Humanitarianism

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Humanitarianism can be broadly understood as a concern with human suffering and a moral desire to alleviate it. It manifests not only through discrete acts of helping, but also through a set of practices, norms, laws, and forms of government. The urgency of humanitarian causes is regularly invoked to justify the large-scale mobilisation of people and resources. They provide anthropologists with a critical site for studying the structural tension between two competing impulses within humanitarianism: the ethical yearning to alleviate suffering, and the political inclination to control suffering populations.

This entry explores four main areas of anthropological scholarship on humanitarianism. First, anthropologists have examined the political implications of the humanitarian management of suffering populations, with its emphasis on fostering physical survival. Second, they have developed critiques of humanitarian ethics, particularly in relation to how lives are valued differently within Western humanitarianism, and the political and moral weight carried by the word ‘humanitarian’. Third, anthropologists have interrogated the concept of crisis, with a focus on how local communities are transformed by the routine presence of humanitarians in protracted conflicts or disasters. Finally, they have explored non-Western humanitarian practices rooted in different traditions of care and different scales of action.

As climate change impacts prospects for human life in vulnerable areas of the world, it is likely that climate-induced displacement crises will only grow more common and prolonged. Humanitarianism’s definitions, boundaries, and limits will also shift in response, offering anthropologists an important terrain of inquiry into how societies frame, mitigate, and manage the suffering of others.

Introduction

In the public imagination, the term ‘humanitarian’ invokes a concern for human suffering and a motivation to alleviate it in some form. It gestures to an altruism borne of the recognition of a shared humanity with distant others. One need only think of humanitarian appeals launched on TV, social media, or billboards to see how representations of the suffering of others might inspire an urge to act (Boltanski 2004), be it through donations, volunteering, or public support for governmental action. These sentiments can mobilise people and resources on a large scale in response to disruptive events with devastating human impacts, such as armed conflicts and disasters. Given the scope and reach of humanitarian deployments, it is vital to understand their inner workings and their unintended consequences. This is particularly important because the concept of humanitarianism can be used by different actors for different purposes and in different contexts, ranging from calls for emergency assistance in the aftermath of earthquakes to justifications for military interventions with the purported aim of saving lives. As a contested concept with multiple meanings and uses, humanitarianism offers an especially rich and productive site of research for

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anthropology.

One of the enduring origin stories of humanitarianism dates its creation to the establishment of the Red Cross by Henry Dunant in response to the suffering he witnessed at the Battle of Solferino in 1859. In its early years, the Red Cross primarily provided medical assistance to soldiers wounded in battle, though the organisation would later expand its scope to include civilians affected by war and disasters. Today, the sector is represented by United Nations (UN) agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), in partnership with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) including *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders, or MSF), Oxfam, Save the Children, among others. The Red Cross has also grown into a more complex institution, with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) being a private entity under Swiss law, while national Red Cross Societies such as the British Red Cross or the Syrian Arab Red Crescent function as appendices of the states where they are based. Each of these organisations has different mandates and modes of operation, but they generally share an emphasis on prioritising urgent needs through specialised life-sustaining aid, including medical care, shelter, and food assistance. It is important to note, however, that these organisations comprise a highly institutionalised and largely Western mould of humanitarianism, originating and headquartered in Global North countries, whereas there are other forms of humanitarian aid espoused by religious, community, and grassroots actors both within and outside the West that are not encompassed by the formal Western aid system (Brković 2023).

Early scholarly critiques of Western humanitarianism highlighted how humanitarian actors took 'war as a fact', in the sense that they sought to remedy not the root causes of war but the suffering that resulted from it. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross in its foundational tenets acknowledged the persistence of war in modern life, and sought to collaborate with all parties to conflict—including states and non-state armed groups—to humanise its conduct and minimise the suffering it caused (Kennedy 2004, 267). Such a narrow focus on suffering, however, failed to consider how aid could fuel the conditions for further conflict. Numerous examples exist from conflict zones across the world where aid has been diverted by armed groups to sustain the fighting, or fomented violence and resentment between different groups, or used to recruit new soldiers from refugee camps and settlements. In particular, the figure of the 'refugee-warrior' benefiting from aid poses a moral and political conundrum for aid workers working to provide humanitarian sanctuaries in the midst of war (Terry 2002).

