individualize suffering masses: in the process, victims' experiences are removed from their socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts, their agency obscured, and their identities reduced to mute bodies. In order to be recognized as refugees, for instance, migrants must convince experts that they are "pure victims" (Meyers 2011): if they do not reduce themselves to anything but damaged biological life, they can be suspected of engaging in victimhood performances.

While the humanitarian victim is normally construed as helpless and passive, the givers—humanitarians, individual donors, wealthy benefactors, celebrities—are endowed with agency to save others. This salvific capacity is invested with a "god-like power" to make decisions over life and death, which, according to several critics, historically reflects colonial and post-colonial relationships between "the victim" and the "good-man," that is to say the "white-man" (Badiou 2001: 12–13).

While not all victims are accorded the same moral value, humanitarian attempts to stabilize individuals in certain typologies of victimhood can be differently contested by eligible candidates. A recent report published by the International Centre for Transitional Justice (Kapur and Muddell 2016), for example, shows that male victims of sexual violence have few opportunities for recognition and compensation owing to the prevalent narratives of female victimhood that identify sexual violence as a women's issue. Categories of victimhood are also appropriated and repoliticized by affected stakeholders, as demonstrated by the rise of victims' organizations. Here, private suffering is turned into collective public action that deindividualizes victimhood and molds it according to externally established legal formulations while, at the same time, increasing victims' chances to access reparation (Druliolle and Brett 2018).

Recently, humanitarians have attempted to overcome the victim–benefactor dichotomy by promoting victims' participation in bottom-up processes of program design and implementation. Yet the primary focus on victimhood as a legal and natural condition tends to push affected communities' changing subjectivities and agency, and their lived socio-political realities, into the background.

Giuseppe Bolotta

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Voluntary Work

“Voluntary work” is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of human activity, including animal and environmental protection, social and medical care, and refugee relief. The adjective “voluntary” refers to the non-compulsory and unpaid character of work. Nevertheless, in practice voluntary work may entail some financial compensation for the volunteer involved. Whereas the distinction between the terms “*bénévole*” and “*volontaire*” in French is more informative, as the first explicitly indicates the lack of payment while the second refers to paid work, in English as in other languages such a distinction does not exist. This blurring of the categories echoes the moral content of the volunteer as a disinterested subject and the epitome of a modern citizen working for the good. The moral values of the gift and altruism lie at the heart of civic volunteerism and the volunteer as a moral subjectivity (Rozakou 2016). Such an analysis of voluntary work helps us to grasp the compatibility between volunteerism and neoliberalism, which, at first glance, seems antithetical to the principle of morality. In fact, zones that stand outside the logic of market exchange and individual self-interest and areas of social interaction that are