

BOOK REVIEW

Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government

By Michel Agier¹

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This book is a critical analysis of the policy and practice of encampment of refugees (also asylum seekers and 'illegal' immigrants) under inhuman conditions, with minimum civil, social and economic rights. The author, Agier, opts for a social justice tone in raising major issues of concern that have led to the treatment of refugees as *the undesirables*. Agier attributes this identification to the mutation of humanitarian assistance to humanitarian regime that has disguised itself behind *relief* provision yet operating within a global system of power and control. He asserts that "In my visits to refugee camps I have discovered the concrete reality of micropolitical legibility of the humanitarian world, which are hidden when people simply speak of humanitarianism 'in general'" (Agier, 2011:200).

Humanitarianism plays the role of the *right hand of the empire*. This is based on the observation that "There is a hand that strikes and a hand that heals" (Agier, 2011:200). The

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hand that strikes represents the big powers of the western nations such as the USA, United Kingdom, France and Germany. Algier (2011:200) gives the example of the US attack on Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 where the "aerial distribution of supplies and medicines accompanied the dropping of bombs." As such humanitarianism emerges as the *hand that heals*, operated under a humanitarian government characterized with permanent apparatus such as budget, staff and global administration policies. The connection between the hand that heals and the hand that strikes is contextual and functional, hence depending on the political, humanitarian and social imperatives on the ground. However, humanitarian intervention is often ambiguous and holds the power of life and death for vulnerable refugees.

The author takes an anthropological view point in bringing out the details of encampment, its potentials, limitations and challenges. Some of the major questions that drive the arguments in this book include: "Is a critical commitment to humanitarian action possible? ...Is all humanitarianism 'trapped' in the way that humanitarian action is today? What can be done?" (Algier, 2011:7). The book is based on research findings from a series of fieldwork studies conducted between 2000-2007 in refugee camps in Kenya, Zambia, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the West Bank. Algier also builds on his personal experience of working with Médecins Sans Frontier in different humanitarian settings, and different administrative capacities.

The book is divided into three parts: the first sets out the theoretical framework for understanding the concepts of refugee, displaced and rejected. Algier clarifies that his study aims at deconstructing the sociological realism that perpetuates the conceptualization of the humanitarian regime (2011:12). The second part details the ethnological study of the different camps while highlighting the excruciating stories and experiences of the vulnerable and *undesirable* refugees. The thick descriptions of these contexts expose the power of the humanitarian regime and the injustices and human rights violations against refugees. The third part explores three themes that have emerged in the ethnographic study. These themes develop into three theories: the first is the urban ethnography of the camps as a place of change, networking, resistance and towns in the process of new realizations; the second theory refers to the power behind the sociological construction of humanitarianism and the control of how it is externally perceived; the third is the theory on humanitarian government, networked globally and gradually becoming an international solidarity.

The major concern for Algier is that humanitarian organizations display a high expression of power that is manifested in the perimeters of their funding governments. The primary beneficiaries, the refugees, have become secondary subjects of concern. The humanitarian regime has construed an encampment ideology that underscores that refugees have to be contained into a camp situation. This has led to the creation of a stateless population referred to as 'refugees' without any basic rights to protection, whether legal or social; and no security nor political rights.

The camps have become extra-territorial space managed by the humanitarian regime, creating what Slaughter and Crisp (2008) have referred to as 'surrogate states,' that is, states within a state. The temporary nature of the refugee camps means that refugees constantly find themselves in situations of uncertainty where they are in waiting mode - never knowing when they will return home; not having any status; and subjected to physical and psychological abuses (Algier, 2011:71). Refugee camps have become ghettoized depicting "zones of exceptional rights and power, where everything seems possible for those in control" (Algier, 2011:82). As such "the protection of the stateless...is no more than a euphemistic justification for controlling the undesirables" (Algier, 2011:211).

Encampment has become a space of oppression and resistance - *oppression* due to lack of basic rights, and *resistance* because of the increased incidences in which refugees have demonstrated to demand better conditions in the refugee camps. The negative characterization of refugees and immigrants (economic or political) as 'illegal immigrants' or '*sans papier*' (French for 'without papers') "criminalizes in an indistinct fashion any displacement of individuals who are undesirable under one heading or another" (Algier, 2011:31).

In conclusion, Algier is of the opinion that it is in identifying the gaps in the system that one also discover what needs to be done. He proposes the depolitization of the humanitarian regime, though he remains pessimistic that this would be a tall order. He thus throws back to the refugees the challenge for a solution by suggesting a dream future. Algier (2011:215) notes that the solution lies in moving from *complaint* to *cry* into the space where refugees can speak out. Thus, he says that it is the political action of the refugees that will eventually lead to the transformation of the camps into towns, urban centres or cities. This will earn refugees their right identity and liberate them from oppressive constructions.

Algier makes a passionate plea for social justice and respect of the basic rights of refugees. His depiction of the humanitarian regime as the hand that heals, juxtaposed against a hand that strikes calls for an analysis of the politics of humanitarianism. His writing echoes other literature on the same topic. For example, Anderson (1999) underscores *doing no harm* in the course of delivering aid; in my writings I have cautioned against the complacency of humanitarian organization in walking along conflicts rather than engaging in *field diplomacy* as a means of conflict impact mitigation (Opongo, 2006); Prendergast (1996) outlines the "seven sins" that humanitarian agencies ought to avoid in order not to *do harm*; Minear and Weiss (1995) have done an extensive research examining the *Humanitarian Politics* and how good intentions can be *Under Fire*, resulting in the exacerbation of conflicts; Minear (2002) is attentive to the challenges and dilemmas of linking up humanitarian assistance, global politics and military intervention.

However, Algier could have discussed more extensively what has been done in humanitarian regime in different audits that have looked at some of the lessons learned and how these can be implemented. For example, The Sphere Project (2004) that outlines

standard guidelines for humanitarian assistance, and other country-based guiding principles for humanitarian assistance and development, are some of the recent initiatives to tidy up the humanitarian regime. These principles, though seemingly perpetuating the powers of humanitarian regime that Algier opposes, equally demonstrate an attempt to understand the complex situation on the ground. This book will be relevant for students in development and peace studies, as well as humanitarian organizations interested in reflecting on some of the social justice issues raised by Algier.

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