Scholars have also criticised humanitarianism for its historical complicity with Western colonialism and imperialism, and for the continued instrumentalisation of aid to serve the geopolitical and national security interests of donor countries in the Global North (Barnett 2011; Donini 2012). Governments throughout the twentieth century have justified military actions on humanitarian grounds, from India's intervention in East Pakistan in 1971 to NATO air strikes in Kosovo in 1999 (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). While these actions have not necessarily involved the explicit cooperation of humanitarian INGOs, the United States' long war

in Afghanistan from 2001 until 2021 co-opted aid organisations into counter-insurgency programs aimed at 'winning hearts and minds' among local communities through developmental aid and reconstruction efforts (Williamson 2011). While this entry primarily focuses on the values and practices of aid actors rather than states, we discuss the growing entanglement between humanitarianism and development and its implications for the independence of aid organisations from geopolitical agendas.

Anthropology has contributed to these debates by questioning the foundational notion that humanitarianism is an inherently altruistic enterprise, and by interrogating the power relations that underpin the humanitarian endeavour. Anthropologists have asked: what does it mean to help 'suffering others'? Who is being helped and how are their lives valued? Who is providing assistance and what motivates them? The discipline helps answer these questions through sustained ethnographic inquiries into the everyday operations of humanitarian organisations, and the social, political, and ethical implications of the humanitarian drive to help. In particular, it points to a structural tension between two competing impulses within humanitarianism: the ethical yearning to alleviate suffering, and the political inclination to control suffering populations. The anthropological approach to humanitarianism as 'an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government' (Ticktin 2014, 274) captures this tension.

Other anthropologists have challenged the predominant focus of scholarship on Western institutionalised forms of humanitarianism, and have pushed for a broader understanding of the concept that encapsulates grassroots mutual aid initiatives led and implemented by vulnerable people themselves (Brković 2020). After all, impacted populations are often 'first responders' to crises through mutual aid networks involving community, religious, and local organisations, blurring the boundaries between the 'providers' and 'recipients' of aid (Fechter 2023). Large-scale responses organised by UN agencies, INGOs, and foreign governments arrive later as a crisis garners international attention, displacing local interpretations of humanitarian giving with professional guidelines and principles.

Biopolitics and the management of populations

The gradual institutionalisation of Western humanitarianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took place at a time when ideas about the state's responsibility to care for its citizens assumed growing legitimacy (Glasman 2020). Anthropological studies of humanitarianism are therefore profoundly influenced by the concept of 'biopolitics', which refers to governmental techniques and procedures that aim 'to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order' (Foucault 1998, 138). Biopolitics encompasses a range of practices and institutions established to regulate the health, reproduction, and sexuality of the biological body based on hierarchical ideas about normality and deviance. Humanitarian actors can be thought of as exercising a form of biopolitics in contexts where state actors are either absent or incapable of safeguarding life (Fassin 2007b; Pandolfi 2003; Redfield 2005; Ticktin 2014).

Much of the anthropological writing on this area has analysed the biopolitical logics and rationales espoused by humanitarian INGOs in the management of populations they purport to help. MSF, for example, enacts a 'minimal biopolitics' (Redfield 2013, 18) as they temporarily administer to lives perceived to be in immediate danger—providing medical assistance to endangered populations in conflict zones and ceasing operations once they deem the crisis is over. The INGO's decision-making on the deployment and withdrawal of personnel is based on assessments of the magnitude of life-threatening needs, such as medical care or child nutrition, and critics have noted instances when MSF waited for the crisis to grow more aggravated before establishing a field mission (Redfield 2013). This focus on temporary solutions prioritises immediate survival but does little to ensure the long-term dignity and empowerment of vulnerable people.

Another key site for the exertion of humanitarian biopolitics is the refugee camp. The refugee camp represents a 'biopolitical figure par excellence' (Fassin 2010a, 81), where bodies are contained, disciplined, and sustained towards a potentially indefinite future. An early ethnographic study of Burundian refugees in Tanzania described the representation of refugees in public and policy discourse as a form of 'bare humanity', a living body presumed to have lost all its cultural and identitarian inheritances (Malkki 1995, 11). This work presaged later critiques of humanitarian action that centred on what form of life is possible in refugee camps. Drawing from the concept of 'bare life' (Agamben 1998)—which denotes a form of persecuted humanity reduced to its basic biological existence—anthropologists argued that refugee camps are zones of exception that sustain people only at the level of physical survival and prevent them from realising their full biographical selves as social and political beings (Agier 2011; Diken and Laustsen 2006; Hanafi and Long 2010; McConnachie 2016). Such framings of refugees as 'bare life' presupposed an ethnically homogenous nation-state as the 'natural order of things', from which refugees were excluded as demographically threatening outsiders (Malkki 1995).

