

Adapt or Die?

Resilience Discourse and the Shifting Contours of Humanitarian Morality*

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Abstract The epistemic terrain of humanitarian morality has undergone a profound paradigmatic transformation in recent years. The turn towards “resilience” as a structuring principle in aid programmes has produced new modes of governance that challenge what I call the moral exceptionalism of humanitarianism’s mandate. This article traces the trajectory of moralism in humanitarian studies, exploring how the productive tension between contrapuntal readings of humanitarianism as moral intent or biopolitical care is transcended by the resilience paradigm’s ontological vision of an intrinsically fragile and vulnerable world. Contrary to theoretical critiques of resilience as an extension of neoliberal tenets to global governance, I draw on the context of the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan to argue that resilience humanitarianism has in fact prompted a return to state welfare as the final guarantor of refugee rights.

Keywords:

Ethics, ethnography, development, humanitarianism, neoliberalism, resilience.

¿Adaptarse o morir? El discurso de la resiliencia y los contornos cambiantes de la moralidad humanitaria

Resumen El terreno epistémico de la moral humanitaria ha sufrido una profunda transformación paradigmática en los últimos años. El giro hacia la “resiliencia” como principio estructurador en los programas de ayuda ha producido nuevos modos de gobernanza que desafían lo que denomino el excepcionalismo moral del mandato del humanitarismo. Este artículo rastrea la trayectoria del moralismo en los estudios humanitarios, explorando cómo la tensión productiva entre las lectu-

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ras en contrapunto del humanitarismo como intención moral o cuidado biopolítico es superada por la visión ontológica del paradigma de la resiliencia de un mundo intrínsecamente frágil y vulnerable. Contrariamente a las críticas teóricas de la resiliencia como una extensión de los principios neoliberales a la gobernanza global, me baso en el contexto de la crisis de los refugiados sirios en Jordania para argumentar que el humanitarismo de la resiliencia, de hecho, ha provocado un retorno al bienestar estatal como el garante final de los derechos de los refugiados.

Palabras clave:

Ética, etnografía, desarrollo, humanitarismo, neoliberalismo, resiliencia.

I was on a plane to Lebanon. We had just landed in Beirut, and I was standing in the aisle of the aircraft, waiting to disembark. I overheard the captain chatting with one of the passengers in line ahead of me. “What do you do?” he asked a white woman dressed in smart business attire. “I sell medical devices to UNICEF”, she replied. He smiled at her and said, “thank you for your service”. This moment caught my attention as a crystallising expression of the moral overtones that continue to be associated with the project of humanitarianism, despite major restructurations of the field in the past few decades. Since the 1980s, humanitarian aid has burgeoned into a highly professionalised enterprise, with defined legal mandates, codes of conduct, evaluation metrics, and dense institutional partnerships with states, multilateral agencies and private companies (Barnett, 2013). Job titles have become technical and specialised, including area managers, field coordinators, communications officers, data and financial analysts, GIS and legal experts, not to mention sector-specialists in health, education, protection, food security, camp governance, sanitation and hygiene. Non-governmental organisation (NGO) management has also grown increasingly neoliberal, with stiff competition over funding, precarious terms of employment and subcontracted programme implementation. Staff are hired full-time to manage grant-writing, budgets and public relations, while the apportioning of “beneficiaries” among aid organisations is sometimes treated as ‘market share’. In other words, we have come very far from the nostalgic origin myth of the modern humanitarian as a ruggedly independent European ‘do-gooder’ (Calhoun, 2010; Douzinas,

2007). The bulk of humanitarian labour today is engaged in the administrative maintenance of a sprawling transnational bureaucracy, not unlike any large corporate entity. Why then do we continue to think of humanitarianism as a *moral* project *par excellence*? Why does selling medical devices to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) deserve a note of thanks?

The classical mandate of humanitarianism has long been defined in contradistinction to development and state welfare as concerned not with the broad “improvement” of the human condition but with the limited goal of alleviating immediate suffering (Beckett, 2019; Feldman & Ticktin, 2010; Hilhorst, 2018; Redfield & Bornstein, 2010). As former president of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), James Orbinski, explained, humanitarianism does not assume the role of political actors; rather, it “occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis” (1999). The ethical claim of this argument derives not simply from the moral urgency of saving life in duress but from a categorical refusal of sovereignty, which translates into the established humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence (Hyndman, 2000; Kennedy, 2004; Rieff, 2002; Smyser, 2003; Terry, 2002). Of course, humanitarian programs may have sovereign “effects”—in that they shape the welfare of people, the management of territory and the conduct of government (Fassin, 2007a; Pandolfi, 2010)—but these effects are treated as an abrogation of humanitarianism’s essentially *moral* renunciation of sovereignty and political power writ large.

