

## The Cause of the Refugee

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A stellar typo stands out in Ilana Feldman's otherwise impeccable prose in *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (2018). Examining Palestinian refugees' struggle to expand the political scope of international humanitarian law, she misquotes Jacques Rancière, describing humanitarian rights as "the rights of those who have no riots," rather than "rights" (143). The error is fantastic because so terribly appropriate; since the 2015 "migration crisis" launched the refugee as "the political figure and theoretical puzzle of our time" (Abourahme 2020: 36), the question of whether refugeehood is a zero-sum game between rights and riots has accurately encapsulated much of the scholarly debate surrounding the refugee's political meaning and value. After twenty years of Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" (1998) brooding over all attempts to theorize the refugee, scholars have recently sought to rescue her from consignment to the limit of politics or its constitutive outside with such zeal as to revamp her into a revolutionary vanguard. The academic investment in the refugee's "resil-

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ience” and “resistance” is such that, as Laleh Khalili points out with particular reference to Palestinians, we now demand levels of political militancy from refugees that we would not expect of ourselves (cited by Feldman, 133); alternately, in a more insidious form of paternalism, we set the bar so low as to celebrate any activity undertaken by refugees as “resistance” and to qualify all “resistance” as political action.

Meanwhile, investment in restoring political agency to the refugee proceeds apace with a zealous and wholesale condemnation of the “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1990) of the humanitarian apparatus held responsible for confiscating that political agency in the first place. Critics have noted that in order for humanitarianism to make a credible claim to political neutrality, staging its engagement in principled quarantine from “worldly” social forces of state, race, and capital, the normative assumptions underlying humanitarianism (its notion of what it means to be human and, consequently, of what people require in order to remain human) must also be presented as somehow out of history. Both abstract and universal, humanitarianism’s definition of “the human” falls back on a morally pure suffering body that lacks the specificity of either action or desire (Ticktin 2011). Because humanitarianism stipulates that those in its care trade politics for recognition, recovering the political content of the refugee has typically meant salvaging her from humanitarianism.

Insofar as the refugee marks a space of impasse between the loss of one context and the struggle to secure a new one, it is difficult for her *not* to be a fetish; throughout her conceptual history, she has shouldered the weight of competing claims to her political (re)signification. To Hannah Arendt, she has featured as so perfect an incarnation of abstract universalisms that she seems to “exist nowhere” ([1951] 2004: 370). And yet, from the irreducible commonality of human suffering to the aspiration to a fully emancipated humanity, the nature of the universals conjured under the banner of the refugee is, like all universals, oddly specific; who the refugee is to us at a given moment reflects something of our own political horizon. An effect of the recent “refugee crisis,” which brought both the reality of displacement and the politics of humanitarianism to the heart of Europe, has been not only to complicate the refugee as a political imaginary and to pose the question of what accounts for her immense theoretical allure; it has also brought that imaginary face-to-face with the real people who live with or against the constraints placed on them by that category, forcing the question of whether and how the two are related.

Feldman’s historical ethnography of the *longue durée* of humanitar-

ian engagement in Palestine is in part an attempt to grapple with just that: to test how the universalisms underlying the figure of the refugee and, relatedly, of humanitarian action hit the ground. As increasing numbers of people live in conditions of protracted displacement, and usually in some relation to the humanitarian apparatus, Feldman argues the Palestinian case might well prove “paradigmatic” (227). The indefinite prolongation of Palestinian displacement strains the political imaginaries of humanitarianism and the refugee condition, forcing them to thin out and expose underlying traits or contradictions that the immediate exigencies of crisis relief might otherwise have obscured. The Palestinian case provides insight into what happens when the purportedly “exceptional” condition of impasse constitutive of the refugee condition and the would-be temporary and provisional terms of humanitarian engagement geared toward survival become the spaces, categories, and tools through which generations of people *live*. The Palestinian refugee camp is thus an appropriate place to pose the question of what politics is possible in the zone of purported political exception.

