



COMMENTARY

The epistemic politics of “northern-led” humanitarianism: Case of Lebanon

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Abstract

This paper examines the epistemic politics of hegemonic humanitarianism by building on agnotology theories. I unpack the idea of “professional authority” with the purpose of showing how the Global North’s humanitarian agencies thrive on both a technocratic and an unpredictability approach. This epistemic politics is used to absolve humanitarianism of its failures and to blame “Southern” politics and technical deficiencies in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

agnotology, humanitarianism, Lebanon, professional authority, technocracy, unpredictability

1 | INTRODUCTION

In a time when protracted forced migrations are on the increase, North Lebanon became a shelter for large numbers of refugees fleeing the war in Syria from 2011. My research experience in North Lebanon between 2011 and 2019 has been in the context of an articulated politics of knowledge, which reveals a complex relationship between ethnographic work, political order, and epistemology. Over my years of fieldwork there, while focusing on aid provision to refugees who fled the war in Syria, I had to contend with the desire of some international humanitarian agencies to monitor the information I wished to disseminate, attempting to validate or invalidate the knowledge I aimed to produce through my ethnographic research (Carpi, 2020a). It is in this framework that I endeavour to capture hegemonic humanitarian ways of working and thinking. I also combine these personal reflections, coming from my previous research in Lebanon, with the findings of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s “Southern-led Responses to Displacement from Syria” project,¹ in which I have worked since 2017. On the basis of all this research work, I attempt to navigate how these create a peculiar politics of knowledge, enabling some leading humanitarian agencies to boost their own professional authority in the global arena. By engaging in my epistemological reflections, I endeavour to investigate how the Northern humanitarian system creates itself as “hegemonic.”

Humanitarian action, indeed, is primarily thought of as a phenomenon arising from countries of the Global North, while war-caused displacements and humanitarian interventions, both short and long term, are generally associated with the Global South. Extensive research conducted by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has examined how diverse Southern actors have responded to displacement at a multiscale level, developing local, national, regional, and even transregional forms of support to assist both refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) (see, e.g., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015, 2019, 2018). As demonstrated by the data collected from the research team of the “Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria” project, practitioners from both the Global North and the Global South, who work in international organisations and institutions in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, generally assign authority to professionals trained within the “Global North”

or according to “Northern” principles. In this sense, “Northern-led” here does not necessarily refer to the nationality of the actors involved, but rather to the mainstream ways of thinking and working in humanitarian action as set up in the countries of the Global North, often labelled as “traditional donors” (Mawdsley, 2012).

In this paper, I examine how this “Northern-led” economy of knowledge, which dominates the humanitarian context, can be reproduced by aid workers operating in disparate political geographies. I will further demonstrate how this politics of knowledge proves to be layered in the context of North Lebanon. Approaching the “humanitarian arena” – a term coined by Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) – as an epistemic community and drawing on previous theories that challenge humanitarian self-justificationism (Redfield, 2012; Terry, 2002), I corroborate the belief that (Northern-led) hegemonic humanitarianism is a system that reproduces, cements, and encourages self-indulgent epistemologies.

In advancing this argument, I draw on agnotology theories (McGoey, 2012; Proctor, 2008; Smithson, 2008; Stel, 2017), which shed light on the epistemic politics of the humanitarian system. These range from a type of professional authority claimed to be “universal” to humanitarian self-indulgence with a lack of sufficient knowledge of the linguistic, cultural, political, and social specificities in which the work is carried out. I specifically build on Stel’s work (2017, 2020; Nassar & Stel, 2019) examining the way in which ignorance is produced and maintained in Lebanon’s refugee governance system. From this perspective, ignorance does not “naturally” stem from the public shift from knowing to not-knowing. Agnotology posits ignorance as a deliberate modality of governance and leads to a political reading of what kind of ignorance needs to remain in place (Stel, 2020, p. 188).