I argue in this article that the epistemic terrain of the moral in humanitarian reason has undergone a profound paradigm shift with the turn towards “resilience” as a structuring principle in humanitarian programming. In institutional parlance, resilience generally refers to “the ability of individuals, households, communities and societies to cope with the adverse impacts of systemic crises”, and as such, ushers in new modes of humanitarian governance oriented towards managing risk and contingency in an ontologically uncertain world (UNDG, 2014, p. 7). Resilience discourse thus challenges the classical mandate of humanitarianism by blurring the political and institutional distinctions between humanitarian

and developmental aid, which raises important questions about the relevance of moralist framings in humanitarian action. I begin this argument by tracing the place of the moral in humanitarian studies, pointing to a recurring tension in the literature between contrapuntal interpretive stances towards moral intent and biopolitical care. As I point out, ethnographies of humanitarianism, in their methodological attentiveness to the moral worlds of aid workers, can over-identify with the terms of humanitarian moralism, which leaves the field unprepared to grapple with the far-reaching ethico-political implications of the resilience turn. In the next section, I offer a brief conceptual genealogy of resilience as a concept in international policymaking, from its origins in the ecological sciences to its growing popularity as a sustainable developmental response to chronic emergencies. Whereas political theorists circumscribe resilience as an extension of neoliberal tenets to global governance, I draw on the ethnographic context of the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan to argue that resilience has blurred the epistemic distinctions between humanitarianism and development and prompted a deepening reliance on state welfare as the final guarantor of refugee rights.

Beyond moral exceptionalism

Humanitarian studies is marked by a foundational structuring tension between two seemingly incongruent stances. On one side, anthropologists argue that humanitarianism is principally defined by an exceptional moral commitment to alleviate suffering, deriving from the intense and urgent legibility of the suffering body in crisis, which surpasses ‘normal’ thresholds of socially tolerable violence and demands protection at all costs. “The humanitarian is someone who is not bound by duty to help others”, writes Greg Beckett, “but who nevertheless feels the *need* to help others. They simply feel themselves to be compelled to do good” (2019, p. 163; emphasis original). This moral calling is often described as non-political in the sense that it does not impose limits on the recognition of suffering or the entitlement to life in duress—which would be the domain and

exercise of sovereignty—even if the dispensation of humanitarian aid is inevitably mired in political calculus. Didier Fassin goes so far as to call humanitarian reason the governing principle of our time, designating new modes of action and new sets of actors ostensibly committed to “the administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle that sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action” (2007a, p. 151). Fassin’s claim is not that humanitarianism is beyond reproach; indeed, he calls upon scholars to scrutinise its categories and question its self-evident “moral untouchability” (2010). Yet, overtones of moralism remain persistent even in many critiques of humanitarian action, which frequently indict the ethical failures of humanitarianism while leaving the moral substance of its commitments untroubled (Kennedy, 2004; Rieff, 2002; Smyser, 2003). “The point”, as Adi Ophir writes, “is not that humanitarian actors are morally right due to their mere concern with the mal-being of others, but that they are ‘within the moral’” (2006, p. 115).¹

The association of humanitarian reason with such essentially and irreducibly moral dispositions sits in striking contradistinction to another tendency within humanitarian studies to approach the aid industry as, first and foremost, an institutional system of power. Scholars have written extensively about how humanitarian organisations come to serve, through complicity and co-optation, as a de facto apparatus of Western geopolitical interests (Krever, 2011; Lewis, 2012; Loescher, 2001; Stevens, 2006). Since the end of the Cold War, as European governments have increasingly curtailed the asylum process, refugee camps and detention centres have emerged as key nodal points to stem the movement of racialized refugees from the global South and extend the extraterritorial reach of Fortress Europe (Cornelisse, 2010; De Genova, 2010; Gibney, 2004, 2006; Karakayali & Rigo, 2010; Mayblin, 2017; Walters, 2010). Others

¹ James Laidlaw (2002), following the moral philosopher Bernard Williams, distinguishes between ‘ethics’, which asks the Socratic question ‘how ought one to live?’, from ‘morality’, which is one answer to that question emerging from the political and historical context from the West. While the implicit hierarchy between the two terms is hotly contested (Fassin, 2012b), it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to explore this debate. For my argument here, I use ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’ more or less interchangeably.

have criticised the resolute absence of democratic accountability within humanitarian organisations, the racist and paternalistic treatment of refugees by aid workers, and the bankruptcy of principled commitments to neutrality that fail to distinguish between perpetrators and victims of genocide (Bhabha, 1996; De Waal, 1997; Duffield, 2001; Harrell-Bond, 1986, 2002; Hyndman, 2000; Keen, 2008; Malkki, 1996; Napier-Moore, 2011; Terry, 2002). Worse yet, the moral appeal of humanitarian causes has also been used by governments to justify military interventions in the global South, most infamously the global War on Terror, raising questions about whether humanitarian morality is just another legitimating discourse for empire writ large (Atanasoski, 2013; Bricmont, 2006; Hehir, 2008; Holzgrefe, 2003; Pandolfi, 2010; Weizman, 2011).

