

The “hybridisation of humanitarianism”: ordinary citizens in French migrant camps

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In 1968, French doctors decided to travel to Biafra to help the Igbo people. Later, they supported migrants in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Now, working alongside NGOs, ordinary citizens scandalised by the treatment of migrants are mobilising here in France in response to this crisis. In doing so, they are inventing a new way of engaging in humanitarian action.

Since 2015, European migration policies have led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis around the reception of migrants, glaringly exemplified by the shanty town in Calais and the street camps in Paris¹. In these places, a wide range of concerned parties, each with their own rationale, has been mobilized to help migrants survive. Recent reports assert that solidarity among citizens² has been revived, but little analysis has been carried out on its underlying practical, ethical, and political rationales³. To better understand these findings, I will examine both the constant and the reconfigured aspects of humanitarian action via the interventions of “ordinary citizens” working in the migrant camps of Calais and Paris⁴. I will look into the process of “hybridisation of humanitarianism” that has evolved from these improvised citizen initiatives in a highly politicised context: that of a democratic State creating, through its migration policy, its own home-grown humanitarian crisis. My account of the politicisation of ordinary citizens in these humanitarian spheres will lead me to discuss the relationships between humanitarianism and politics. But before presenting the facts, an overview of the historical intermingling of these two concepts appears essential.

¹ Babels, *De Lesbos à Calais: comment l'Europe fabrique des camps*, Éditions du Passager Clandestin, 2017.

² Madeleine Trépanier, “Les Britanniques à Calais. La solidarité européenne à l'échelle locale dans une ville-frontière”, *Multitudes*, vol.3, n°64, 2016, p.82-91; Yasmine Bouagga and Mathilde Pette, “L'aide aux migrants à Calais”, in Céline Leroux and Olivier Pissot, *La Cartographie 2017 des engagements volontaires et solidaires à l'international*, Observatoire de France Volontaires, 2017, p.23-28; Michel Agier et al., *La jungle de Calais: les migrants, la frontière et le camp*, PUF, 2018.

³ Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc, “L'improvisation humanitaire: potentialités et limites des solidarités citoyennes dans les camps de migrants à Calais et à Paris”, *Fondation Croix-Rouge française. Les Papiers de la Fondation*, no15, mai 2018.

⁴ These thoughts emerged from a socio-ethno-graphic survey based on observations and interviews conducted in Calais in the autumn of 2016 and in Paris in the winter of 2017, including studies of two citizen initiatives launched in 2015. This research was carried out following a postdoctoral fellowship in September 2016, as part of the call for projects by the Fond Croix-Rouge française and the Malakoff Méderic group. The results presented in this article are more fully developed in the document cited in note 3.

Humanitarianism and politics: historical intermingling

For nearly fifty years, the “without borders” model, whose origins have been commonly associated with the Biafran war, has influenced successive generations of humanitarians⁵. Humanitarians “without borders”, although claiming to intervene apolitically, have, historically, never ceased being involved in politics⁶. The right to interfere for humanitarian causes and the practice of witnessing are two founding principles that symbolise the uniquely ambiguous relationship between the “without borders” approach and politics. On the one hand, there is the capacity to transcend the sovereignty of States, when exceptional public health, political and ecological circumstances warrant an intervention to rescue people in danger. On the other hand, there is the search for political impact through the media and through public outcry against breaches of human rights in certain contexts of intervention. The history of modern humanitarianism also clearly points to the strategic role that humanitarian organisations have played in the political outcome of some conflicts⁷. This role is sometimes shaped by Western political objectives, as was demonstrated during some of the interventions in Biafra. In addition, humanitarian organisations have historically intervened in the countries of the South in response to crises triggered by their countries of origin for reasons of colonial history, such as the crisis that occurred in Biafra, or today, the ones currently being instigated by Western strategic interests for geopolitical reasons. The crisis that has plagued Afghanistan for several decades is a clear illustration of this⁸. In such contexts, humanitarian ideals are challenged by political interests, and, unavoidably, the numerous detrimental effects of aid rise to the surface: indirect contribution to war economies, manipulation by warring parties and States, absorption of aid into neoliberal economic policies⁹. Created, controlled and at times shaped by political decisions, humanitarian interventions undeniably and inevitably convey the same rhetoric, policies, effects and classifications¹⁰ as in the political sphere. The political history of humanitarianism in the countries of the South finds a particular resonance in the European migrant crisis, in which the actions of ordinary citizens have led humanitarianism through a process of “hybridisation” toward a point midway between improvisation and politicisation.