But if, as Feldman shows, the rights/riots binary does not reflect the reality of refugees’ experience, then that discrepancy itself demands investigation. Why, despite all ethnographic evidence, do some continue to look to the refugee to find the utter absence of politics or its epitome? Though seemingly opposed, both visions suggest the same particular outlook: the sense that politics has receded as a sphere accessible to most of us and through which we might collectively transform our world. “Bare life” is more or less openly a way of thinking life without politics, at least of the old emancipatory kind that once tethered the Palestinian liberation movement to a global anti-imperialist coalition. Treating the refugee as exceptionally political is more coded in its implications. It means to look for politics in places and people we consider pure in their abjection, divested of prospect or property, forced apart from the rest of society, and free of complicity in our world.

The analytical move foreclosed by both of these positions is to refuse exceptionalism by embedding the refugee in the world, situating her in the historical processes of capital and empire that encompass us as well as her, and that once provided the basis for a universalist emancipatory project which linked Palestinians with freedom struggles from South Africa to Vietnam, and with workers and students in European and American cities, too. This is also to track the ways in which transformations in those material processes have shaped the conceptual trajectory of the refugee as a political imaginary: as an abstraction, a harbinger of the transcendence of

race, state, and capital, or a figure of indeterminacy through which we now attempt to grapple with the failure of that transcendence and to imagine a new universalist politics under different conditions.

Taking as its starting point Feldman's ethnography of the possibilities for political action afforded by the humanitarian apparatus in Palestinian refugee camps, this essay mobilizes her conclusions to consider the recent history of the "refugee crisis" in Europe. It argues that humanitarianism and the present exceptionalization of the refugee offer a valuable optic through which to understand contemporary politics on two levels. The turn to humanitarianism and to the refugee as a political imaginary has shaped ways of talking about and responding to the crisis of a political horizon on the left. But there have also been turns *within* humanitarianism—and, indeed, multiple humanitarianisms. Changes within humanitarian apparatuses, and their routinization beyond the "exceptional" conditions of disaster and displacement, have exemplified the broader social transformations producing that crisis of emancipatory politics. At once ideationally and materially, the story of humanitarianisms in recent decades is a story of the conditions under which politics came to feel so difficult, and our horizons narrowed to the prospect of coping with rather than transcending the neoliberal present. And yet in this humanitarian world, as Feldman shows us, all kinds of politics still happen. As an idea, humanitarianism might exceptionalize refugees. But as a material force, the scale of humanitarianism's ascent has created a shared experience and political outlook linking refugees with others around them. The essay concludes by asking whether those common humanitarian predicaments born of the defeat of an older emancipatory project might nevertheless, at times, provide the messy terrain from which a collective politics proceeds.

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Drawing on six years of fieldwork conducted in the West Bank, Jordan, and Lebanon, Feldman tracks the "grip of encounter" (Tsing 2005: 1; cited by Feldman, 5) between refugees and the humanitarian apparatus. She combines the institutional archives of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other international humanitarian organizations, aid workers' personal archives, interviews with refugees and humanitarian providers (Feldman stresses that these are often the same people), pamphlets, public statements, and PLO literature to examine the ways in which refugees and humanitarian institutions have shaped each other during the seventy years of Palestinian displacement. Feldman's analysis is not

organized chronologically but aims to reflect the multiple, uneven, and overlapping temporalities of “punctuated humanitarianism” that measure time in the camp by degrees of intensity of humanitarian engagement: periods of chronic poverty, boredom, attrition, and political impasse are interrupted by moments of acute crisis and emergency (16). Crisis “events” recalibrate the apparatus; each emergency serves as an opportunity for humanitarianism to redefine its operations and priorities, and thus its relation to recipients and the forms of subjectivity and sociality formed around the provision of aid. Conversely, periods of protracted stasis allow the “predicaments” of the “humanitarian condition” to resurface: the indefinite dilation of the humanitarian mandate under conditions in which no structural solution seems forthcoming raises questions regarding the long-term prospects of Palestinian emancipation and the value of enduring in a grueling humanitarian present. Each phase has the effect of shifting the political terrain of the refugee-humanitarian encounter as they engage each other in a struggle to negotiate the terms of their relationship. In so doing, Feldman argues, they perpetually redefine the limits of political possibility afforded by the refugee category and humanitarianism, altering our understanding of both.