The structuring tension between these two stances pivots around the epistemic status of morality in humanitarian studies: while one stance sees moral valuations of life as integral to the very metaphysics of being humanitarian, the other reads them symptomatically as a formulaic script by which other political ends may be pursued. This tension is embodied in the familiar intellectual coordinates referenced in much of this scholarship: the work of Agamben, Schmitt, Foucault and Arendt. In particular, Agamben's (1995, 1998, 2003) refiguration of biopolitics as a constitutive injunction of sovereign power to "make live and let die" (Foucault, 1997, 2008) provided fertile terrain for theorising political crises as states of exception that continuously produce bare lives as objects of humanitarian care.² In this view, humanitarian care would appear—as a sovereign injunction to 'make life live'—to be a biopolitical project *par*

² Scholars have rightly criticised the evacuation of socio-historical biographies implicit in Agamben's formulations, and in particular the erasure of racial difference as the constitutive grounds of modern exclusion (Humphrey, 2004; Nguyen, 2019; Owens, 2009; Sexton, 2010; Weheliye, 2014). Miriam Ticktin, for instance, points out that the figure of bare life "is but a political device to create the conditions for care. Bare life does not exist beyond this; it always comes with political and social attributes allowing it to be identified as human, as bare, and as 'life'" (2011, p. 14). While there is indeed no *pre*-political cognizability to the biological body, it remains the case that the analytical purchase of 'bare life'—what Arendt refers to as "the abstract nakedness of being human" (1976, p. 299)—like all juridical categories, is by definition restricted to the structural logics of law and cannot offer us anthropological views of the human beyond it.

excellence. Yet, anthropologists have been strikingly reticent to draw this equation. Fassin (2007b, 2009), for instance, argues that whereas biopolitics consists in the regulation of population and the normalisation of behaviour, humanitarianism is a “politics of life”, in that it finds meaning and value in the “simple fact of living”. Life exceeds the biopolitical because it is not simply an object of political instrumentalisation; rather, it invokes moral sentiments based on the “biolegitimacy” of the human body, the “recognition of life as the highest of all values—life that must be understood in the sense of being alive” (Fassin, 2012a, p. 249). In other words, it is a moral attachment to ‘life itself’—a universal subject shorn of race, gender, ethnicity and other identifying markers of the social—which for Fassin distinguishes humanitarianism’s power of life from biopolitics’ power *over* life. Peter Redfield (2013) offers a similar qualification when he suggests that humanitarian organisations like MSF instantiate a “minimal biopolitics”, which fosters an attenuated form of life while refusing the transcendental sovereignty of the biopolitical state. This minimalism of humanitarian intervention and its abjuration of sovereign power is the very foundation of its moral legitimacy, wherein “lives are sustained and prolonged, more than they are ‘saved’ in any final sense”, and survival “is a perpetually temporary outcome” (Redfield, 2013, p. 17).

The anthropology of humanitarianism is surfeit with such conceptual manoeuvres—humanitarianism as a “nongovernmental government” (Fassin, 2007a), as a “paradox of emancipation and domination” (Barnett, 2011), as “migrant sovereignty” (Pandolfi, 2010) or as “non-ideological ideology” (Fox, 1995)—attempting to recuperate a moral substance within, before or beyond the (bio) political. My point here is not that humanitarian morality and biopolitics are sociologically exclusive categories; the moral act of giving is invariably preconditioned by and entangled within relations of power. My point is that by taking the distinction between the two as an analytical heuristic, one discerns a moralising slant in ethnographies of aid that is symptomatic of the field’s broad sympathies with humanitarianism’s moral exceptionalism. By contrast, ethnographies of other biopolitical projects, such as

capitalist development (Appel, 2019; Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007; Mitchell, 2002; Mosse, 2005), the neoliberal/welfare state (Brown, 2015; Coronil, 1997; Davis, 2007; Ong, 2006; Scott, 1998; Stepputat, 2005), settler colonialism (Coulthard, 2014; Gregory, 2004; Robinson, 2000; Simpson, 2014; Stoler, 2016), and global governance (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Lewellen, 2002; Tsing, 2005) are rarely fixated on the moral claims of those projects. Where the moral arises at all, it appears as a discursive edifice for the cultivation of distinct political subjectivities and governing rationalities adequate for their purpose, or put more bluntly, as ideological mystifications no different from Kipling's "white man's burden". Indeed, the critical thrust in much of this scholarship has been to interrogate the taxonomies of humanity that animate racial capitalism and colonial modernity, and to recover the histories of political violence concealed by their sanctifying myths. The critique of humanitarian reason on the other hand, by virtue of its conceptual dissociation between the moral and the political, seems destined to waver between "critical theories of biopower and the ethnographic immersion in the moral economy of humanitarianism", apprehending humanitarianism "both as an ideology concealing specific relationships of domination and as an ethos that is constitutive of our way of experiencing the world today" (Guilhot, 2012, p. 86).

The political sympathies of anthropologists for the moral tenets of humanitarianism may partly be a function of scale. It seems intuitively easier to discern at a macro-structural level the systemic failures of the humanitarian industry, but such diagnoses say little of what it means to occupy that industry and labour within its limits. They say little about the ethically charged worlds of aid workers, their phenomenological encounters with suffering, and their affective and intellectual struggles against the recursivity of disaster. Institutions as an aggregate may not be moral subjects, but they are peopled with moral yearnings and dispositions, and ethnography exhorts our attention to the micro-contextual registers in which their social acts come to acquire moral meaning. It is no accident therefore that the anthropology of humanitarianism closely shares its subdisciplinary

origins and thematic concerns with moral anthropology (Mattingly & Throop, 2018; Ticktin, 2014). An anthropology of the good, as Joel Robbins argues, behoves us to recognise “the way people orientate to and act in a world that outstrips the one most concretely present to them, and to avoid dismissing their ideals as unimportant or, worse, as bad-faith alibis for the worlds they actually create” (2013, p. 457). In her ethnography of the Finnish Red Cross, Liisa Malkki (2015) takes up just such an invitation, questioning the inclinations of a Barthesian-style cultural critique to trivialise humanitarianism’s little gestures, such as making toys or weaving blankets, as mere bourgeois sentimentality—ethical but not properly “political”, individually meaningful but not collectively transformative.³ Why, she asks, do we habitually equate the “real” with the geopolitical, while consigning a wide range of affective and imaginative practices to the “realm of the mere?” (2015, p. 266). What if we were to take those practices seriously as a form of “imaginative politics”, one that emerges not from an abstract moralism but from a socially situated and culturally coded *need* to help?