Domestic humanitarian improvisation

Even though the provision of aid to migrants in Europe seems to indicate that domestic humanitarian aid has made a “comeback”, home-based interventions are not new. This was shown by the French mission set up by Médecins du Monde in 1986, which now runs around one hundred aid programmes offering treatment to help vulnerable populations¹¹. The crisis in

⁵ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Les humanitaires dans la guerre. Des idéaux à l'épreuve de la politique*, La Documentation Française, 2012; Eleanor Davey, “L'action humanitaire au-delà des French doctors”, *Alternatives Humanitaires*, inaugural issue, February 2016, p.10-19.

⁶ Miriam Ticktin, “Where ethics and politics meet: the violence of humanitarianism in France”, *American Ethnologist*, n°33, 2006, p.33-49.

⁷ Boris Martin, *L'Adieu à l'humanitaire? Les ONG au défi de l'offensive néolibérale*, Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer, 2015; Rony Brauman, *Penser dans l'urgence: parcours critique d'un humanitaire*. Interviews with Catherine Portevin, Le Seuil, 2006.

⁸ Christine Delphy, “Une guerre pour les femmes afghanes?”, *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, vol.21, n°1, 2002, p.98-109.

⁹ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Les humanitaires dans la guerre...*, *op. cit.*; Boris Martin, *L'Adieu à l'humanitaire?...*, *op. cit.*; Jérôme Larché, *Le déclin de l'empire humanitaire. L'humanitaire occidental à l'épreuve de la mondialisation*, L'Harmattan, 2017.

¹⁰ Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of care: immigration and the politics of humanitarianism in France*, University of California Press, 2011.

¹¹ Médecins du Monde, “La mission France de Médecins du Monde. Un accès aux soins pour les plus vulnérables”, 2011.

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European humanitarian policies, however, is revealing a shift among humanitarian actors and their practices, with a growing role for intervention by “ordinary citizens”. They are called “volunteers” in Calais and “supporters” in Paris. I call them “ordinary citizens” to the extent that they are individuals from different legal backgrounds who have rallied to the migrant cause, yet who are unconnected to activist movements and somewhat oblivious to the realities and practical application of migration policies to individual lives. Media coverage of horrific situations – depictions of fatalities in the Mediterranean and refugee camps in Europe – as well as the self-perception of their moral responsibility to redress these situations, justify the development of a “humanitarian sensibility”¹² in these individual citizens.

This sensibility, however, forms part of a set of “essential provisos”¹³ that motivate them to take action: a political, intellectual, artistic or religious socialisation, but also personal experience of travelling or of emigration/immigration. In Paris, the presence of migrant camps “at one’s doorstep” was a determining factor in mobilising local residents, who felt as outraged and guilty about the survival conditions forced upon migrants as they were concerned about the maintenance of social harmony in their neighbourhoods¹⁴. In the camps of Calais and Paris, these ordinary citizens intervened in the gaps between the inadequate or non-existent services provided by public authorities and the action of humanitarian NGOs specialising in health and hygiene. Structuring themselves in urgent haste, these citizens improvised day-to-day responses to a plethora of basic needs left unmet by other humanitarian actors: shelter, food, clothing, heating, washing facilities, sanitation and sometimes even health care. Ad hoc organisational management thus emerged as the most effective tool for improvisation through the creation of informal, horizontally-structured collectives, flexible field coordination, casual recruitment of volunteers with informal on-the-job training and a significant turn-over that continuously renewed staff. This improvisation was based on an “à la carte”, “pay-as-you-go” approach that was both flexible and non-committal, where participants were engaged according to their desires and their availability and where logistical work involved intensive use of social networks. Humanitarian action here differs from the operations of large NGOs that are more institutionalised from an organisational point of view. Although they benefit from significant political leverage, large humanitarian organisations have gradually structured themselves internally around managerial imperatives, a logical systematisation of their practices and the professionalisation of actors¹⁵. To this extent, citizen initiatives are an illustration of postmodern organisational changes in humanitarian intervention. Moreover, going beyond the objective of assuring the biological survival of migrants, the day-to-day actions of ordinary citizens gave special value to maintaining their social survival and dignity. Forming interpersonal ties in the field, listening, respecting the choices made, recognising the capacity to act and integrating migrants at all levels of intervention were all at the heart of the ethics of improvisation. It should be noted that, in addition to meeting basic needs, ordinary citizens distributed a wealth of information through various means within the camps. For example, both in Calais and in Paris, improvised French classes not only taught migrants language basics, but became the prime opportunity for migrants to express themselves,

¹² Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility”, *The American Historical Review*, vol.90, n°3, juin 1985, p.547-566.

