



## PEOPLE AND PLACES

# Migration, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Knowledge

An Interview with Juliano Fiori

*Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh with Juliano Fiori*

■ **ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Juliano Fiori—Head of Studies (Humanitarian Affairs) at Save the Children—reflects on Eurocentrism and coloniality in studies of and responses to migration. In the context of ongoing debates about the politics of knowledge and the urgency of anticolonial action, Fiori discusses the ideological and epistemological bases of responses to migration, the Western character of humanitarianism, the “localization of aid” agenda, and the political implications of new populisms of the Right.

■ **KEYWORDS:** counterhegemonic politics, decolonial thought, Eurocentrism, humanitarianism, neoliberalism, populism

**Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh:** In this issue of *Migration and Society* we are interested in the overarching theme of “Recentering the South in Studies of Migration.” Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged that studies of and policy responses to migration and displacement often have a strong Northern bias. For instance, in spite of the importance of different forms of migration within, across, and between countries of the “global South” (i.e., “South-South migration”), there is a significant tendency to focus on migration from “the South” to countries of “the North” (i.e., South-North migration), prioritizing the perspectives and interests of stakeholders associated with the North. Against this backdrop, what is your position with regard to claims of Eurocentrism in studies of and responses to migration?

**Juliano Fiori:** To the extent that they emerge from immanent critiques of colonialism and liberal capitalism, I am sympathetic toward them.<sup>1</sup> Decentering (or provincializing) Europe is necessarily an epistemological project of deconstruction. But to contribute to a counterhegemonic politics, this project must move beyond the diagnosis of epistemicide to challenge the particular substance of European thought that has produced systems of oppression.

The idea of “decolonizing the curriculum” is, of course, à la mode (Sabaratnam 2017; Van-yoro 2019). It is difficult to dispute the pedagogical necessity to question epistemic hierarchies and create portals into multiple worlds of knowledge. These endeavors are arguably compatible



with the exigencies of Enlightenment reason itself. But, though I recognize Eurocentrism as an expression of white identity politics, I am wary of the notion that individual self-identification with a particular body of knowledge is a worthy or sufficient end for epistemic decolonization—a notion I associate with a prevalent strain of woke post-politics, which, revering the cultural symbols of late capitalism but seeking to resignify them, surely produces a solipsistic malaise. Decolonization of the curriculum must at least aim at the reconstruction of truths.

Eurocentrism in the study of human migration is perhaps particularly problematic—and brazen—on account of the transnational and transcultural histories that migrants produce. Migrants defy the neat categorization of territories and peoples according to civilizational hierarchies. They redefine the social meaning of physical frontiers, and they blur the cultural frontier between Self and Other. They contribute to an *intellectual miscegenation* that undermines essentialist explanations of cultural and philosophical heritage. Migration itself is decentering (Achiume 2019).

And it is largely because of this that it is perceived as a threat. Let's consider Europe's contemporary backlash against immigration. The economic argument about the strain immigration places on the welfare state—often framed in neo-Malthusian terms—can be readily rebutted with evidence of immigrants' net economic contribution. But concerns about the dethroning of "European values" are rarely met head-on; progressive political elites have rather responded by doubling down on calls for multiculturalism from below, while promoting universalism from above, intensifying the contradictions of Eurocentricity.

It is unsurprising that, in the Anglophone world, migration studies developed the trappings of an academic discipline—dedicated university programs, journals, scholarly societies—in the late 1970s, amid Western anxieties about governing increased emigration from postcolonial states. It quickly attracted critical anthropologists and postcolonial theorists. But the study of the itinerant Other has tended to reinforce Eurocentric assumptions. Migration studies has risen from European foundations. Its social scientific references, its lexicon, its institutional frameworks and policy priorities, its social psychological conceptions of identity—all position Europe at the zero point. It has assembled an intellectual apparatus that privileges the Western gaze upon the hordes invading from the barrens. That this gaze might be cast empathetically does nothing to challenge epistemic reproduction: Eurocentrism directs attention toward the non-Western Other, whose passage toward Europe confirms the centrality of Europe and evokes a response in the name of Eurocentrism. To the extent that Western scholars focus on South-South migration, the policy relevance of their research is typically defined by its implications for flows from South to North.

The Eurocentrism of responses to forced migration by multinational charities, UN agencies, and the World Bank is not only a product of the ideological and cultural origins of these organizations. It also reflects the political interests of their principal donors: Western governments. Aid to refugees in countries neighboring Syria has been amply funded, particularly as the European Union has prioritized the containment of Syrians who might otherwise travel to Europe. Meanwhile, countries like India, South Africa, and Ivory Coast, which host significant numbers of regional migrants and refugees, receive proportionally little attention and support.