These are undoubtedly generative questions, and I am cognizant that dismissing the minimalism of humanitarian aid out of hand forecloses rather than opens up conceptual lines of inquiry. However, in an industry replete with inflated and self-congratulatory estimations of its own generosity, there is also a converse danger to the self-referential semiotic circuits within which any humanitarian effort can be declared meaningful in its own right. We witness this minimalist mentality that “anything helps” in the litany of aid programmes offered to Syrians, from yoga classes for refugees with PTSD (Meyer, 2016) and theatre productions of Shakespeare in a militarised refugee camp (Hubbard, 2014) to a remarkably tone-deaf appeal by the World Health Organization to minimise tobacco consumption in Syria at the height of the civil war (WHO, 2016).

³ In his essay titled “The Great Family of Man”, Roland Barthes (1972) decries the “ambiguous myth of the human ‘community’” that undergirds liberal humanism, holding it guilty of an ahistorical universalism that elides the differential determinants of political violence. Humanitarian appeals to global solidarity are perhaps the apotheosis of this humanist project.

Yazan Al Saadi aptly captures this glut of fetishised caregiving in a cartoon depicting an international NGO's (INGO) awareness campaign in Lebanon seeking to teach Syrian refugees how to use soap (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
 “An INGO worker walks into a refugee camp”



Source: Ghosn and Al Saadi (2018, pp. 104-105).

The participants were angered by what they saw as an insult to their intelligence, as if refugees by virtue of losing their homes also lost all other markers of their humanity, including personal hygiene. Al Saadi writes, “it goes without saying that no one likes to be treated like cattle, but most types of humanitarian work directed towards refugees (and others) usually concern themselves with providing the barest levels of aid, and rarely is that type of aid about refugees’ long-term self-sustainability or results in tangible social, economic, and political avenues for developing their own agency; in effect, it temporarily transforms the refugees into helpless cattle-like beings” (Ghosn & Al Saadi, 2018, p. 107). While Al Saadi’s criticism of the hygiene campaign focuses on its dehumanising treatment of refugees and its insufficiency to meet humanitarian needs, it’s worth asking more generally why definitions of human need remain tethered to the minimalist mandate of a hygiene campaign here or a yoga class there. Perhaps all these acts also constitute an “imaginative politics” in Malkki’s sense, but it seems premature to invest them with *a priori* moral significance irrespective of their efficacy or repercussions for the people they’re supposed to help. Surely an anthropology of the good cannot jettison all “consequentialist” standards of ethics—which evaluate moral actions according to what they achieve in practice rather than their conformity to normative rules or declared dispositions (Fassin, 2012b)—otherwise it risks reproducing the very terms of humanitarian self-representation that claim moral untouchability and elide critical scrutiny. As Alex De Waal warned us years ago, “humanitarianism is hugely self-justifying: it may even be the paradigm of a secular human enterprise that does not need to succeed in order to justify itself. Humanitarianism works, by definition” (1997, p. 4).

I do not mean to suggest by this argument that the structural tension between the moral and the biopolitical, the singular and the aggregate, needs to be synthesised in any direction. Humanitarianism is perforce both a moral pursuit that is biopoliticised as well as a biopolitical project that is moralised, and the field of humanitarian studies must continue to inhabit rather than suspend this productive contradiction. My point is that the anthropology of humanitarianism has rightly disrupted the category of the political

in humanitarian biopolitics while all too often leaving the moral essence of its commitments untroubled. Even as Fassin asserts that “moral anthropology has no moralizing project” (2012b, p. 3), ethnographies of aid frequently over-identify with humanitarians as moral interlocutors, precipitating a form of what Harri Englund (2010) calls “anthropological populism” which “prevents [scholars] from articulating their own difference towards their interlocutors and from opening to the possibility of an argument developed on the basis of diverging interests” (Guilhot 2012, p. 88).

The theoretical implications of this over-identification are especially significant today, when countries around the world have witnessed a resurgence of right-wing xenophobia and neo-fascist populism, denied asylum-seekers entry in contravention of their own commitments to international law, and bartered refugees like pawns in geopolitical contests for regional influence and trade agreements. In this abyss, one is hard-pressed to discern the scope and relevance of humanitarian reason as a higher moral principle, or to find what Fassin (2012a) calls the “biolegitimacy” of human life operative anywhere even in name. At the same time, the World Humanitarian Summit reports that “humanitarian assistance alone can neither adequately address nor sustainably reduce the needs of over 130 million of the world’s most vulnerable people. A new and coherent approach is required based on addressing root causes, increasing political diplomacy for prevention and conflict resolution, and bringing humanitarian, development and peace-building efforts together” (WHS, 2016, p. 2). In other words, humanitarianism has reached a critical juncture in its history where accelerating rates of displacement triggered by conflict and climate change have outstripped the existing capacities of humanitarian actors, prompting a fundamental recalibration of their strategies, practices, and the moral values that drive them. The classical mandate of emergency relief that undergirded anthropological preoccupations with moral exceptionalism is now widely recognised by aid practitioners to be ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of the coming century. A different ethical framework is needed to grapple with the emergent humanitarian value of resilience, which as I discuss in the next

section, aims to produce communities better prepared to survive, and even thrive, in the recurring crises of the future.

