

***Firefighters and Arsonists:  
Decolonizing epistemologies, methodologies and practice in humanitarian action***

*Early Career Researchers Workshop  
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*Call for Papers*

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Although inherently linked to the study of international relations (as a practice), humanitarian action as an object of study exists only as a sub-discipline in International Relations (IR, as a discipline) in its attempts to mitigate suffering during war, disaster, famine and violence. In the broader conceptual sense, humanitarian action, within the boundaries of IR, is most often still discussed within the paradigms of realism and liberalism. There, humanitarian action (distinct from humanitarianism as a doctrine) is seen either as an inherent part of the foreign policy objectives of interested states or as a normative endeavour implicated in *producing* liberal order, respectively. Besides perpetuating a false sense of ‘unification’ through narratives of the *singular* humanitarian system or *global* humanitarian governance, such accounts too easily gloss over the diverse and problematic cosmos that is the aid sector as a whole. All too often, (arguably uncomfortable) nuances get lost in the larger, seemingly homogenous, narrative of the ‘aid machine’, a machine always populated by individuals with competing interests, embedded organizational processes and individual beliefs, motivations and practices. Such attempts at capturing entire narratives and practices further run the risk of dehistoricizing the problematic ways that the system is intricately linked to, as opposed to being a reaction to, ‘distant suffering’.

Olivia Rutazibwa recently noted that humanitarianism (and development studies) is indeed a firefighter, yet we forget that these systems of which we are a part of act also as arsonists (or pyromaniac). Her argument stands strong against the long and troubled history of aid, where links between civil wars, conflict, disasters, or droughts and neo-liberal agendas are too often brushed aside or ignored entirely. A stark example of the arsonist firefighter is unfolding in the war in Yemen. Here, Rutazibwa’s comment holds strong: while a wide-spread humanitarian crisis unfolds in the country with 1.2 million people facing a food emergency, the two major supporters of the coalition fighting Houthi rebels, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have pledged \$1 billion (a fourth of the UNs call for funding) for supposed humanitarian operations in the country. An ongoing war, with infrastructure and the economy decimated, and extreme starvation, while the current humanitarian system allows warring factions in a conflict (arsonists) to be simultaneously major humanitarian donors (firefighters).

In associating large-scale humanitarian needs and population displacements with climate change-induced droughts and flooding, on-going wars with foreign interests and colonial legacies, or the lack of affordable medicine with exorbitant and unjustified pricing by big pharma, we start to see unsettling connections between neo-liberal world orders and their often brutal manifestations. It is a reminder for both scholars and practitioners of humanitarian action to historicize suffering around the world and address aid not as a way of mitigating these realities but as part and parcel of the ways that international politics marginalize, suppress and even ignore this ‘systematic fragmentation of reality’. If humanitarian action has been cut and detached from the very forms of global violence whose affects are then used to justify the “need” to intervene, it is imperative to reassemble these severed parts.

Looking at the aid machine today, donors and NGOs alike are mobilizing resources to address various contemporary dilemmas, such as the ethical treatment of biometric data, the ‘urbanization’ of warfare, the ‘localization’ approach, the criminalization of aid provision, and the perpetuation of sexual violence against both ‘beneficiaries’ and staff. At the same time, the system continuously

employs and perpetuates crippling binaries of us/them and aid worker/beneficiary which reproduce modernity as a (neo)colonial logic in humanitarian theorizing and practice. Against this, a decolonial and deliberately anti-fragmented approach to the study of such contemporary issues allows us to trace and understand the origin of such binaries and thus attempt to move towards finding alternative ways in which the humanitarian endeavour unfolds in the future. To be clear, the intention here is not to use a decolonial approach to humanitarian action as some sort of end point, but rather the device through which both humanitarian knowledge production and aid practices may reconcile troubled histories with alternative (critical, feminist, ethical) practices and theorizing of aid delivery.

Understanding, then, humanitarian action as an ethos and practice, this workshop seeks to engage early career scholars in reimagining, reevaluating and historically situating the humanitarian endeavour (as discourse and practice) as an extension of (unequal) power dynamics in global politics. We aim to inquire the dangers of perpetuating hierarchies in the system to generate productive, localized and historicized critiques to investigate both the humanitarian fire(wo)men and arsonists. As scholars, we must also inquire about the politics of knowledge production and the methods we employ with regard to their potential to discipline or encourage critical thinking on humanitarian action. In spaces where our work may perpetuate various forms of racial, gendered and elitist power imbalances, a decolonial approach combined with a concerted reflection on ethical research practices pushes us to investigate our own methods and methodologies with the hope of exploring novel ways to address the *study and practice* of aid delivery.

Overarching questions for the workshop:

- **Methods and Research Ethics:** What inter-disciplinary, critical and creative methods can we employ to study humanitarian action as practice and humanitarianism as doctrine? How might they attend to existing ethical concerns?
- **Spaces and scales:** How could a focus on the micro, on the individual, and on localized spaces in aid delivery lead to other ways of producing knowledge on humanitarian action? How can this be applied in practice?
- **Motivations and alternatives:** What can a decolonial approach to humanitarian action help us see about the normative motivations and practical application of the humanitarian system and what alternatives can this produce?

**Deadline to apply:** May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021.

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