It is an irony of European containment policies that, while adopted as a measure against supposed threats to Europeaness, they undermine the moral superiority that Eurocentrism presupposes. The notion of a humanitarian Europe is unsustainable when European efforts to deter immigration are considered alongside the conditions accepted for other regions of the world. A continent of more than half a billion people, Europe hosts just under 2.3 million refugees; Lebanon, with a population of six million, hosts more than 1.5 million refugees from Syria alone. It should be noted that, in recent years, European citizens' movements have mobilized resources

to prevent the death of people crossing the Mediterranean. Initiatives like Alarm Phone, Open Arms, Sea Watch, and SOS MEDITERRANEE seem to represent a politicized humanitarianism for the network age. But in their overt opposition to an emboldened ethnonationalist politics, they seek to rescue not only migrants and refugees, but also an idea of Europe.

**EFQ:** How, if at all, do you engage with constructs such as “the global North,” “the global South,” and “the West” in your own work?

**JF:** I inevitably use some of these terms more than others, but they are all problematic in a way, so I just choose the one that I think best conveys my intended meaning in each given context. West, North, and core are not interchangeable; they are associated with distinct, if overlapping, ontologies and temporalities. As are Third World, South, and developing world.

I try to stick to three principles when using these terms. The first is to avoid the sort of negative framing to which your work on South-South encounters has helpfully drawn attention (i.e., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley 2018). When we come across one of these terms being deployed negatively, it invariably describes that which is not of the West or of the North. As such, it centers Europe and North America, and it opens up an analytical terrain on which those residing beyond the imagined cultural bounds of these regions tend to be exoticized. When I need to frame something negatively, I try to do so directly, using the appropriate prefix.

Second, I try to avoid setting up dichotomies and continuities. Placing East and West or North and South in opposition implies entirely dissimilar bodies, separated by a definite, undeviating frontier. But these terms are mutually constitutive, and it is rarely clear where, or even if, a frontier can be drawn. Such dichotomies also imply a conceptual equilibrium: that what lies on one side of the opposition is ontologically equivalent to what lies on the other. But the concept of the West is not equivalent to what the East represents today; indeed, it is questionable whether a concept of the East is now of much analytical value. South, West, North, and East might be constructed dialectically, but their imagined opposites are not necessarily their antitheses. Each arguably has more than one counterpart.

Similarly, I generally don't use terms that associate countries or regions with stages of development—most obviously, least developed, developing, and developed. They point toward a progressivist and teleological theory of history to which I don't subscribe. (The world-systems concepts of core, semiperiphery, and periphery offer a corrective to national developmental mythologies, but they are nonetheless inscribed in a systemic teleology.) The idea of an inexorable march toward capitalist modernity—either as the summit of civilization or as the point of maximum contradiction—fails to account for the angles, forks, and dead ends that historical subjects encounter. It also tends to be founded on a Eurocentric and theological economism that narrows human experience and, I would argue, mistakenly subordinates the political.

Third, I try to use these terms conceptually, without presenting them as fixed unities. They must be sufficiently tight as concepts to transmit meaning. But they inevitably obscure the heterogeneity they encompass, which is always in flux. Moreover, as concepts, they are continuously resignified by discursive struggles and the reordering of the interstate system. Attempts to define them too tightly, according to particular geographies or a particular politics, can give the impression that they are ahistorical. Take Boaventura de Sousa Santos's definition of the South, for example. For Santos, the South is not a geographical concept: he contends that it also exists in the geographical North (2014, 2016). Rather, it is a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism. It is anticapitalist, anticolonialist, antipatriarchal, and anti-imperialist. According to this definition, the South becomes representative of a particular

left-wing politics (and it is negative). It thus loses its utility as a category of macrosociological analysis.

Ultimately, all these terms are problematic because they are sweeping. But it is also for this reason that they can be useful for certain kinds of systemic analysis.

**EFQ:** You have written on the history of “Western humanitarianism” (i.e., Fiori 2013; Baughan and Fiori 2015). Why do you focus on the “Western” character of humanitarianism?

**JF:** I refer to “Western humanitarianism” as a rejoinder to the fashionable notion that there is a universal humanitarian ethic. Within both the Anglophone academy and the aid sector, it has become a commonplace that humanitarianism needs to be decolonized, and that the way to do this is to recognize and nurture “local” humanitarianisms around the world. In the last decade and a half, enthusiasm for global history has contributed to broader and more sophisticated understandings of how humanitarian institutions and discourses have been constructed. But it has also arguably contributed to the “humanitarianization” of different altruistic impulses, expressions of solidarity, and charitable endeavors across cultures.