Genealogies of resilience

When the then Democratic presidential nominee Joseph Biden launched his signature economic recovery plan in July 2020, the name he gave it was a clear rebuff to the platform President Donald Trump had run on four years earlier. Unlike the slogan “make America great again”, which invoked a mythic narrative of American history in the service of white supremacist consolidation, Biden’s proposal to “build back better” viewed the crisis of the present not as an occasion for return, but as an opportunity for large-scale social and structural transformation. What Biden didn’t mention was that this instrumental view of crisis has long pervaded projects of “disaster capitalism”, which exploit wars, political upheavals and natural disasters to force open new sectors to capital accumulation (Gunewardana & Schuller, 2008; Klein, 2007). But more than that, the phrase “build back better” had a more contemporary resonance in resilience discourse, an emerging global policy paradigm that has acquired growing popularity in diverse fields of international policymaking, ranging from urban planning to climate change, national security and disaster preparedness to international development and humanitarian aid (see Chandler, 2012; Corry, 2014; Joseph, 2016; Juntunen & Hyvönen, 2014; O’Malley, 2010; Pugh, 2014; Tierney, 2015; Welsh, 2014).

The concept of resilience has several overlapping conceptual genealogies, but the one most salient to international policymaking emerges from the growth of complexity theory in the ecological sciences.⁴ In a highly influential article published in 1973, the ecologist C.S. Holling argued that complex ecological systems did not always obey the laws of homeostasis. Indeed, the very

⁴ Philippe Bourbeau (2018) has questioned the ‘accepted truth’ among international relations scholars that resilience discourse grew out of the field of ecology, drawing attention to a substantial body of literature on the subject in psychology, social work and engineering. For this argument however, I am interested in the specific resonance of Holling’s work in framing the scope and limits of resilience-based humanitarian interventions.

notion of ecological equilibrium, drawn from classical mechanics and thermodynamics, was a dangerous abstraction, for it could not account for all the heterogeneous variables and their complex interactions that produce unpredictable perturbations in ecological behaviour (Walker & Cooper, 2011). Instead, Holling proposed the concept of resilience as a distinct property of ecological systems, defined as “the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist” (1973, p. 17). His purpose was to warn that agricultural ecosystems could not maintain fixed yields unless they managed risk and adapted to recurring crises. However, he concluded his paper with a more general assertion about complex systems:

A management approach [to agriculture] based on resilience [...] would emphasize the need to keep options open, the need to view events in a regional rather than a local context, and the need to emphasize heterogeneity. Flowing from this would be not the presumption of sufficient knowledge, but the recognition of our ignorance; not the assumption that future events are expected, but that they will be unexpected. The resilience framework can accommodate this shift of perspective, for it does not require a precise capacity to predict the future, but only a qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take (1973, p. 21).

Holling’s sombre pronouncement suggested that the best-laid plans to improve the human condition are inherently beset by the limitations of human knowledge and its ability to foresee outcomes in a dynamic and non-linear world. As such, his dismal futurity served as a premonition of the growing consensus among Western policymakers since the 1990s that the “new imperial” project (Harvey, 2003) to remake the world according to so-called liberal democratic values had definitively failed.⁵ The outbreak of “new wars” (Kaldor, 2012; Münkler, 2002) in the global South conclusively belied the liberal triumphalism of Fukuyama’s (1992) “end of history” thesis,

⁵ One can of course question the ‘liberal’ credentials behind these projects, given the abysmal track record of developmental and military assistance by Western powers throughout the Cold War. The diagnosis of failure in the post-Cold War era says less about verifiable policy outcomes than it does about shifting perspectives within the liberal tradition itself about the relevance of liberal governance.

while the fractures from ill-conceived structural adjustment policies produced a deepening sense of disillusionment with rationalist, top-down models of institutional state-building (Pugh, 2014). Resilience emerged around this time in international policy discourse as the crystallising expression of a more cautious, less confident philosophy of global governance, one that accepted crisis as an intrinsic property of the world system. The focus on disaster resilience in such a dire and vulnerable world, as a UN report titled “Living with Risk” put it, was “to find a way to live with these phenomena, rather than die from them” (UNDRR, 2004, p. xi).

Resilience quickly became a fashionable buzzword in policy circles as various international organisations adopted and modified Holling’s definition to advance their own programmatic approaches to resilience. The Resilience Alliance, established in 1999 as a multidisciplinary research organisation for the study of social-ecological systems, defined resilience as “the capacity of a social-ecological system to absorb or withstand perturbations and other stressors such that the system remains within the same regime, essentially maintaining its structure and functions” (Resilience Alliance, n.d.). The UN adapted the term to mean “the capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure” (2004, p. 16).⁶ The definition used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

⁶ Different UN agencies have further modulated this definition according to their specific mandates. For UNHCR, resilience “refers to the ability of individuals, households, communities, national institutions and systems to prevent, absorb and recover from shocks, while continuing to function and adapt in a way that supports long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, and the attainment of human rights” (2017, p. 3). For the World Food Programme (WFP), resilience is “the capacity to ensure that shocks and stressors do not have long-lasting adverse development consequences” (2015, p. 5). Donor organisations provide their own gloss on the term as well. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) describes “Disaster Resilience [as] the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses—such as earthquakes, drought or violent conflict—without compromising their long-term prospects” (2011, p. 6), while the US Agency for International Development (USAID) defines resilience as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (2013, p. 9).