Against exceptionalist readings of the refugee as the constitutive other of the citizen marking the negative space of politics, Feldman argues that “this category that confers no political status—which is meant to suspend political judgment—can serve as a mechanism precisely for political life” (61). Refugees continue to pursue politics, even within the avowedly apolitical status of the refugee, through the purportedly neutral apparatus of humanitarianism and in spaces of presumed political exception, such as the camp. Examining what politics is possible in that “grip of encounter,” Feldman distinguishes between, on the one hand, a “politics of life” (i.e., the ways in which humanitarianism shapes the biological, institutional, and social conditions of refugees’ lives, from rations to housing and social welfare to access to recognition as both refugees and “in need”) and, on the other hand, a “politics of living” (i.e., how those who live under the humanitarian directive strive to press claims, challenge or ameliorate their conditions, and work toward “non-humanitarian futures” in ways that are both immanent and opposed to the apparatus itself) (4). While refugees usually enact those politics *in spite of* or against the restrictions placed on them by humanitarianism’s regulatory framework, they also often pursue those ends through and because of it.

That people living in conditions of protracted displacement will, like anyone else, use whatever means are available to them to act on the condi-

tions that shape their lives is unsurprising. The obligation to stress the point that refugees retain a political existence is the legacy of a long-standing dispute between scholars in the social sciences invested in the refugee as a political concept or heuristic following Arendt and Agamben's "bare life" and those bent on debunking those refugee "ideal types" by proving they have no material referent in the real human beings who live under the category (then again, ideal types usually don't and are not expected to, so this is to somewhat miss the point). The more challenging questions that concern Feldman are the content of that politics, relatedly: What makes action expressly political, and to what degree is it possible or indeed useful to speak specifically of a "refugee politics"? The simple and scrupulous answer Feldman gives is that it depends.

While refugees are not exiled from political life, their politics is not straightforward. It is, in Feldman's words, "discordant" (1). This is the case not only because Palestinians experience the refugee condition differently or because they live in varying degrees of proximity to the humanitarian apparatus but because refugees inhabit multiple subject positions, claim various orders of rights simultaneously, and do so in order to advance agendas of different temporal and geographic scales that fall somewhere on the spectrum of two driving aspirations: on the one hand, the prospect of Palestinian national liberation and an end to refugee status; and on the other hand, the demand for better conditions in the present.

The coexistence and frequent tension between the goals of immediate amelioration and emancipation are themselves negotiated alongside or through the "humanitarian predicament." The persistence of humanitarian relief alongside Palestinians' refusal to renounce refugee status or to seek resettlement bears witness both to the fact of injury and to the failure of redress. Both symbolically and materially, in enabling Palestinians' endurance in impasse, the camp holds open the possibility of justice. But its persistence longer than anyone thought possible (236) highlights familiar dilemmas regarding not only humanitarianism's imperative to offer provisional remedies to structural problems that require a political response, but also questions of whether the availability of relief in the present might not actually forestall political solutions by making those structural conditions bearable. Palestinian refugees inhabit these contradictions. It is no wonder that in order to navigate these political conundrums, they pursue politics in several registers at once. Palestinians might put pressure on the humanitarian ethics of neutrality by insisting on UNRWA's representation of Palestinian national rights even as they minimize their presence as a political threat

in order to insist on their humanitarian rights; conversely, they might retaliate against the disciplining efforts of humanitarian agencies by threatening to riot in the event of aid withdrawal; others might refuse humanitarian aid on suspicion that it thwarts Palestinian aspirations to national liberation.

Just as the refugee “contain[s] multitudes” (98), Feldman points out that humanitarianism, too, is not one thing but can function as a point of articulation through which different, even contradictory, demands are voiced, fought for, and, at times, met. But while Feldman insists that humanitarianism does not necessarily spell the death of politics and that the refugee has agency beyond what is implied in the figure of the abstract, suffering body, she does not, by that, mean to elevate either into an emblem of political radicalism. Politics that emerges from within and through the humanitarian apparatus can stretch but never escape the limits of humanitarian possibility. Feldman’s middle ground is relentless, and the resulting political prospect intentionally uninspiring. Humanitarianism cannot “solve” the political questions that occasion its intervention and shape its course. While politics is possible within the humanitarian condition, it is a muted politics, a politics of coping that prospers in the absence of a truly transformative horizon. In this, humanitarianism shares its predicament with other political dilemmas: continuity and rupture, reform and revolution, palliative and cure. It is precisely in its emphasis on persevering under conditions so adverse to thriving that the humanitarian ethic is iconic not only of the Palestinian political prospect thirty years after the Oslo Accords but also of a more general political mood, orientation, and outlook. I will return to this later.