The term “humanitarian” was popularized in English and French in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it soon became associated with humanistic religion. It thus connoted the existence of an ideal humanity within every individual and, as Didier Fassin (2012) has argued, it has come to represent the secularization of the Christian impulse to life. It was used to describe a wide range of campaigns, from abolition and temperance to labor reform. But all promoted a rationalist conception of humanity derived from European philosophy. That is, an abstract humanity, founded upon a universal *logos* and characterized by the mind-body duality. What is referred to today as the “humanitarian system”—of financial flows and liberal institutions—has been shaped predominantly by Western power and political interests. But the justification for its existence also depends upon the European division between the reasoned human and the unreasoned savage. The avowed purpose of modern humanitarianism is to save, convert, and civilize the latter. To cast modern humanitarian reason as a universal is to deny the specificity of ethical dispositions born of other conceptions of humanity. Indeed, the French philosopher François Jullien (2014) has argued that the concept of “the universal” itself is of the West.

Of course, there are practices that are comparable to those of Western humanitarian agencies across different cultures. However, claiming these for humanitarianism sets them on European foundations, regardless of their author’s inspiration; and it takes for granted that they reproduce the minimalist politics of survival with which the Western humanitarian project has come to be associated.

So why not refer to “European humanitarianism”? First, because it must be recognized that, as a set of evolving ethical practices, humanitarianism does not have a linear intellectual genealogy. European philosophy itself has of course been influenced by other traditions of thought (see Amin 1989; Bevilacqua 2018; Hobson 2004; Patel 2018): pre-Socratic Greek thinkers borrowed from the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Egyptians; Enlightenment philosophes had exchanges with Arab intellectuals. Second, reference to the West usefully points to the application of humanitarian ideas through systems of power.

Since classical antiquity, wars and ruptures have produced various narratives of the West. In the mid-twentieth century, essentialist histories of Western civilization emphasized culture. For Cold War political scientists, West and East often represented distinct ideological projects. I refer to the West as something approaching a sociopolitical entity—a power bloc—that starts to take form in the early nineteenth century as Western European intellectuals and military planners conceive of Russia as a strategic threat in the East. This bloc is consolidated in the aftermath

of World War I, under the leadership of the United States, which, as net creditor to Europe, shapes a new liberal international order. The West, then, becomes a loose grouping of those governments and institutional interests (primarily in Europe and North America) that, despite divergences, have been at the forefront of efforts to maintain and renew this order. During the twentieth century, humanitarians were sometimes at odds with the ordering imperatives of *raison d'état*, but contemporary humanitarianism is a product of this West—and a pillar of liberal order.<sup>2</sup>

**EFQ:** With this very rich historically and theoretically grounded discussion in mind, it is notable that policy makers and practitioners are implementing diverse ways of “engaging” with “the global South” through discourses and practices of “partnership” and supporting more “horizontal,” rather than “vertical,” modes of cooperation. In turn, one critique of such institutionalized policy engagement is that it risks instrumentalizing and co-opting modes of so-called South-South cooperation and “hence depoliticising potential sources of resistance to the North’s neoliberal hegemony” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley 2018: 2). Indeed, as you suggested earlier, it has been argued that policy makers are strategically embracing “South-South migration,” “South-South cooperation,” and the “localisation of aid agenda” as efficient ways both “to enhance development outcomes” and to “keep ‘Southerners’ in the South,” as “part and parcel of Northern states’ inhumane, racist and racialised systems of border and immigration control” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley 2018: 19). What, if any, are the dangers of enhancing “policy engagement” with “the South”? To what extent do you think that such instrumentalization and co-option can be avoided?

**JF:** The term “instrumentalization” gives the impression that there are circumstances under which policy engagement can be objectively just and disinterested. Even when framed as humanitarian, the engagement of Western actors in the South is inspired by a particular politics. Policy engagement involves an encounter of interests and a renegotiation of power relations; for each agent, all others are instruments in its political strategy. Co-option is just a symptom of negotiation between unequal agents with conflicting interests—which don’t need to be stated, conscious, or rationally pursued. It is the means through which the powerful disarm and transform agendas they cannot suppress.

The “localization agenda” is a good example. Measures to enable effective local responses to disaster are now discussed as a priority at international humanitarian congresses. These discussions can be traced at least as far back as Robert Chambers’s work (1983) on participatory rural development, in the 1980s. And they gathered momentum in the mid-2000s, as a number of initiatives promoted greater local participation in humanitarian operations. But, of course, there are different ideas about what localization should entail.