By explaining how the idea of “professional authority” is built through a technocratic and unpredictability approach, I conceptualise an epistemic politics able to explain the current failures of humanitarian practices and policies. The behavioural understanding of humanitarianism that I propose can also diagnose the current discontents of the “localisation of aid” agenda, which thrives on the moral alibi of working *through* the local while blaming its failures on the “innate” workings of “Southern” politics and on technical deficiencies in the Global South.

2 | TECHNOCRACY AND UNPREDICTABILITY: TWO FACES OF THE SAME COIN

I attempt to grasp the layered politics of knowledge through the following cues: on the one hand, professional authority is primarily granted to aid workers with standardisable technical experience gained in diverse emergency contexts, although they are rarely equipped with in-depth contextual knowledge. This tendency is proper to humanitarian technocracy, which can be defined as a “universal episteme” (from the Ancient Greek *epistēmē* – the act of knowing and understanding) and is allegedly the product of global negotiations. However, this is instead the inscription of the Global North’s hegemonic forms of humanitarianism as the only professional authority. Technocracy encompasses a set of practices able to rescue and govern disparate geographies affected by crisis. In this sense, technical expertise in the humanitarian labour market is highly valued over context-specific competences (Anderson, 1999; Polman, 2010), marking internationals as “materially heavy and socially light,” and locals as “materially light and socially heavy” (Redfield, 2012, p. 360). On the other hand, the humanitarian actors I encountered in the field tended to defend their own lack of knowledge – and therefore strategically assert their powerlessness – on how the future may ever look in the areas of intervention and on the consequences of their projects. They attributed random meanings to failures and successes as a result of uncertainties inherent in politically volatile contexts such as Lebanon. In this vein, powerlessness and unpredictability are strategised to leave North-defined professional authority unchallenged. Interestingly, this unpredictability approach contradicts humanitarian technocracy, which instead plans, compartmentalises, and assesses programmes that target areas affected by crisis as mere technical conundrums. Unpredictability emerges as a strategic value that reveals a tolerance for the potential failure of humanitarian programming and a certain international “politics of blame” toward indigenous structures and capabilities (Carpi, 2019). Indeed, “legitimation concerns the uses of ignorance to justify actions and choices” and an “evasion of culpability” (Smithson, 2008, p. 221–223) for the sake of what Terry has called a “humanitarian culture of justification” (2002, p. 229).

This self-defensive politics of claiming a right to ignorance, professional limitedness, and powerlessness, whenever contextual responsibility is called out, contributes to constructing certain sites as insecure, inherently unpredictable, and characterised by political and technical deficiency. This persistent attitude (Redfield, 2012; Terry, 2002) points to the ineffectiveness of the current “localisation of aid” efforts, as set out in the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, the Global North’s technocracy, which emerged out of modern humanitarianism, typically intervening in politically unstable ex-colonies (Watenpaugh, 2015), still provides *the* definition of professionalism as well as the grammar

of professional authority. In other words, the local (who is often likely to be a humanitarian professional from the Global South or trained in the Global South) is increasingly invited to participate, facilitate, and take risks in the context of political instability rather than define and transform the rules of the humanitarian game.

The technocratic approach to crisis and a politics of uncertainty leaves the alleged “unpredictable origins” of emergency crises unquestioned. Thus, crises caused by human conflict are practically conceived of as unpredictable “natural” phenomena. Against this backdrop, crises have already been deconstructed in the scholarly literature as predictable outcomes of socio-political processes (Calhoun, 2004, 2008; Ophir, 2010). Deconstructing the “crisis” mantra means emphasising the predictability of the socio-historical roots of crisis and acknowledging “catastrophisation” (Ophir, 2010; Vazquez-Arroyo, 2013) as a convenient means of governance. This enhances resources at a domestic level through international intervention, and legitimises states of exception and extreme security measures while, at the same time, upholding public accountability. In a bid to defend professional accountability as well as their own intentions that underpin humanitarian work, practitioners in North Lebanon have tended to profess their inevitable ignorance about the future impact of their programmes and their presence on the region. They also stressed their powerlessness towards the consequences of humanitarian programming. On the one hand, hegemonic humanitarianism deals with crises as temporally and spatially bound *events*, while they are the very continuation of local and transnational histories. On the other hand, whenever contextual consequences call for profound self-criticism, humanitarians strategically make unpredictability a source of moral alibi while suspending technocracy.