¹³ Lilian Mathieu, “Les ressorts sociaux de l’indignation militante. L’engagement au sein d’un collectif départemental du Réseau éducation sans frontière”, *Sociologie*, vol.1, n°3, 2010, p.303-318.

¹⁴ Isabelle Coutant, *Les migrants en bas de chez soi*. Le Seuil, 2018.

¹⁵ Pascal Dauvin and Johanna Siméant, *Le travail humanitaire: les acteurs des ONG du siège au terrain*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2002; Ludovic Joxe, “Médecins Sans Frontières: to be professional or not to be?, Study day “Ethnographie des professionnels de l’international”, Lyon, May 2017; Ludovic Joxe, “Les limites du sans-frontiérisme: entre pensée universaliste et action sur-mesure”, Université d’été du RéDoc “Dépasser les frontières”, Strasbourg, June 2017; Peter Redfield, “Chapter Six: Vital Mobility and the Humanitarian Kit”, in Andrew Lakoff and Stephen J. Collier, *Biosecurity Interventions. Global Health & Security in Question*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p.147-171.

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confide in others and share information¹⁶ Volunteer citizens intervened in areas where everyday emergencies were combined with a chronic lack of human resources. They were therefore likely to assume tasks for which they were unqualified. Their interventions, resting on the notion of unskilled labour¹⁷, sometimes worked against their intended objective and called humanitarian “best practice” into question. Moreover, their “non-binding” involvement has proven to be illusory. Ordinary citizens have tended to throw themselves body and soul into helping migrants, to overinvest themselves to the point of exhaustion and, in doing so, sometimes to question certain aspects (professional, social, emotional) of their own personal lives. Either way, it has led them to redefine the boundaries of their daily existence¹⁸. The improvisation of humanitarian aid is limited to an extent that challenges the transfer of public action to ordinary citizens. Beyond the emergency humanitarian mobilisation, the intervention of ordinary citizens in favour of migrants has led to an unavoidable political clash with migrant policies in France.

When humanitarianism gets involved in politics: “liaisons dangereuses”

In this sense, the improvisation of humanitarianism has proved particularly conducive to the State’s exploitation of citizen resources. When the Calais camp was torn down, I showed how the legitimacy of the ordinary citizens in the eyes of the migrants was used to ensure that the intervention was indeed “humanitarian” and how this aid allowed the government do the dismantling undercover¹⁹. In this way, the public authorities were satisfied that they could provide only a minimal amount of relief without fearing that migrants would die in the camps, because they could use citizen resources as a stopgap without having to respond to their grievances. This was bitterly pointed out by the coordinator of a citizen collective group. Thus, with a blend of frustration and relief, supporters in Paris read in the press release published by MSF in January 2017 that they had done “a fantastic job for months”. Yet they felt unheard by government authorities, despite giving the same warnings as the NGO when migrants were violently evicted by police forces one night in December 2016. Home-based humanitarian action appears here as a fundamental aspect of public action, allowing the State to apply borderline legal policies antagonistic to migrants while barely responding to warning calls from humanitarians it considers as legitimate. MSF’s intervention in the media, immediately followed by the local government’s extension of the “truce” preventing people from being evicted in winter to people living in slums, tents, and makeshift shelters, underscored the extent to which major humanitarian NGOs have historically built their capacity for “getting in the way” and, unlike ordinary citizens, have enjoyed the privilege of calling into question the action or inaction of States, including France²⁰. Previous research into commitment to the migrant cause among traditional activists who fight for foreigners’ rights points to the apparent tensions created in passing from advocacy to humanitarian action²¹. In Paris, as in Calais, some citizen collective groups first adopted an activist stance, claiming that making sandwiches and distributing blankets were political acts. This was done through broad-based communication on social networks, alerts issued to public authorities and high street presence²². The citizen initiatives I have examined

¹⁶ Babels, *Entre accueil et rejet. Ce que les villes font aux migrants*, Éditions du Passager Clandestin, 2018; Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc, “L’improvisation humanitaire...”, art. cit., p.16-17.

¹⁷ Madeleine Trépanier, “Les Britanniques à Calais...”, art. cit.

¹⁸ Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc, “Un migrant chez soi”, *Esprit*, vol.7-8, n°446, July-August 2018, p.122-129.

¹⁹ Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc, “L’humanitaire instrumentalisé à Calais”, *Plein droit*, n°112, March 2017, p.32-35.

²⁰ Boris Martin, *L’Adieu à l’humanitaire? ...*, *op. cit.*

²¹ Mathilde Pette, “Les associations dans l’impasse humanitaire?”, *Plein droit*, no104, March 2015, p.22-26.