As localization has climbed the humanitarian policy agenda, the overseas development divisions of Western governments have come to see it as an opportunity to increase “value for money” and, ultimately, reduce aid expenditure. They promote cash transfer programming as the most “empowering” aid technology. Localization then becomes complementary to the integration of emergency response into development agendas, and to the expansion of markets.

Western humanitarian agencies that call for localization—and there are those, notably some branches of Médecins Sans Frontières, that do not—have generally fallen in line with this developmental interpretation, on account of their own ideological preferences as much as coercion by donor governments. But they have also presented localization as a moral imperative: a means of “shifting power” to the South to decolonize humanitarianism. While localization might be morally intuitive, Western humanitarians betray their hubris in supposing that their own con-

cessions can reorder the aid industry and the geostrategic matrix from which it takes form. Their proposed solutions, then, including donor budgetary reallocations, are inevitably technocratic. Without structural changes to the political economy of aid, localization becomes a pretext for Western governments and humanitarian agencies to outsource risk. Moreover, it sustains a humanitarian imaginary that associates Westerners with “the international”—the space of politics, from which authority is born—and those in disaster-affected countries with “the local”—the space of the romanticized Other, vulnerable but unsullied by the machinations of power. (It is worth stating that the term “localization” itself implies the transformation of something “global” into something local, even though “locals”—some more than others—are constitutive of the global.)

There are Southern charities and civil society networks—like NEAR,<sup>3</sup> for example—that develop similar narratives on localization, albeit in more indignant tones. They vindicate a larger piece of the pie. But, associating themselves with a neomanagerial humanitarianism, they too embrace a politics incapable of producing a systemic critique of the coloniality of aid.

Yet demands for local ownership of disaster responses should also be situated within histories of the subaltern. Some Western humanitarian agencies that today advocate for localization, including Save the Children, once faced opposition from anticolonial movements to their late imperial aid projects. More recently, so-called aid recipient perception surveys have repeatedly demonstrated the discontent of disaster-affected communities regarding impositions of foreign aid, but they have also demonstrated anguish over histories of injustice in which the Western humanitarian is little more than an occasional peregrine. It is the structural critique implicit in such responses that the localization agenda sterilizes. In the place of real discussion about power and inequalities, then, we get a set of policy prescriptions aimed at the production of self-sufficient neoliberal subjects, empowered to save themselves through access to markets.

While some such co-option is always likely in policy engagement, it can be reduced through the formation of counterhegemonic coalitions. Indeed, one dimension of what is now called South-South cooperation involves a relatively old practice among Southern governments of forming blocs to improve their negotiating position in multilateral forums. And, in the twenty-first century, they have achieved moderate successes on trade, global finance, and the environment. But it is important to recognize that co-option occurs in South-South encounters too. And, of course, that political affinities and solidarity can and do exist across frontiers.

**EFQ:** You edited the first issue of the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, which focused on “humanitarianism and the end of liberal order” (see Fiori 2019), and you are also one of the editors of a forthcoming book on this theme, *Amidst the Debris: Humanitarianism and the End of Liberal Order*. New populisms of the right now challenge the liberal norms and institutions that have shaped the existing refugee regime and have promoted freer movement of people across borders. Can decolonial and anticolonial thinking provide a basis for responses to displacement and migration that do *more than resist*?

**JF:** Any cosmopolitan response to migration is an act of resistance to the political organization of the interstate system.<sup>4</sup> As blood-and-soil politicians now threaten to erect walls around the nation-state, the political meaning and relevance of cosmopolitan resistance changes. But if this resistance limits itself to protecting the order that appears to be under threat, it is likely to be ineffective. Moreover, an opportunity to articulate internationalisms in pursuit of a more just order will be lost.

In recent years, liberal commentators have given a great deal of attention to Trump, Salvini, Duterte, Orbán, Bolsonaro, and other leading figures of the so-called populist Right. And these

figures surely merit attention on account of their contributions to a significant conjunctural phenomenon. But the fetishization of their idiosyncrasies and the frenzied investigation of their criminality serves a revanchist project premised on the notion that, once they are removed from office (through the ballot box or otherwise), the old order of things will be restored. To be sure, the wave that brought them to power will eventually subside; but the structures (normative, institutional, epistemological) that have stood in its way are unlikely to be left intact. Whether the intention is to rebuild these structures or to build new ones, it is necessary to consider the winds that produced the wave. In other words, if a cosmopolitan disposition is to play a role in defining *the new* during the current interregnum, resistance must be inscribed into strategies that take account of the organic processes that have produced Trumpism and Salviniism.