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To the end, Feldman remains true to her stated intention of neither “painting a picture of utter abjection or describing a scene of unending resistance” (5) in her description of refugee politics. At a moment in which the prevalent academic trend is to inflate either perspective, Feldman’s attentiveness to the messy, contradictory, and at times boring actuality of the refugee condition is both analytically rigorous and ethically scrupulous. Her extensive research, brilliant writing, and painstaking attention to nuance and provision for all possible caveats have produced a work so tightly crafted and well balanced it is almost hermetically sealed. And yet it is precisely that unflinching moderation, the absence of any of the rough edges one might expect of an effort to treat an issue as complex as the

politics of refugeehood, that leaves the reader just a little bit unsatisfied. To a degree, the book's perfect compactness is the result of the frame and scale Feldman has staked out in her ethnography, prioritizing meticulous research and analytic depth in her pursuit of the refugee-humanitarian "grip of encounter" in the space of the camps while sectioning off the ways in which that encounter is shaped by politics evolving at other scales and in other spaces, or indeed the ways in which the humanitarian apparatus functions as a conductor through which global transformations shape local realities and vice versa. While Feldman performs the groundbreaking work of demonstrating that politics is possible *within* the humanitarian condition, she leaves open the question of how those political struggles shape and are shaped by politics *without*, or, incidentally, the question of what analytic or political work that distinction performs in the first place.

Feldman flags from the outset that "humanitarianism never describes the totality of people's experiences" (25) but is only one of the political currents and social pressures that make up the life conditions of refugees. But her decision to silo the humanitarian experience risks generating the impression that it is even *possible* to understand it separately from those other forces: transformations in the nature of capital, of anticolonial struggle, of Palestinian political thought and national movements, and of Israeli settler colonialism. These elements form the background conditions of Feldman's work; while she acknowledges them, they are not protagonists in her story. While she insists that camps do not exist "out of time" and that they participate in the course of history—"Refugees are not external to global political orders, but central to them" (235)—she elides the question of what qualifies that centrality, of how refugees and humanitarianism are conscripted to the production and distribution of value, the circulation of ideas, the reshuffling of global political orders, and the imagining of emancipatory futures.

Because of her precision and thoroughness in rendering the refugee-humanitarian encounter in the circumscribed space of the camps themselves while insisting that the specificity of the Palestinian experience can nevertheless be "paradigmatic" (227), Feldman's argument itself rests on a certain degree of abstraction from context. Yet it seems to me that the main political challenge in "rethinking" both the refugee and humanitarianism is to work in the opposite direction. To "de-exceptionalize" the refugee, the camp, and, indeed, humanitarianism is not only to point out that they exist everywhere but also to breach the kind of theoretical quarantine that, pro or contra Agamben, tends to treat refugees and their politics (admitting that



they have them) as somehow apart from the ordinary processes of state, capital, and colonialism which make up our own experience of the political and of which the refugee is invariably an expression and a participant. It also means re-embedding the *conceptual* category of the refugee in the social processes that have determined her contemporary theoretical allure and political valence and that have made the humanitarian imaginary and outlook so central not only in places of remote suffering but in the heart of the “West” as well.

Arguing for the relevance of the Palestinian experience for understanding the refugee condition elsewhere, Feldman concludes her book at the “migration crisis” that propelled the refugee and, relatedly, the humanitarian imaginary to the center of European political life. Most of the questions I bring to her book come out of my experience working in Greek and Italian solidarity projects that responded to the 2015 “migration crisis.” Since then, the struggle to redefine the refugee, her political content, and the spheres of political action she affords has been one of the central preoccupations of the European academic and activist Left, and some variation on humanitarianism has been the *modus operandi* of political organization around the issue. In this context, the imperative to “re-embed” or historicize the refugee and humanitarianism in relation to capital, colonialism, statehood is more than an academic question about how we got here; it is also to ask what grounds of recognition or solidarity exist between refugees and nonrefugees beyond the humanitarian or *ethical* frameworks in which they are currently ensconced; to ask how the specific forms that a “refugee politics” takes and the demands that it makes relate to a political horizon that can reflect our own aspirations as well. If, as I have suggested, the refugee has long been a heuristic for considering the universal, then to think seriously about her political content is also to probe the limits of our own political imagination.