(IPCC), which has since been adopted by the World Bank (2014), goes further: resilience is “the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration, or improvement of its essential basic structures and functions” (IPCC, 2012, p. 5). The IPCC’s stress on not only maintaining but improving system performance is significant, because it suggests that the goal of resilience is not simply to ‘bounce back’ from crisis in a homeostatic sense, but to bounce back *better*—or “build back better” as Biden’s plan would have it—so that future crises may be weathered and survived with greater efficiency.

Under the resilience paradigm, society itself is a complex and non-linear system writ large. Risks and hazards, “shocks and stresses”, are immanent to this system, such that any sovereign ambition to regulate and govern the world is intrinsically fraught with uncertainty. The task of international intervention then is no longer centred on securing the subject from threat in a biopolitical sense, but rather, preparing the subject to adapt to endemic insecurities and chronic vulnerability (Chandler, 2014). As a USAID programme guidance report puts it, “while we cannot stop shocks from occurring, we can do much more to help people withstand and recover from them, creating a platform for their continued development” (2013, p. 8). It is not surprising then that much of the theoretical debate on resilience has focussed on its relationship to neoliberal models of governance (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Dean, 2014; Evans & Reid, 2014; Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Joseph, 2016; Juntunen & Hyvönen, 2014; Neocleous, 2012; Welsh, 2014; Zebrowski, 2013). Mark Duffield, for instance, argues that resilience thinking has colonised an essentially neoliberal turn within social policy that, in the age of the Anthropocene, treats humanity itself as “as the author of its own *permanent emergency*” (2013, p. 56). Brad Evans and Julien Reid suggest that resilience involves “the deliberate disabling of the political habits, tendencies and capacities of peoples”, such that resilient subjects are required to embrace “a neoliberal rationality that fosters a belief in the necessity of risk as

a private good” (2014, p. 42). Similar claims have also been made about the resilience turn in national security discourse (Corry, 2014; O’Malley, 2010), disaster risk reduction strategies (Tierney, 2015) and the principle of ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) (Chandler, 2012). For many of these scholars, there appears to be an “intuitive ideological fit” (Walker & Cooper, 2011) between resilience and neoliberal governmentality, deriving from the latter’s prescriptive retreat from grand state-building projects and its emphasis on individual capacities and responsibilities (Haldrup & Rosén, 2017). Others suggest that resilience in fact surpasses neoliberal ontologies by treating complexity not as a barrier to effective governance, but as the foundation for a new governing rationality attuned to the unpredictability of events and a fatalistic recognition of its own limits (Chandler, 2014; Schmidt, 2015).

Given the aid industry’s well-known propensity for resisting institutional reform, this “post-liberal” transition towards the constitution of adaptable, independent, self-governing subjects capable of enduring future crises marks a distinct break with the past (Mascarenhas, 2017; Pugh, 2014). That said, the inculcation of resilience thinking into humanitarian aid—which has garnered relatively little anthropological attention thus far—presents a very different *problématique* from that of neoliberal state abandonment, for humanitarianism has never ostensibly been a state-building project. As I argued earlier, the moral exceptionalism of humanitarianism is founded on precisely its categorical renunciation of sovereign power and its exaltation of human life as an innate value beyond the political. In practice, the resilience paradigm has blurred the institutional boundaries that have long distinguished humanitarianism from development, and forced aid organizations to grapple with the epistemic silos between the two sectors’ respective logics, ethics, temporalities and communities of concern. The aid industry’s adoption of resilience as a programmatic imperative, as I explore in the next section, materialises not a retreat from welfare but an *expansion* of its remit from the minimalist humanitarian imperative to save life to a maximalist vision of large-scale developmental engineering—challenging the foundation of humanitarian morality as a form of non-politics.

Return to the state

The idea that displacement is not just a humanitarian challenge but a developmental one is not new. A political distinction between the two fields emerged in the early years after World War II, when institutional arrangements within the UN produced refugees and poverty as separate problems requiring separate policy instruments. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established under the mandate of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which was geographically restricted to displacement in Europe (until this stipulation was amended in the 1967 Protocol),⁷ while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was founded in 1966 to oversee development aid in the global South. As the global refugee population kept rising during the 1970s, humanitarian donors became increasingly reluctant to fund potentially indefinite aid programmes. The 1980s thus saw a series of landmark meetings, such as the International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA), to formulate a “refugee aid and development” strategy that would target refugee-hosting regions in the global South with sustainable development-oriented interventions at the onset of a crisis (Crisp, 2001). This was also linked to a growing institutional awareness of the protracted nature of contemporary crises and the need for “linking relief, rehabilitation and development” as part of an integrated strategy (Hilhorst, 2018; Mosel & Levine, 2014; Roberts, 2010). This approach promised to offer a more cost-effective, holistic and lasting solution, but the problem it was meant to solve was interpreted differently by