French geographer Christophe Guilluy offers an analysis of one aspect of organic change that I find compelling, despite my discomfort with the nativism that occasionally flavors his work. Guilluy describes a hollowing out of the Western middle class (2016, 2018). This middle class was a product of the postwar welfarist pact. But, since the crisis of capitalist democracy in the 1970s, the internationalization of capital and the financialization of economies have had a polarizing effect on society. According to Guilluy, there are now two social groupings: the upper classes, who have profited from neoliberal globalization or have at least been able to protect themselves from its fallout; and the lower classes, who have been forced into precarious labor and priced out of the city. It is these lower classes who have had to manage the multicultural integration promoted by progressive neoliberals of the center-left and center-right. Meanwhile, the upper classes have come to live in almost homogenous citadels, from which they cast moral aspersions on the reactionary lower classes who rage against the “open society.” An assertion of cultural sovereignty, this rage has been appropriated by conservatives-turned-revolutionaries, who, I would argue, represent one side of a new political dichotomy. On the other side are the progressives-turned-conservatives, who cling to the institutions that once seemed to promise the end of politics.

This social polarization would appear to be of significant consequence for humanitarian and human rights endeavors, since their social base has traditionally been the Western middle class. Epitomizing the open society, humanitarian campaigns to protect migrants deepen resentment among an aging precariat, which had imagined that social mobility implied an upward slope, only to fall into the lower classes. Meanwhile, the bourgeois bohemians who join the upper classes accommodate themselves to their postmodern condition, hunkering down in their privileged enclaves, where moral responses to distant injustices are limited to an ironic and banalizing clicktivism. The social institutions that once mobilized multiclass coalitions in the name of progressive causes have long since been dismantled. And, despite the revival of democratic socialism, the institutional Left still appears intellectually exhausted after decades in which it resigned itself to the efficient management of neoliberal strategies.

And yet, challenges to liberal order articulated through a Far Right politics create a moment of repoliticization; and they expose the contradictions of globalization in an interstate system, without undermining the reality of, or the demand for, connectivity. As such, they seem to open space for the formulation of radical internationalisms with a basis in the reconstruction of migrant rights. In this space, citizens’ movements responding to migration have forged a politics of transnational solidarity through anarchistic practices of mutual aid and horizontalism more than through the philosophizing of associated organic intellectuals. Fueled by disaffection with politics, as much as feelings of injustice, they have attracted young people facing a precarious future, and migrants themselves; indeed, there are movements led by migrants in Turkey, in Germany, in Greece, and elsewhere. They construct social commons with a basis in difference, forming “chains of equivalence.” Decolonial and anticolonial thinking is thus more likely to

influence their responses to migration and displacement than those of Western governments and conventional humanitarian agencies. Indeed, beyond the political inspiration that horizontalism often draws from anticolonial struggles, decolonial and postcolonial theories offer a method of deconstructing hierarchy from the inside that can transform resistance into the basis for a pluralist politics built from the bottom up. But for this sort of internationalism to reshape democratic politics, the movements promoting it would need to build bridges into political institutions and incorporate it into political strategies that redress social polarization. To the extent that this might be possible, it will surely dilute their more radical propositions.

I rather suspect that the most likely scenario, in the short term at least, involves a political reordering through the reassertion of neoliberal strategies. We could see the development of the sort of political economy imagined by the early neoliberal thinker Gottfried Haberler (1985): that is, one in which goods, wages, and capital move freely, but labor doesn't. This will depend on the consolidation of authoritarian states that nonetheless claim a democratic mandate to impose permanent states of emergency.

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## ■ NOTES

1. See, in particular, the work of decolonial thinkers like Aníbal Quijano (2007) and María Lugones (2007) and Ramón Grosfoguel and Ana Margarita Cervantes-Rodríguez (2002). On Eurocentrism in "development" and humanitarian practice, see Mporu and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) and Rutazibwa (2019), respectively.
2. For one of many critical accounts of humanitarianism's contribution to global governance, see Chimni (2000).
3. See <http://www.near.ngo>.
4. I use the term "cosmopolitan" here to refer to a negative posture: a general opposition to the limits of the nation-state and, in particular, to exclusionary nationalisms with their demands for patriotic loyalty. Such negative cosmopolitanism was expressed by Diogenes the Cynic, who declared himself a "citizen of the world" because he owed no special service to his home city of Sinope. It does not necessarily imply a positive project, such as the formation of world government (or federated empire), with which contemporary cosmopolitanism has been associated.



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