In recent years, anthropologists have questioned the notion that refugees are merely passive subjects of humanitarian management, or that refugee camps are little more than temporary way-stations without a lived history of their own. A growing body of ethnographic work on camps has pointed to the political agency, heterogeneous identities, place-making practices, and transgenerational memory of refugees living in long-term camps. Palestinian camps in particular have fostered a robust national liberation movement, which imbues everyday spaces with intense political significance (Allan 2014; Gabiam 2016; Peteet 2005). Similarly, Burundian Hutus living in Tanzanian camps during the 1980s developed new expressions of Hutu identity anchored in shared narratives of victimisation and memories of violent displacement. In their case, the camp represented a locus of 'purity' that protected Hutu identity from contamination through assimilation (Malkki 1995). In other words, refugee camps over time become invested with a 'politics of living' (Feldman 2018), revealing how refugees not only survive, but strive, thrive, and contest their devaluation as 'bare life'.

Beneficiaries of aid also reshape the terms of their humanitarian protection. For example, as the French government tightened its immigration policies in the early 2000s, it introduced a humanitarian exception for undocumented immigrants with life-threatening illnesses that could not access adequate medical treatment in their country of origin. Facing stricter bureaucratic requirements and longer wait times, many immigrants translated their narratives of suffering into medical categories, or even deliberately infected themselves in order to qualify for medical asylum, thereby leveraging the diseased body as an object of humanitarian concern (Ticktin 2006; 2011). Paradoxically, their survival depended on their very exposure to vulnerability (Ticktin 2006). 'Bare life' in these instances is not associated with passive victimhood, but points to the myriad ways in which migrants wield their biological vulnerability as a form of capital. Taken together, this literature on humanitarian biopolitics reveals that international aid wields enormous managerial power over the subjects it governs while being actively contested and appropriated by those subjects as well.

Humanitarian ethics

In 1965, the Red Cross established seven fundamental principles governing humanitarian practices—humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality—which have since found widespread adoption across the aid sector (International Committee of the Red Cross 2015). Taken together, these principles embody a form of secular morality committed to the sacred but material value of all life (Redfield 2012a). Furthermore, humanitarian morality serves as a governing framework that extends beyond formal humanitarian institutions and may be invoked by state and non-state actors alike. Didier Fassin (2007a) calls this a form of 'humanitarian government'. Concerns around the formulation of ethical objectives and processes in governmental affairs has garnered keen interest from anthropologists studying the intersections between life, health, and suffering (Daniel 1996; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). One of the core challenges they raise pertains to the ethical ideal of humanity that underpins humanitarian action. During the early years of the Iraq War, for instance, a worsening security outlook compelled MSF to terminate its operations in the country, evacuate its staff, and leave behind vulnerable populations unassisted (Fassin 2010b). Humanitarians thus produced a 'politics of life' by establishing a hierarchy of humanity between the lives deemed worthy of saving and those left to perish (Fassin 2007b; 2012).

This hierarchy also manifests among aid workers themselves. Ethnographies of humanitarian diplomacy have revealed how local aid workers skilfully leverage their identities to negotiate humanitarian access in places torn apart by ethnic strife (James 2022; Pottier 2006). However, even as they are uniquely positioned to deliver aid in areas inhospitable to international staff, local aid workers also face greater risks to their own safety and more limited prospects for career progression within the organisations that employ them. Transnational border regimes permit humanitarian staff from the Global North to travel more easily

between countries, usually along geographical circuits established by colonial history (Redfield 2012b). Meanwhile, aid workers hired locally by INGOs from the Global South frequently do not have the option to evacuate if their lives are endangered, or receive the same standard of international care should they fall ill (Benton Forthcoming).

In the context of the Syrian Civil War, for example, restrictions on the entry of foreign nationals into the country placed the responsibility of providing humanitarian assistance entirely onto Syrian aid workers. While shouldering the risk of navigating an active warzone, these local humanitarian teams were nevertheless managed by INGOs with offices in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, with major policy decisions being taken by senior leadership predominantly from the Global North (Fradejas-García 2019). Even within the humanitarian sector, therefore, human lives are valued differently according to their race, gender, nationality, and other markers of social difference (Firoz and Lima 2024). The 'politics of life' maintains hierarchies between not only aid workers and refugees, but between different categories of aid workers as well.

