

PROMOTING AGENCY THROUGH REJECTING OTHERING: A MANIFESTO FOR TRANSFORMATIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The overarching ambition that underpins this manifesto is the promotion of agency in the humanitarian world. We understand the promotion of agency as the opposite of a patronising approach: agency means treating other human beings like entities with the same level of intellect, decision making capabilities, and responsibility for their choices, regardless of their legal status, nationality or experience as a refugee, avoiding any sort of condescending attitude or behaviour. In these terms, agency is an enabler of transformation.

While giving agency and empowering people is a mantra of many NGOs that work in the sector, we believe that mainstream approaches to humanitarianism create or reinforce relations of dependency. Most of all, dynamics of infantilisation, refugee labelling and self-labelling, and low expectations – inadvertently but powerfully – contribute to a worldview in which the humanitarian sector puts itself on a different (and higher) moral ground than the people it is supposed to work for. The vast majority of the standard practice that we want to challenge comes from the reduction of the beneficiary to a static and stereotypical representation, a process of “othering” beneficiaries that inevitably reinforces marginalization.

1. THE PROBLEM WITH OTHERING

Otherness, intended as the radical impossibility of mutual understanding between individuals or groups, is a construct: this framing is not only arbitrary but is often used to justify political stances. In very broad terms, on one side of the political spectrum otherness is often used to shield a group (national, ethnic, religious) from the interferences of others – that is to say to preserve its supposed purity; on the opposite side of the political spectrum the same concept is used to defend groups of “others” from attacks and criticisms – in other words, again, to preserve their supposed purity. In both cases external interference is considered a threat rather than an opportunity. It is clear from the outset that the two approaches rely on the same assumption.

Our standpoint is that otherness is an inadequate and misleading concept. It does not help to describe – and even less explain – human interactions, therefore any theory and consequent initiative built on its premises fails to comprehend the underlying threads that operate in the humanitarian world. Because of these reasons, ultimately it misses the goal of achieving a fairer society. Our main concern centres around the impact of the “othering” mechanism on humanitarian action, as well as its damaging consequences for the individuals who receive aid and for society in general. The humanitarian debate increasingly focuses on the recognition of the inevitable imbalance of power between beneficiary and service provider; we argue that the current recipes to address this power imbalance strengthen it rather than reduce it.

2. OTHERING AID: THE HUMANITARIAN COMMON SENSE

Within the humanitarian landscape, the othering mechanisms stems primarily from the imbalance of power between the provider and the recipient of aid: whenever aid is delivered, the provider of aid holds a certain amount of power that the recipient of aid doesn't.

This power has two main declinations. The first is the power to decide who, among the affected population, gets access to the services and goods that are deemed helpful (and that

are channelled/mobilized by the provider). The provider can try to mitigate this unbalance by promoting fairness through very accurate and strictly enforced selection criteria, and through inclusive measures (how do I make sure that I am reaching those who are so vulnerable that cannot even come and collect a hygiene kit?). This does not fully even out the power unbalance, since the decision-making power still lies with the provider.

The second declination of power lies in the difference between the experience of the aid worker and that of the beneficiary. The aid worker has access to services and goods that the beneficiary cannot access (for instance they do not rely on food distributions for their subsistence).

This twofold power imbalance is structurally and strongly present in every process of aid delivery. However, if inflated to encompass aspects that fall outside of the aid provider-beneficiary relationship, it inevitably leads to othering the individual receiving aid. This othering mechanism builds on three intertwined assumptions:

- A) the beneficiary is nothing but a victim, not a complex evolving individual;
- B) the beneficiary is a product, a vessel of pre-existing identitarian traits (religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc), thus deprived of responsibilities for their actions and words;
- C) the beneficiary accepts existing power relationships within the group they belong to and finds meaning in perpetuating the *status quo* of those power dynamics, regardless of their oppressive or transformative nature;

Problematic as they evidently are – no one would accept them when analysing their own position in society – these assumptions constitute the core of what we call Humanitarian Common Sense (HCS).