In a few of the most gripping pages of her book, Feldman reminds us that the political history of Palestinian displacement attests to the possibility of a nonliberal vision of refugeehood and restoration, and to a rendition of humanitarianism that is not premised on the disavowal of politics in the pursuit of imperial governance or cosmetic solutions to systemic injustice. Humanitarianism as a technology of subjectivation has not always of necessity worked to produce the refugee as a pliant body. In a brief historical tangent on the role of Samed (Palestine Martyrs Works Society) and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in the PLO’s project of building a national public and economic development in exile, Feldman shows us how the provision of

aid, healthcare, labor, culture, and social support has at times not only been explicitly political but revolutionary, a flank of the armed struggle for Palestinian liberation (although given how frequently political groups provide some sort of social service for the population, there is a lingering question of what makes efforts such as Samed's specifically humanitarian). Crucially, she emphasizes how Samed's efforts to respond to humanitarian needs in the camps by developing a "revolutionary economy" challenged the parallel (and often allied) hierarchies of both humanitarianism and capitalism by creating the conditions for labor that was *unalienated* precisely because performed in the service of emancipation. It also created in the refugee a "revolutionary persona: dignified, steadfast, committed to struggle" (198).

The stress on the transformative rather than merely remedial aspects of that revolutionary humanitarianism returns us to the universal. Samed's humanitarianism could be both humanitarian and revolutionary because, rooted in Third Worldism, it was premised on a different, anticolonial *humanism*, of which the refugee might have been the bearer. The Palestinian struggle for national liberation proposed, and sought to enact even in the absence of the nation-state, refugee emancipation not, as we usually think it, as redress for individual suffering through a "return" to a liberal order of citizenship. Home meant something different. Rather, the liberation of the Palestinian refugee heralded *disalienation* (Fanon [1952] 2008): the collective transcendence of that order of distinction and with it, those of class and race. It was emancipatory in its fullest sense because the Palestinian aspiration described universalist ambitions.

Though Feldman does not engage that tradition extensively, the refugee politics she examines are haunted by the failure of those struggles. Other anticolonial movements of the third-world alliance of which Palestinian liberation had been a part saw their vision of emancipation thwarted by neocolonial relations of production and exchange, and their vision of internationalism perverted by neoliberal globalization. Many of the PLO's factions and institutions held on to that vanishing horizon longer than others, but after the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982 and definitively following the 1993 Oslo Accords, the prospect of liberation through revolutionary struggle gave ground to an increasingly hazy aspiration at Palestinian statehood presumed to emerge out of a combination of political compromise in the name of a loosely defined peace and economic access to the free market. The replacement of an anticolonial politics pursued *against* capitalist exploitation with a liberation project waged *through* neoliberalization has circumscribed the geographic breadth and historical arc of Palestinian emancipation to the liberal nation-state, a distant prospect of privati-

zation, individual enrichment, and “quality of life” for a small comprador elite and Palestinian Authority political establishment—in the place of a Palestinian commonwealth (Khalidi 2014; Baker 2019).

If the Palestinian case presents a lost vision of the refugee as the bearer of a humanism that transcends distinctions of race, class, and nation, then to interrogate the present political valence of the refugee is to examine that political multitude or totality sundered, broken up into component parts, and invested in different political and social *types*. In Europe and the United States, for instance, to speak of the refugee is necessarily to speak also of the economic migrant. This is true not only because the same people move back and forth between those categories according to opportunities for recognition but because they exist as contending frameworks through which the “other” can be made intelligible and which structure the conditions of their inclusion and the horizon of their politics. I should be clear that my use of *refugee* and *economic migrant* denotes conceptual paradigms that inform current political thinking. These paradigms sometimes do describe real people, but that is not their chief objective.