⁷ The 1967 Protocol simply extended the 1951 Convention’s narrow definition of the refugee as someone with a “well-founded fear of persecution” to the rest of the world without significant adjustment. While the targeted persecution of minorities remains an ever-present danger, a vast number of refugees today flee for reasons not formally recognised by the Convention, such as structural violence, economic insecurity and climate change. Some countries in Africa and South America have promulgated their own redefinitions of the refugee category through regional agreements—most notably, the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees—which have sought to address the limitations of the 1967 Protocol by broadening the criteria for refugee protection. Such reimaginings expose the long overdue need for revamping the international refugee regime to address accelerating rates of forced migration in the 21st century.

the various parties to the process. Whereas international donors supported “refugee aid and development” initiatives as a pathway to local integration and reduced dependence on humanitarian aid, asylum countries advocated for them as a more equitable burden-sharing arrangement and were not necessarily interested in granting permanent residency rights to refugees (Crisp, 2001).

With the end of the Cold War, as Western governments withdrew their security rationale for resettling refugees from former communist regimes, repatriation came to be seen as the most effective resolution to the refugee question (Gibney, 2004, 2006). At the same time, humanitarian deployments during the '90s, especially in Rwanda, faced allegations of exacerbating rather than mitigating conflict (Hyndman, 2000; Terry, 2002). These developments had the effect of refocussing the development lens on countries of origin in order to stabilise post-conflict countries while also reducing the number of beneficiaries requiring humanitarian assistance. This “returnee aid and development” strategy was perceived to have better chances of success than its previous iteration, but it too ran aground because, as UNHCR and the World Bank argued in a joint paper at a Brookings roundtable in 1999, the funding mechanisms for it simply didn't exist (Crisp, 2001). According to a follow-up study by Bryan Deschamp and Sebastian Lohse (2013), the years from 2001 to 2012 did not see much change in these mechanisms such that the silos between humanitarian and development assistance remained as entrenched as ever. The more fundamental problem with the “returnee aid and development” strategy, however, concerned the state that would assume responsibility for refugees. As Jeff Crisp argues:

This has serious implications for any attempt to link ‘relief’ with ‘development’. For while the former is normally provided on an unconditional basis and outside of governmental structures, the latter is channelled through the state and is conditional. In some countries, development aid will be withheld because of the state's unacceptable behaviour, or because the state has effectively disintegrated. And even if such aid is provided, it will be in the context of extreme institutional weakness, financial scarcity and political volatility (Crisp 2001, p. 18).

Crisp's point raises the difficulty of operating in post-conflict countries that lack the institutional capacities to serve as effective partners in an integrated humanitarian and development aid programme. How could state institutions that were historically under-resourced and politically defanged be expected to channel international assistance towards the welfare of not only their own citizens but refugees as well? A different set of circumstances was needed. With the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis, humanitarian policymakers were provided with a seemingly perfect opportunity to experiment with a novel development-oriented humanitarian response to mass displacement.

The sudden influx in 2013 of more than half a million Syrians into Jordan—a relatively small country of 6.2 million people—imposed severe costs on the health, education and financial infrastructure of an economy already facing dire unemployment and heavy reliance on foreign aid. Before Jordan could secure its borders, refugees had settled all over the country in urban areas, which departed from the trend of containing refugees in camps to offset the demographic shock to local housing and services. Their presence also revived historical anxieties around the so-called national security threat posed by Iraqi and Palestinian refugees, prompting Jordan's monarch, King Abdullah II, to warn international donors that the country was on the verge of collapse. Amid these mounting pressures, policymakers in UNDP declared that the classical humanitarian mandate of emergency relief was no longer sustainable, and began advocating for what they called a “resilience-based approach” to the Syrian refugee crisis, known as the Resilience Agenda, which outlined a large-scale developmental response designed to strengthen the ability of both refugees and host communities “to cope with the adverse impacts of shocks and stresses” (UNDP, 2015, p. 2).

The Jordanian government welcomed this endeavour as it bolstered its claim that Syria's neighbours needed greater assistance to help shoulder its disproportionate share of the global migration crisis. For their part, advocates of the Resilience Agenda were convinced that Jordan's established infrastructure and middle-income economy presented them with a suitable context for the

inauguration of their programmatic vision of aid. Rather than building new services from the ground up, INGOs could draw on and expand the existing capacities of the government in order to support both refugees and vulnerable citizens in Jordan. This would also be more cost-effective, donors argued, for humanitarian services were difficult to maintain once emergency funding waned, whereas investments in public services and institutions would ensure that asylum countries were better equipped to tackle not only the present crisis but recurring cycles of displacement in the future as well. The Resilience Agenda was thus a crystallisation of the humanitarian recognition that, unlike the “extreme institutional weakness” Crisp (2001) described in the displacement scenarios of the ’80s and ’90s, refugee-hosting states in the Middle East could be treated as partners rather than barriers in the dispensation of humanitarian aid.