At an institutional level, the ethical principle of neutrality dictates that humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities in order to secure trust by all parties involved and maintain access to vulnerable populations. While a neutral stance appears to position humanitarians 'beyond politics', anthropologists point out that this claim to neutrality is also a tactical one, as aid workers regularly engage in political negotiations with warring parties behind closed doors (Redfield 2012a; Malkki 2015, 174). Rather than simply retreating from politics, neutrality is deployed as a political strategy toward political actors, constituting 'an impossible or negative form of politics' (Redfield 2010a). Such paradoxes in humanitarian logics represent what Fassin calls 'aporias', which, 'contrary to contradictions, are not a matter of organisational dysfunction but rather of the dysfunction intrinsic to their very functioning' (2010c, 50). These aporias have been constitutive of Western humanitarianism from its very inception, and at the same time remain insurmountable for the success of its mandate.

Another question related to humanitarian ethics is the political weight carried by the attribution of the term 'humanitarian'. Humanitarianism is an unstable concept and claims to being humanitarian have to be maintained through constant 'ethical labour', which can be described as 'an ethical practice that join[s] concern for others with care of the self' (Feldman 2007; cited in Brada 2016). For example, in an HIV clinic in Botswana where American healthcare staff worked alongside with national staff, the former's claim to be 'humanitarian' engendered a sense of 'unquestionable technical and moral superiority' that disregarded the ethical commitments and expertise of their Motswana counterparts (Brada 2016, 757).

Even for beneficiaries of aid, the ethical claim to humanitarian relief carries important political connotations. Palestinians have resisted for decades the framing of aid they receive from the UN as 'development'—broadly construed as the long-term improvement of human life—and insisted on a

humanitarian narrative that highlights the transience of their status as refugees (Gabiam 2012). Here, the appeal to humanitarian aid is not only pitched as a global right, but rather, amplifies the urgency of their predicament. Like the immigrants who leverage their biological vulnerability, Palestinians leverage their status as humanitarian subjects to demand a political solution that guarantees their right to return to their lands.

Finally, it is worth noting that anthropological critiques of humanitarian ethics do not dismiss the ethical commitments of individual aid workers, but rather, address the systems and structures within which they perform their ethical labour. In her ethnography of the Finnish Red Cross, Malkki (2015) questions the tendency of critics to trivialise small gestures of humanitarian care, such as making toys or weaving blankets, as being insufficient for real structural transformation. Rather than simply equating the 'real' with the grand ambitions of geopolitics, she calls for scholars to take the sentimental practices of humanitarians seriously as a form of 'imaginative politics' that is rooted in culturally specific modes of helping. Such an analytical orientation resonates closely with how anthropologists describe the mandate for an anthropological approach to morality and the social good, which requires attending 'to 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' (Robbins 2013, 457). In other words, anthropology does not adopt a moralising or normative stance on humanitarian action itself, but rather, empirically traces what moral commitments mean to aid workers themselves and how they are practiced, challenged, and transformed during humanitarian emergencies.

The politics of 'crisis'

The large-scale mobilisation of humanitarian interventions relies on the naming of specific sites as 'emergencies' or 'crises'. The label of crisis evokes the sense of a temporary interruption in social order, an 'unpredictable event emerging against a background of ostensible normalcy' that will eventually be succeeded by the return to normalcy (Calhoun 2013, 30). The declaration of crisis produces a temporality of urgency that demands immediate action, and cultivates moral clarity for humanitarian actors to intervene (Redfield 2013; Calhoun 2004; Roitman 2014). However, by virtue of this logic of naming, situations that remain 'on the verge of crisis' or in 'states of permanent emergency' are sometimes confounded with the 'ordinary'—a non-site for humanitarianism—leaving aid organisations in a state of ethical uncertainty, constantly renegotiating the terms of their engagement (Redfield 2010b; Pandolfi 2010). Ethnographies that address the categorisation of crisis situations, and the potentially novel sites and modes of operation that emerge from this exercise, are therefore especially useful for uncovering the 'complexities, limits and boundaries' of humanitarianism as it responds to new challenges (Ticktin 2014, 283).