While the refugee has usually belonged to the domain of the nation-state and sovereignty, the economic migrant has belonged to class and capital; their respective paradigms of dispossession are the camp and the factory. The refugee belongs to the liberal establishment. A victim of her identity (race, religion, membership in a particular social group), she seeks redress for the injury of her exclusion from the liberal order of rights not by seeking to dismantle it but by claiming inclusion within it, thereby validating it. Because, following the young Marx, the liberal order of rights granted by the nation-state is premised on the normative bourgeois subject, the rights claims of refugees do not require a critique of capitalism. On the contrary, they must of necessity consider the reproduction of an existing social order one of the underlying premises to their own fulfilment. Little expresses the affinity between political conservatism and the humanitarian temperament so well as the coincidence, in 2015, of the “refugee crisis” and the quashing of the anti-austerity radical Left in Greece. In the same month in which Angela Merkel, the face of the unforgiving Troika, had appeared in the guise of the tight-fisted Swabian matron whipping a belligerent debt colony into submission, she presented herself as the Old World’s Statue of Liberty beckoning the refugee to a “Europe with a friendly face.” “Saving the refugee” proffered an opportunity to rescue the image of a liberal Enlightened Europe of rights whose identity and legitimacy had just been shaken by the internal decay foregrounded in Greece and elsewhere.

If the refugee is liberal and assimilationist, the economic migrant

is disruptive and revolutionary; the prospect of her emancipation relies on transcending the bourgeois order of rights. It is for this reason that, in the wake of the decline of European mass labor movements, the failure of Eurocommunism and the fall of the Soviet Union, the economic migrant was featured, at least for a period, as the redemptive figure of the radical Left in search of a subject. The identification of the migrant as a worker offered a framework for recognition and solidarity and conscripted her into a common emancipatory project that had been defined for her before she arrived. An encouraging combination of familiarity and novelty, the economic migrant spoke to the enduring relevance of class and labor as organizing principles of the political but remained untainted by the trauma and disillusionment of those movements' defeats. The imagined total abjection of the migrant from the colonies or the European periphery announced the continued existence of a "pure" revolutionary subject at a moment in which most of the European working class had acquired "a great deal more to lose than just their chains" (Orwell [1941] 1998: 420). Nothing so well encapsulates that balance of hope and trepidation invested in the economic migrant as Etienne Balibar's ambivalent yet awkwardly celebrated statement that "immigrants are today's proletarians" (2004: 50).

In contemporary Europe, the theoretical allure of the "refugee" among the radical Left, and the related rise of humanity and morality as the terrain and motor of political action, emerged in part out of the decline of class-based subjectivity, a turn away from the social democratic state and party politics as a field of political engagement, and our own disorientation in the aftermath of that loss. The "refugee crisis" may have brought humanitarianism to the forefront of radical politics in Europe, but the impression that the humanitarianization of politics is a recent phenomenon is mistaken, as is the idea that it has emerged in response to a novel political subject (refugees) rather than from a preceding transformation in the spheres of political action available in general. In reality, the humanitarian apparatus and, crucially, the humanitarian temperament or outlook have long provided one of the primary conceptual and organizational toolkits for political expression and contestation in Europe. In keeping with Feldman's claim about the political multiplicity of humanitarianism, they have functioned as both accessories to state and capital and as vanguards of its opposition.

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One of the key revelations of Feldman's analysis of the *longue durée* of humanitarian engagement is that while nominally premised on the notion

of an abstract, atemporal suffering body, humanitarianism both presumes and helps to create the kinds of subjects and societies that a given historical conjuncture inspires or demands. Humanitarianism's shift in focus since the 1948 *Nakba* foregrounds humanitarianism's dynamism with regard to global social changes and attendant transformations in normative conceptions of the human. In Palestine, humanitarianism began with the rationalization of need, infrastructure, and the management of populations, distribution, and welfare, in which UNRWA took on some of the functions of the welfare state. In time, that was replaced by a withdrawal of aid and a moral panic around scrounging under a logic of scarcity, and then eventually a shift in focus onto individual empowerment and/or coping with disempowerment. Humanitarianism's changes, in other words, have reflected the passage from welfarism to neoliberalism—and the shifting place of the human within them.