At the same time, the Jordanian government was deeply fearful that the Resilience Agenda was a surreptitious attempt by Western donors to integrate refugees on its national territory. Its fear was not unfounded, for the European Migrant Crisis in 2015 had revealed just how short-lived European commitments to international asylum norms were when faced with the prospect of mass migration from the global South (Betts & Collier, 2017). Thus, while Jordan fared better than Lebanon and Turkey in partnering with international organisations to build refugee resilience, it simultaneously took harsh security measures to undermine that very resilience—such as incarcerating new refugee arrivals in highly militarised camps, binding refugees to exploitative work permits and punishing infractions with deportation. Even as the country offered humanitarians a sufficiently bureaucratised and compartmentalised state that could abide by the regulatory regimes of international aid, its repressive apparatus also curtailed humanitarian space and proved that institutional ‘robustness’ was both a boon and a curse to the humanitarian mission. Humanitarian actors were thus locked into a paradoxical relationship of cooperation and conflict with the Jordanian government, their mandates simultaneously aligned and diverging within the same regional refugee response, at the heart of which lay a foundational structural contradiction between the

human rights of refugees and the sovereign rights of citizens as mutually exclusive categories of political concern. I refer elsewhere to this contradiction—between an aid agenda designed to sustain refugees and state security interests anxious to remove them—as the “resilience paradox”, which precipitates profound ethical questions for humanitarians about whose resilience is really at stake in the Syrian crisis (Firoz, forthcoming).

A striking incongruence thus emerges between theoretical and ethnographic interpretations of resilience. As I discussed earlier, political theorists have critiqued resilience discourse as the extension of neoliberal ontologies into the arena of global governance, characterised by an overvaluation of autonomy and adaptability, an insistence on the responsabilisation of the rights-bearing subject, and a studied pessimism towards state planning and welfare. Such critiques draw much of their critical thrust and urgency from the demise of the welfare state in Western democracies, so it is not surprising that they should diagnose resilience as little more than the symptom of a metastasized capitalism, where crisis is the new normal and aspirations for biopolitical security have given way to the immanence of risk. As Duffield writes:


Resilience underpins a new biopolitics that differs from what shaped the great modernist project of the Welfare and New Deal states. In order to work, resilience needs populations, communities and people that are free of any interposing historical, institutional or cultural legacies of social protection. Resilience requires a *pre-existing* state of exposure. Closed, protected, or even reluctant, communities have to be opened-up to risk and contingency, so that they are free to reinvent themselves anew as leaner and more agile versions of their bloated selves (2013, p. 56).

These Eurocentric points of departure lead Duffield, Neocleous (2012), Evans and Reid (2014) and others to deem the ‘post-security’ landscapes of resilience also ‘post-political’ by definition, breeding quiescence and resignation in the face of life’s existential vulnerability.

Yet, under the aegis of the resilience paradigm, humanitarian policymakers have sought a very different purpose that does not quite fit neatly within this well-trodden critique of neoliberalisation. The institutional differentiation between humanitarianism and

development after World War II produced not only separate policy instruments but diverging conceptualisations of state power in the two sectors. Classical humanitarians who confined their mandate to spaces of political collapse short-sightedly assumed that crises wiped away local institutions and social relations, leaving behind a *tabula rasa* upon which aid organizations could build anew their parallel relief services (Hilhorst, 2018). By the '80s, as architects of the neoliberal revolution were calling for reductions in welfare spending and shrinking the public sector, humanitarians were advocating for increasing investment in the developmental capacities of asylum states as the only way to mitigate chronic aid dependency (Harrell-Bond, 1986). The Resilience Agenda emerged as humanitarianism's response, not to neoliberal anxieties about 'big government' or the 'nanny state', but rather, to the need for reinforcing public infrastructure and social safety nets in the world's disaster zones so that vulnerable refugees and host communities may be self-sufficient in the long term. With a policy platform so heavily reliant on structured partnerships with asylum states, the Resilience Agenda precipitated not a retreat from, but counterintuitively, a *return* to state welfare as the final guarantor of refugee rights, and thereby amplified the vexed and agonistic relationship between state power and humanitarian biopolitics. In other words, far from relinquishing biopolitical security, resilience draws humanitarians into deeper entanglements with the biopolitical prerogatives of asylum states; rather than depoliticising governance, resilience—to paraphrase Tom Scott-Smith (2018)—*hyper-politicises* a field whose moral claims have long relied on a renunciation of the political, forcing it to confront the arbitrary limits that condition whose rights and which bodies become cognizable under the domain of sovereignty—the refugee and the citizen, the European and the African, the asylum-seeker and the poor.

The true ontological dangers of resilience lie perhaps not in its neoliberal echoes, but in its importation of an environmental metaphor to answer for the intractability of human conflict. The fatalism of resilience thinking may seem apposite to the climate change debate, where predictions of ecological crises worsen each year

and most scientists now assert that global catastrophe may already be a foregone conclusion (see IPCC, 2021). In the face of devastating storms, floods, heat waves and droughts, the entire globe may soon be called upon to act resilient. The unexamined extension of the same paradigm to conflict and displacement, however, externalises political violence as a complex ecological system that is natural to the human condition. Like all colonial ideas, it erases the archives of depredation that bring us to our present and obfuscates political responsibilities to find just solutions to humanitarian problems. As such, resilience is symptomatic of a defeated humanitarianism that can no longer envision an end to war. If that is indeed the case, the coming wars of the 21st century may soon appear as ontological as planetary death itself 

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