

The place of the child in humanitarian action and communication: moving away from the cliché of childhood as icon

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The war that is currently raging in Ukraine has already produced numerous images of children, replicas of thousands of others that emerge as soon as adults take up arms. They move us and haunt us. They should also raise questions.

A century ago, on 23 February 1923, the first declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted in Geneva. Under the aegis of the International Save the Children Union, it established a global movement in the wake of the First World War, ranging from the large-scale opening of canteens to the expansion of the market for powdered milk by way of transnational action to bring an end to child labour.¹ Almost a century later, the image of the child largely dominates the communications media issued by humanitarian organisations, which rely heavily on the figure of the innocent, hungry or wounded child to raise funds. In doing so, they often promote a reductive vision of childhood, part idealised, part martyred – the figure of a child as icon.

Although this trope has long been criticised, it shows no signs of going away. This is to say nothing of the notorious abuses to which the figure of the child in danger has given rise, from the scandal of stolen children in Chad by members of *L'Arche de Zoé* in 2007 to the trade in fake orphanages in Nepal that emerged following the earthquake of 2015 encouraged by the growing and lucrative business of “voluntourism”.

The use of the iconography of childhood in the humanitarian field has already been the subject of numerous research projects over the past twenty years,² but with the recurring problems it raises today in the face of multiple humanitarian issues, it merits further examination. The exploitation of childhood-martyrdom as a front for compassionate geopolitics has indeed increased in recent years, thanks to numerous cases of social media hype. The photograph of Alan Kurdi, the Kurdish child found dead on a Turkish beach in September 2015 (whose photograph was shared on Twitter by the emergency director of Human Rights Watch), remains the most striking example. Since then, many responses have been issued by other parties with different motivations. Remember, for example, the controversial cases of Omran Daqneesh, a young Syrian boy whose bloodied face in an ambulance

¹ Yves Denéchère, « Les parrainages d'enfants étrangers au 20^e siècle : Une histoire de relations interpersonnelles transnationales », *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, n° 126, avril-juin 2015, p. 147-161 ; Valérie Gorin, « L'enfance comme figure compassionnelle : étude transversale de l'iconographie de la famine aux dix-neuvième et vingtième siècles », *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, vol. 22, n° 6, 2015, p. 940-962 ; Julia F. Irwin, “Sauvons les Bébés: Child Health and U.S. Humanitarian Aid in the First World War Era”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2012, pp. 37–65.

² Erica Burman, “Innocents abroad: Western fantasies of childhood and the iconography of emergencies”, *Disasters*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1993, pp. 238–253; Heide Fehrenbach, “Children and other civilians: photography and the politics of humanitarian image-making”, in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 165–199; Kate Manzo, “Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood”, *Antipode*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2008, pp. 632–657; Laura Suski, “Children, suffering, and the humanitarian appeal”, in Richard Wilson and Richard Brown (eds.), *Humanitarianism and Suffering. The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 202–222.

was broadcast by local photographers in August 2016, or the photograph featuring the Turkish president Erdogan with Bana al-Abed, a 7-year-old Syrian girl who told the story of the war from Aleppo before being evacuated by Turkey in December 2016. Two media cases in which the image of children at risk – reposted *ad nauseam* on social networks – has been exploited for the benefit of a political regime directly involved in the Syrian armed conflict.

Yet we are still struggling to identify new ways of portraying childhood in suffering or at war. Consider the issue of child soldiers, whose image is still largely reduced to one of boys fighting and girls turned into sex slaves, whereas the reality is more complex, as well as the reintegration of children into the communities involved. The same goes for the action of non-governmental organisations in favour of the de-radicalisation of child soldiers of the Islamic State or the children of jihadists, detained in Iraq or Syria, which remains hesitant and seldom discussed. We should also mention the aid programmes on gender and sexual violence, which have benefited from wide exposure in recent years, even though they prioritise women victims of abuse, to the detriment of children. Humanitarian organisations are effectively more reluctant to directly mention the sexual exploitation of children, or the abuses committed by some of their staff, even as denunciations of paedophilia are multiplying in Catholic circles, as evidenced by the latest report of the Sauvé Commission in France.

This new focus theme aims to take stock of these issues by challenging the taboos linked to the classic vision of idealised childhood and transcending the classic attributes of unsafe childhood, namely innocence and disempowerment. Sophie Nakueira's ethnographic work amongst refugee children in Uganda therefore demonstrates how raising the child to the status of an icon of vulnerability serves the humanitarian project, to the detriment of a more realistic contextualisation of resilient childhood. This concern has prompted humanitarian organisations to develop or revise codes of ethical conduct to take into account the over-representation of children in humanitarian appeals, including the issue of consent and accountability.³

In addition, multiple sectors of international aid take the identity, autonomy and participation of young beneficiaries into account, as evidenced by the advocacy of Kirstin Kreyscher and Sofie Lilli Stoffel about the benefits of child-oriented programmes. Many projects are flourishing in the areas of natural risk reduction and post-conflict demobilisation and disarmament, which include an active approach with regards to children, from needs assessments to the setting up of specific activities in spaces adapted to young people. And yet, is this salutary development commensurate with the social, legislative and emotional changes taking place in other sectors of social life, such as education, care or the family environment, which bear witness to new sensitivities and representations of the child? By analysing the management of suffering children in Doctors Without Borders' care programmes in Chad, Elba Rahmouni and Olivier Guillard point out the extent to which the treatment of pain in children in developing countries is ignored, even though it has recently been acknowledged in Western countries. Another important turning point was the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations in 1989, which recognised their autonomy and right of expression. This new approach to child protection, explored in the interviews conducted by Camille Maubert in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and by Dustin Ciufu in Haiti, promotes the image of participative and resilient childhood.

³ See for example: Siobhan Warrington and Jess Crombie, *The people in the pictures. Vital perspectives on Save the Children's image making*, Save the Children, March 2017, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/the_people_in_the_pictures.pdf; Siobhan Warrington, *Ethical content guidelines. Upholding the rights of the people in the pictures in content gathering, management and us*, Oxfam, January 2020, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/ethical-content-guidelines-upholding-the-rights-of-the-people-in-the-pictures-i-620935>

The contributions presented in this issue ultimately question the global shift in the light of paradoxes which are still too frequently observed in the humanitarian field: an overemphasis on the child perceived as a figure of otherness and reduced to the status of a victim, in a colonial and protective perspective inherited from the nineteenth century, to the detriment of a more realistic representation of children as thinking, active beings, naturally with all due consideration for the constraints inherent in their condition. The Ukrainian tragedy unfolding before our eyes reminds us of these issues.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

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