3 | THE ALLIANCE OF MEDIA AND HUMANITARIANISM

During the most recent period of my field research on humanitarianism in North Lebanon, I experienced the dissonance between lived experience and the representation of this experience in the media. Indeed, it is known that humanitarian assistance and the media’s reporting on emergencies work in effective synergy (Brauman, 1996; Franks, 2014). The media needs humanitarian agencies to provide information on the territories in question, while humanitarians in turn rely on the media to deliver visibility and consequently the opportunity to secure funding, protection, and global attention.

As evidence of this, from the perspective of international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) and UN agencies in Akkar (the northern region that has been the focus of my study for a number of years), the sparking of sporadic tensions between humanitarian actors, local residents, and refugees needed to be concealed as part of a humanitarian strategy to preserve local harmony. In this sense, the humanitarian governance bodies were behaving much like states. The region was epistemologically constructed as a “hospitable” space in the international media. This was demonstrated by an episode that occurred in the main Akkar city, Halba, in December 2012, when some Lebanese residents threw stones at humanitarian workers who were distributing food kits to Syrian refugees. This episode was apparently an outburst of tension sparked by local residents who, having been in economic need for a long time in a historically neglected context, were also being ignored by the many humanitarian organisations that increasingly populated the region to assist the refugees. Other local people who had witnessed the episode later confirmed to me that some Lebanese people had thrown the stones to vent their frustration and resentment. The humanitarian agencies operating in the town decided not to report the episode and, as confirmed by a local and a foreign journalist at that time, informally requested that journalists and commentators (who had tried to collect more information on the episode) did not report on the incident. This omission was primarily aimed at preventing the inflammation of further tensions between the local community and Syrian refugees, although, as explained above, the actual friction had arisen between the humanitarian actors and local people. In accordance with the general tendency of humanitarian programming to compartmentalise services according to the nationality of beneficiary groups (Carpi, 2020b), media representations typically rely on “nationalised” descriptions to explain conflict – in this specific case, Lebanese versus Syrians. Indeed, in this case, the media narrative of Lebanese hospitality – and, therefore, the impossibility that a Lebanese person would have thrown a stone at humanitarian workers – served the interest of the aid providers by depicting them as acting in a charitable, compliant, and willing environment: a narrative that ultimately preserves social order.

In this specific case, public ignorance – not only preserved but actively promoted along with a “keep-it-unknown” ethical philosophy – was employed as a modality of governance (Stel, 2017) to preserve social order that could prevent people from knowing, from building a more aware society, and from reducing tensions. This purpose, made explicit in the interview I conducted with an aid worker who witnessed the Akkar accident, seemingly rests on the belief that tensions can be resolved or alleviated if people remain unaware of outbursts of violence and of unrest in their own or other societies. Ignorance, therefore, emerges as an effective token of local stability.

4 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this commentary, the Global North's ways of thinking and working in humanitarian action are interpreted as a self-approved professional authority. I have attempted to outline some salient attitudes of knowing and not knowing that demonstrate the layered epistemic politics of the humanitarian system. In humanitarianism, ignorance is strategically employed to abdicate the professional responsibility derived from the contextual failures of both humanitarian programming and of the very international presence in vulnerable settings. In order to corroborate this idea, I have provided an example of local versus humanitarian tensions, where the maintenance of public ignorance was used as a deceptive tool of local harmony and stability. Making something known or keeping it unknown are thus strategies used to preserve and self-define professional authority.

Ultimately, as the findings of the “Southern Responses to Displacement” project indicate, professional authority is generally ascribed to Northern humanitarian ways of working and thinking. This authority first builds on technocracy, which problematically reasserts Northern competence over Southern areas “in need,” placing the critique beyond the nationality of the professionals who operate on the ground. Second, professional authority builds on the moral alibi of unpredictability. This not-knowing strategy absolves humanitarianism of its failures while trying to maintain professional accountability to the general public and, above all, to the donorship.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were created.

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ENDNOTE

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