3. CONSEQUENCES OF OTHERING

By othering the beneficiary, the humanitarian sector inadvertently, but strikingly, patronises the people it is meant to help. It is important here to stress that it does so *despite* its focus on agency and empowerment (and not because agency and empowerment are only slogans rather than actual approaches), but because the way they are conceptualized is flawed. At the same time, it is important to remark why we say “inadvertently”: it is extremely rare to encounter someone in the sector who is in bad faith, or who in any other way doesn’t care about the wellbeing of their beneficiaries.

The vast majority of the HCS rooted in the othering mechanisms that we want to challenge comes from an accumulation of practices that are not always detrimental in themselves, but that have inevitable side effects that too often are not taken into account.

Othering is detrimental to the beneficiary’s self-perception and well being

The first effect is that, as pure victims, product of identitarian traits and automatically compliant with the status quo, beneficiaries are framed as always being driven by external forces that nullify their individual responsibilities and, as a consequence and more importantly, their sense of agency and transformation. If one’s ideas, behaviour and personality are predetermined by belonging to a group (ethnic/religious, or based on legal status/vulnerability), individual action cannot truly happen.

This has huge consequences on the self-perception and psychosocial well-being of beneficiaries: rather than being seen as an individual with an intricacy of beliefs, contradictions and not yet (never?) fully defined projects, the beneficiary becomes an accrual of needs.

Othering is detrimental to the beneficiary's opportunity to challenge unfair power dynamics within their community

Even as victims of forced displacement, natural disasters, wars etc, individual beneficiaries hold an array of characteristics that can place them on various steps of the power ladder within their surroundings. To list a few examples: the beneficiary can be a head of household exerting power over the rest of the household, a qualified worker that has more power than unskilled workers from the same community, a member of a party that is more popular than another one in the same community, an unconvicted criminal that exerts control over other beneficiaries, an elderly man benefitting from patriarchal dynamics and respect for age in a way that is unthinkable for a young woman, etc.

The Humanitarian Common Sense obliterates all these nuances by assuming a compliant relationship between the beneficiary and the role that is cast upon them by existing power structures: those who are at the lowest steps of the power ladder in a community should stay where they are – which is exactly where the most powerful place them. This alienates any consideration for fairness and redistribution of actual power within the community. While existing identitarian traits influence the choices and the beliefs of an individual, someone's own relationship to the surrounding *milieu* cannot be assumed as static and unproblematic. The solutions that are frequently offered to address this issue are problematic, in the fact that rather than challenging those power structures, they often reproduce them. The effort to even out the imbalance of power by trying not to exercise the power that the aid provider has over the beneficiary is an illusion. The power is there, and by attempting to remove itself from the discussion, the aid provider is quietly enforcing those dynamics, while often perceiving itself as not responsible. However, having power over a situation is a responsibility that cannot be addressed by pretending that, or acting as if, that power is not there: neutrality towards an unfair dynamic is not neutrality but siding with the status quo.

Othering is detrimental to the broader society

When identitarian traits are prioritized vis à vis individual preferences, they are reinforced as monolithic, undisputable and founded on beliefs no one can scrutinize. Cultural justificationism then is the only way to address (or better: avoid to addressing) habits and norms that counter basic human rights and/or replicate oppressive dynamics.

While these challenges are somehow part of the debate on humanitarianism, the methods proposed so far (the most mainstream ones fall under the umbrella of participatory approaches) are instrumental rather than transformative, in the fact that they cannot coherently bridge the gap between beneficiary and provider, while that gap is being defended and idealised by the above-mentioned assumptions. Real participation can only be achieved if such initiatives are underpinned by a belief in intra-community and inter-community dialogue, a process of transformation through which two or more parties starting from different standpoints can go through a process of mutual enrichment, which results in a change of the initial status quo.

If, through othering, differences between communities are emphasized rather than bridged, it is inevitable that society as a whole will not benefit from mutual learning and understanding, producing instead a myriad of societal clusters that cannot communicate with each other, and where respecting the internal culture of each cluster means respecting who has power in that culture (generally older, heterosexual, males). It is for this reason that, unless it is rooted in an approach that rejects otherness, humanitarianism does not foster agency and transformation to a fairer society.