Humanitarianism's ethics of neutrality rests on its abstraction not only from politics but also from the dirty business of capital (“not-for-profit”). While in reality humanitarianism is deeply imbricated with capitalism, that imbrication is not always straightforward. Humanitarianism is, after all, an industry; humanitarian organizations are corporations. But their business model rests on the monetization of objects/subjects not usually thought of as sources of value. According to Feldman, refugees, for instance, are both beneficiaries and resources in the donation circuit; while the camp emerges to contain and manage what would be “superfluous” to state and capital (what cannot be—or, in some cases, does not want to be—absorbed), those living under the humanitarian apparatus are kept productive of value even if they do not labor (26). Conversely, the humanitarian apparatus has functioned as a crucial mediator between business and labor, participating in recruitment schemes through which those who are ghettoized in refugee camps are released subject to market demands (Altenried et al. 2018).

Humanitarianism, in other words, exists in a tangential relation to state and capital. It thrives in the gaps left by both and is also essential to their functioning. This was true of nineteenth-century charities which had as much to do with missionizing in the colonies as they did with sopping up the abject subjects of an unbridled capitalism or with ensuring the reproduction of labor in the metropole when wages were too low for that. And it is no surprise that the return to humanitarianism in the “West” (witness the rise of domestic charities, from food banks and *The Big Issue*, or the extension of microfinance from a “development” scheme aimed at the Global South, to the means of survival of the European precariat) should occur after the end

of the European industrial boom and the full employment that had made it, for a period, unnecessary.

If the present looks humanitarian, this is not only because corporations of some sort of charitable stripe have emerged out of the tide pools of the welfare state and European industry but also because of the normalization of a political outlook that breeds the kinds of subjects appropriate to that transformation. A striking aspect of Feldman's ethnography is the degree to which refugees' and humanitarians' descriptions of the present "humanitarian condition" and outlook are familiar. Emphasis on addressing idleness and scrounging, or on "aid dependence" and depression as moral failures redeemable through a lifestyle regimen of self-improvement and, the NGO catchphrase, "empowerment," smacks a great deal of the neoliberal canard that the new poor and unemployed of the "advanced" capitalist societies are somehow to blame for the absence of opportunities that would give them something to *do* with their "empowerment" in places where they and their labor are redundant. More striking, however, is the frequent emphasis on "coping." "Coping" projects aim to teach people that even though the conditions of their lives may be horrific, and though they cannot change those conditions, or even imagine a way out of them, they *can* change the ways in which they experience those conditions by, as Feldman puts it, "revaluing their lives" (119). As it turns out, the humanitarian ethic very much describes the survival ethic or "capitalist realism" of neoliberalism (Fisher 2009). Both share a similar "predicament": it hurts, but since there is no alternative, the best you can aspire to is to make it hurt a bit less.

In Greek camps where I have worked, migrants able to gain admission to the public health service for whatever ailment are routinely sent away with a tablet of Paracetamol and a prescription for Lexotanil (an old-school benzodiazepine) or Xanax. The use of those antianxiety drugs skyrocketed in Greece at the onset of the financial crisis, when doctors in public hospitals began administering them to everyone as treatment for unemployment, bankruptcy, pension cuts, and thoughts of suicide and/or insurrection in response to austerity. In the camps, these drugs serve the dual function of making migrants a little less desperate about the squalid conditions in which they live and, relatedly, of sedating them lest they riot. Among solidarity activists in Greece, Lexotanil has been rebranded "the real opiate of the masses." At a recent demonstration in Moria (the main camp on the border island of Lesbos) in response to the suicide of a migrant with severe PTSD who was kept in solitary confinement by the camp police, one of the leading chants was, "Paracetamol, no good!" To be clear, my intention here is

not to suggest an equivalence between the migrant trapped in Moria and the precaritized Greek but to situate them in a regime of social control that affects both, in which measures of policing and care developed around one are repurposed as devices for governing the other.