There are many areas of protracted conflict or displacement where humanitarian actors have been at work

for decades. Anthropologists have analysed these contexts to inquire how crises are experienced and understood by the populations impacted by them, in some cases over multiple generations. Haiti is one such context. The country has seen waves of civil unrest, authoritarian rule, and gang violence since the 1990s, coupled with disasters such as the catastrophic 2010 earthquake, a cholera epidemic in its aftermath, and more recently the disintegration of the country's state apparatus. Haiti was often dubbed a 'Republic of NGOs', characterising the prolonged administration of life during this period by aid organisations, with international funding being channelled mainly to humanitarian and development actors rather than the country's own government (Schuller 2017). As aid came to encompass all aspects of daily living, the presence and logics of humanitarian care became banal (Beckett 2019). Anthropologists make a similar point about the decades-long displacement of Palestinians, for whom crisis is a 'condition of life' and whose everyday survival hinges upon their claims on humanitarian rights (Feldman 2012). In such contexts, everyday life is saturated with layers of crises past and present, such that the very idea of crisis becomes ordinary. Put differently, crisis becomes 'an atmosphere – the often invisible outer layer of life that surrounds us, envelops us, and comes to be taken for granted or even ignored' (Beckett 2020, 79).

Narratives of crisis can also be rendered useful to neoliberal governing strategies. We might look at the recent shift among aid organisations towards an auditorial approach to aid: instead of engaging directly with vulnerable communities during a crisis, the ICRC has pivoted to tutoring state actors or armed groups on monitoring threats and violations through the collection of data, the production of indicators, and the use of risk management tools (Billaud 2020; Lima 2022). In Rio de Janeiro, for example, a humanitarian programme created by ICRC trained healthcare workers on how to promote their own safety while also protecting their patients from the risk of gun violence, since local police did not operate effectively in territories controlled by drug-trafficking gangs (Lima 2022).

Aid organisations have similarly adopted a 'managerial orientation' that frames refugees as an economic burden for host states and advocates strategies to mitigate the burden through international cooperation (Calhoun 2013, 41). For Global South countries where the large majority of the world's displaced population resides, such strategies also offer unique economic opportunities. Under the auspices of building refugee resilience and self-reliance, UN agencies have negotiated livelihood rights for refugees in exchange for exploiting their labour to benefit the developmental agendas of host states (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018; Skran and Easton-Calabria 2020). For instance, the Jordan Compact launched in 2016 committed the host government to providing vocational training, the formalisation of Syrian businesses, and the provisioning of temporary work permits for Syrian refugees in designated labour sectors, in exchange for US $1.7 billion in international assistance and trade concessions for Jordanian exports to Europe (Lenner and Turner 2019). This approach was formalised in 2018 into the Global Compact on Refugees between donors and aid organisations, providing a blueprint for future humanitarian responses to mass displacement.

Humanitarian crises are thus used by states to advance the frontiers of what scholars have called ‘disaster capitalism’, forcing open new territories and economic sectors to capital accumulation (Gunewardana and Schuller 2008; Klein 2007; Swamy 2021). At the same time, the promise of development is designed to incentivise refugee integration in the Global South and prevent their onward migration to the Global North. This multi-pronged approach to aid, often referred to as the ‘humanitarian–development nexus’ (Lie 2020; Strand 2020) or in some cases the ‘humanitarian–development–security’ nexus (Riggan and Poole 2024), anchors the legitimacy of humanitarian efforts to the national interests of host states and the security agendas of donor states, which many scholars and practitioners consider a betrayal of core humanitarian values such as neutrality and independence.

De-centring Western humanitarianism

Recent anthropological scholarship has attempted to de-centre the analytical focus on Western institutionalised humanitarianism by turning its attention to humanitarian practices rooted in different traditions of care and different scales of action. The principles guiding these alternative forms of humanitarianism can differ markedly from the Red Cross principles espoused by international organisations, and are often more consonant with cultural notions of mutual aid and communal solidarity found among grassroots networks that emerge in response to emergencies. To understand these ‘vernacular humanitarianisms’, anthropologists propose to interrogate ‘what people in a certain place understand as ‘human’, ‘humanity’, or ‘humanitarian’, and then to build an analysis from there’ (Brković 2023, 9).