²² Julie Sebahoun, “Et maintenant, on s’installe où ?” *Ethnographie de trois campements d’exilés, entre février et mai 2016, sous le métro de Stalingrad à Paris*, Mémoire de Master 2 d’Anthropologie, Université Paris Descartes, 2016.

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have moved in the opposite direction, from emergency humanitarian intervention to politicisation. Resulting from ordinary citizens learning of the indecent political treatment of migrants in France²³, this process was not followed by any recognition of their legitimacy in contributing to the public debate. Ordinary citizens were tolerated by the public authorities as long as they stuck to their emergency humanitarian interventions. However, when denouncing political decisions and the resulting misapplication of security measures, they became just as unpalatable to the governmental authorities as the migrants. Thus, in positioning themselves in the gaps left by humanitarian organisations and political policymakers, ordinary citizens find it difficult to make their voice heard.

They are either exploited, disqualified, made accountable or criminalised²⁴. In the French context, this reality sheds new light on the “myth of public humanitarianism”²⁵. It shows how humanitarian aid is used by the State to respond to the contradictions in its own policies, while de-legitimising or even criminalising citizens who develop humanitarian responses for the survival of migrants.

Constancy and transformation

This article gives special attention to the constancy and the transformation of domestic humanitarianism and, more particularly, to the permeability of the fine line between the humanitarian and political spheres. It does so, on the one hand, by redefining the contours, principles, and fundamental values of the modern humanitarian world, since the political crisis arising from the reception of migrants has led ordinary citizens to innovate in home-grown humanitarian interventions. On the other hand, it reviews the mechanisms of humanitarian instrumentalisation in light of the politicisation of humanitarians. The study of these initiatives thus suggests a process of hybridisation of humanitarianism. This includes humanitarians themselves and the principles and ranges of their interventions, in which humanitarian responses are organised around everyday life; logistics and moral standards, associated with flexible “à la carte”, “pay-as-you-go” management; principles of solidarity, urgency, social bonding and political demands that converge and are channelled together within both physical and virtual spaces. Humanitarianism has taken on an added dimension and has gradually become part of the daily life of a large number of people who were previously unconnected to this humanitarian world. This can generate limitations and the risk of abuse. Even if there has been a visible turnover of people involved in humanitarian aid and a reconfiguration of their practices, their gradual politicisation, situated midway between response²⁶ and exploitation²⁷, has given new meaning to the liaisons dangereuses that have always existed between the humanitarian and political spheres.

²³ Avishai Margalit, *La société décente*, Flammarion, 2007.

²⁴ See, among other things, the high-profile judicial summons of two citizens in Paris for the organisation of a rally in the summer of 2016: www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/081116/refugies-houssam-et-aubepine-poursuivis-pour-avoir-organise-un-rassemblement?onglet=full ; www.lemonde.fr/immigration-et-diversite/article/2016/08/23/migrants-qui-se-cache-vraiment-sous-le-benevole-parisien_4986671_1654200.html ; www.exilesparis.org/fr/2016/08/09/un-long-dimanche-de-garde-a-vue-par-aubepine/ ; www.philomag.com/lactu/passage-a-lacte/aubepine-dahan-ce-quaider-veut-dire-20377

²⁵ Fabien Dubuet, “Le mythe de l’humanitaire d’État”, *Humanitaire*, n°7, 2003, p.53-59.

²⁶ Thierry Brigaud, “Migrants: la riposte humanitaire”, *Humanitaire. Enjeux, pratiques, débats*, n°33, 2012.

²⁷ Claire Arjun, “De l’humanitaire comme outil de dissuasion en Grèce”, *Alternatives Humanitaires*, n°5, juillet 2017, p.14-29; Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc, “L’humanitaire instrumentalisé à Calais...”, art. cit.

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

Biography • Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc

With a PhD in sociology, Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc is interested in the administrative, social, and healthcare experiences of migrants in France and in the humanitarian and citizen solidarity practices that have shaped them. Her doctoral thesis, written at CEPED with the support of Sidaction and the Pierre Bergé Endowment Fund, focused on the voluntary mobilisation of migrant women from sub-Saharan Africa advocating the cause of HIV. She then conducted research on the issues arising from the growing number of aid providers in migrant camps in Calais and Paris, thanks to a postdoctoral grant from the French Red Cross Foundation and the Malakoff Médéric group. Affiliated with the EHESS, she is currently conducting postdoctoral research, co-funded by the Paris City Council as part of the ANR Babels programme, around the rationale behind individual hospitality for migrants in Île-de-France based on a study of how they are accommodated by local residents.

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