If on the one hand the humanitarianization of politics and the politicization of humanitarianism attest to the elaboration of a relationship between neoliberalism and the humanitarian practice of care and governance, they also, on the other hand, reflect the trajectory of a large section of the European radical Left, which, following the end of the USSR and the decline of the factory and the party as sites of struggle, reinvented itself in the private corporate structures of NGOs, charities, and religious organizations (Ticktin 2011 gives a fascinating account of the French Left's humanitarian turn in the aftermath of 1968). The case of Italy, which has recently risen to the forefront of the "refugee question," is instructive. There, veteran militants of the 1970s *Autonomia* movement and the 2001 Genova antiglobalization campaigns have recently led the radical Left's opposition to the Far Right by founding pro-refugee, primarily sea-rescue NGOs such as *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, whose famous slogan, *Restiamo umani* (Let's Stay Human), would surely have puzzled their former selves. These autonomist militants' political trajectories plot one possible theoretical arc of the Left's search for a subject and related terrain of political struggle: from Mario Tronti's "mass worker" anchored to the factory, to Toni Negri's "socialized worker" less anchored in the factory in the wake of neoliberalism's assault on organized labor but nevertheless rooted in the new terrains of social struggle in gender, sexuality, and race uncovered during Italy's "long 1968," to the present focus on "humanity" as an "abstract" subject and field of political action of indeterminate location, characteristics, and relations.

While these civil society organizations—often key points of antistatist, antiracist, and anticapitalist struggle—are markedly different from institutions of the humanitarian establishment, they share some of their "predicaments": a politics of sanctuary or "relief" developed in the interstices of state power and capital, providing shelter to those no longer properly absorbed by them or those who have come unanchored or "abstracted." Extending across all the traumas of social life, these spaces—from the squat to the ship to the cooperative—form part of today's most radical social movements. Yet the central difficulty of the humanitarian imaginary still lingers over them: how to imagine the transcendence of the present rather than its survival and, relatedly, how those myriad particular stations of the Left relate to a universalist aspiration that can replace or reinvent

the twentieth-century cause of labor and anticolonial struggle. I stress this background because it helps account for the Left's anxieties and predicaments that have produced the present theoretical fixation with the refugee. While the Left's tactical approach to refugees in Europe has been largely humanitarian—even a *radical* humanitarianism—the question we bring to the refugee as “abstract figure” par excellence is the search for a new universal terrain of politics that might keep “humanity” as its horizon but not be humanitarian, that might, following one tradition of Palestinian refugee politics, be a figure of multiplicity embedded in a universal emancipatory struggle rather than a figure of abstraction. As climate change promises to displace millions more people and propel them to Europe's shores, foregrounding our mutual imbrication perhaps more than ever before, that question is increasingly less naive and more urgent.

Finally, if this is the theoretical interest invested in the refugee, then the obvious question remains as to whether it has anything to do with the real people who live under the refugee category. The venture to reimagine a universalist politics might well involve refugees as (some among its) revolutionary subjects, but that means little to those who, in the meantime, have to scrape together some sort of political existence in Europe's border camps. While competing bids are made to signify the refugee as the harbinger of a future politics, people in the camps will continue, as Feldman insists, to enact politics that are not straightforward, that are “discordant,” in which demands might be provisional, “unambitious,” and will not necessarily serve or even be interested in a radical horizon we might endorse. While the Palestinian case may be “paradigmatic” of the politics of protracted displacement, most refugees do not have the same entrenched political objective as the Palestinian demand for return that gives meaning to their continued endurance in displacement. But then, this is true of most of our politics as well. Organizing politically in camps often means confronting the simple truth that refugees share most of our political demands, that these demands (security, freedom, and a guarantee of the basic conditions conducive to thriving) are themselves “ameliorative” or “unambitious,” and that if these basic protections are denied refugees, they are also increasingly foreclosed to precaritized Europeans as well. This simple insight can at times be the basis of extraordinary windows of solidarity that flash up repeatedly, not in some remote emancipatory horizon but in the present politics of the everyday.

In the spring of 2016, European politicians unwittingly opened up a



terrain of solidarity between Greeks living under EU-imposed austerity and migrants when they summoned the image of the asylum-scrounging “economic migrant” to justify imprisoning all new arrivals on the Greek islands, preventing them from moving toward the European core. Overnight, “alliances of the undeserving” sprang up on the islands as purportedly “benefit-scrounging” indebted Greeks, and migrants protested the European establishment in the same squares and outlets, and with the same slogans. The shared understanding that the comforts of Europe had not only been cast beyond the reach of migrants but were denied to us as well, and the conviction that the existing order of Europe had to be transcended if we stood a chance of claiming the luxuries it once promised, is a seldom-acknowledged part of the political history of the “migrant crisis.”

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