Displaced communities in Myanmar, for example, routinely alternate between the positions of aid provider and aid recipient depending on their circumstances: those who are helped might shift to helping others once they are settled (Fechter and May 2024). Similarly, Greek humanitarians helping migrants (*solidarians*) during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ in the Mediterranean actively refused the labels of ‘volunteer’, ‘beneficiaries’, or ‘services’ when describing their motivations, insisting instead on a principle of solidarity based on horizontal, non-hierarchal relations (Rozakou 2017). These cases of Myanmar and Greece are not uncommon, and highlight the value of letting in-depth ethnographic research inform our understanding of how people invest the concepts of humanitarianism and humanity with meaning (Brković 2023).

We may alternatively examine how states and civil society in the non-Western world mobilise aid for distant others by drawing on different articulations of suffering, rights, and humanity (Osanloo and Robinson 2024). Anthropologists have drawn our attention to an older genealogy of humanitarian care rooted in the Hindu concept of *dān*, which refers to the sacred virtue of charity considered essential for spiritual liberation in Hinduism (Bornstein 2012). Whereas the anthropology of humanitarianism often separates religious philanthropy from professional humanitarianism, the shared symbolism of the ‘gift’ binds both institutionalised redistribution and individual acts of giving to shifting notions of citizenship and the

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entitlements it affords. Similarly, the concept of *zakat* undergirding Islamic humanitarianism is seen by its adherents not as a voluntary virtue but as a form of 'financial worship' that purifies both the giver and the receiver (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003). While this pillar of Islam may have functioned as an early system of social security, anthropologists note that it has diminished in modern Islamic states from a public welfare institution into a private, voluntary practice of piety.

The idea of humanitarian duty as synonymous with service to God continues to survive at other scales of civil society. The distribution of free meals near a mosque in Cairo, for instance, was primarily motivated not by a formalised commitment to alleviate human suffering but by *khidma*, a sense of service 'directed *by*' and '*at* God' (Mittermaier 2024, 256). In Northern Pakistan, humanitarian action is often motivated by *jazba*, an 'emotional impulse' or 'spirit to get the unlikely done' and to leave behind a material legacy of concrete, transformative projects (Mostowlansky 2020, 251). These specific orientations notwithstanding, the broader geopolitical logics of Islamic humanitarianism can still at times echo its Western counterparts: Turkish humanitarians, operating in Islamic Africa south of the Sahara, draw on the heritage of a shared religion but nevertheless frame themselves as heirs to an Ottoman civilisation that protects its less fortunate Black African neighbours. The racialised and colonial underpinnings of 'white' Turkish humanitarianism here reproduce the historical associations between Western humanitarianism and the European colonial project (Güner 2023).

Conclusion

As prospects for life on earth deteriorate with climate change, it is likely that climate-induced displacement will only grow more protracted and routine for the world's most vulnerable communities. Humanitarianism's definitions, boundaries, and limits will also shift in response, as a new array of actors mobilise humanitarian logics to pursue their own agendas. New spaces may be reframed as sites for humanitarian intervention, such as cities affected by urban violence (Lima 2022), while existing sites and instruments such as refugee camps may continue to proliferate. To deal with these emerging challenges, humanitarians are innovating with new technologies, including drones, biometrics, digital currencies, artificial intelligence, blockchains, and algorithmic data management. Anthropologists tend to remain sceptical of such limited, technical solutions to humanitarian needs, and often warn against the sector's deepening reliance on proprietary tools—often developed in partnership with Big Tech companies—that rely on extractive data collection practices with minimal safeguards for refugee privacy, rights, and freedoms (Ajana 2013; Firoz 2024; Iazzolino 2021; Scott-Smith 2016; Tazzioli 2019).

In 2025, international humanitarianism faces one of the largest financial crises in its history. Following the abrupt withdrawal of support from the world's largest humanitarian donor, the United States, donors across Europe also implemented major reductions in their aid budgets. Humanitarian organisations have warned of disastrous consequences for food security, primary healthcare, disaster relief, educational

access, poverty alleviation, and refugee protection across the globe. In particular, the shuttering of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has sent shockwaves through the sector, interrupting operational partnerships and supply chains. At the same time, the complicity of Western states with Israel's genocide in Gaza has also undermined the framework of international law that enshrine humanitarian rights and obligations. As another genocide rages on in Sudan, it is more difficult than ever to imagine a sustainable future for survivors of humanitarian crises. In a future marked by resource scarcity, ecological collapse, warfare, and militarised borders, when the protections once afforded by citizenship are waning and the moral appeal of our shared humanity is endangered by the resurgence of authoritarianism, humanitarianism will continue to offer anthropologists a vital terrain of inquiry to understand how societies frame, mitigate, and manage the suffering of others.

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