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Book Review

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Glasman, Joël (2020), *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity*, London/New York: Routledge, ISBN: 9780367464165 (paperback), 274 pages.

In the last couple of years, historians and sociologists have published a number of studies on the history of humanitarianism. Besides books that deal with the ideological roots of humanitarianism and its periodisation, we also find empirical case studies about various humanitarian actors and their work on the ground. The new book, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs*, by Joël Glasman is located in this growing field. Glasman, meanwhile, uses an innovative approach by simultaneously applying historical and ethnographical methods. His study deals with the question of how the production and use of big data has influenced the work of humanitarian actors from the 1960s until today. The creation of statistics about human suffering, the author argues, increased consistently over the last decades and today plays a key role in the legitimation of humanitarian aid. But, in spite of increasing global wealth since the Second World War, the definition of the bare minimum has not substantially changed. For that reason, Glasman summarises his central thesis, which is also in the book's title: the quantification of human suffering on a global scale in fact means "minimal humanity." The book is therefore an important contribution to understanding how the global humanitarian regime works in history and in the present, and how statistics serve as a crucial tool for categorising and prioritising emergency situations and raising funds.

The book is organised in six parts that deal with the theoretical concepts, categories, and standards in use to quantify human suffering. These findings are combined and contrasted with empirical case studies based on sources from various archives, including the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), as well as ethnographic research of Central African refugees, which he conducted in the Cameroonian borderland between 2014 and 2016.

The first chapter analyses the historical concepts of "needs." Looking at the genesis of this notion, the author argues that it was actually its vagueness that enabled its breakthrough and success at the end of the twentieth century. As a consequence of the overuse of the concept of "needs," the concept itself became more and more vague and simple in order to be applicable for many different kinds of human suffering. This development was also facilitated by the worldwide expansion of humanitarian action and the attempt to address many different crises.

The second chapter focuses on the origins of categories used by UNHCR in order to classify refugees. The UNHCR uses legal and social categories in order to streamline the programming of assistance and protection in Africa as well as globally. The third chapter adds a materialist dimension. By changing the focus from refugees to the issue of acute malnutrition, it deals with a question, in which Glasman is undoubtedly an expert: the history of the MUAC (midupper arm circumference) tape. The MUAC tape has become a signature tool in measuring malnutrition of children and the commensurability of human needs concerning food security in the Global South since the Biafran War. The fourth chapter investigates how big aid agencies have attempted to standardise good humanitarian practice since the 1990s. Because the donations to and public trust in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have significantly decreased in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, they initiated the "Sphere Project," which put together handbooks and guidelines in order to improve the quality of humanitarian relief work all around the world.

The book's last two parts concentrate on empirical case studies. Based on fieldwork and oral history methods, they ask how concepts, classifications, tools, and standards came together in Cameroon in the wake of the Central African crisis in 2014. With the sudden arrival of thousands of Central African refugees, Cameroon was classified a "level three" humanitarian emergency situation – and thus the highest level possible. Glasman analyses the rivalry among humanitarian actors in their efforts to dominate the humanitarian relief as well as the technological instruments that were used to generate robust data about the number of refugees by UNHCR (chapter 5) and about the malnourished children by UNICEF (chapter 6). Although these instruments often lost their functionality in the field, quantitative data build the basis for acquiring financial support for humanitarian programmes.

Glasman's conclusion is quite critical but nevertheless well balanced. He observes a growing temptation to delegate important decisions to big data. Unfortunately, according to him, the rapid growth of numerical data is too often mistaken as an increase in actual knowledge. However, more data do not always mean better data. Furthermore, Glasman points out that the focus on the concept of "needs" captures only a very small, minimalist version of humanity thus setting a very low standard for aid relief.

To sum up, first, not all of Glasman's findings are entirely new – the problematic legal and political definitions of the term "refugee" are well known, for example. Sociological and anthropological studies have also demonstrated that the "refugee label" usually only concerns aspects of material assistance and turns refugees into invisible victims and objects instead of acknowledging their agency. Second, it is plausible that Glasman chooses African case studies, not only because he himself is an expert in this field but also because Africa was then, as now, one of the regions most affected by humanitarian crises. But in the selection of archival sources, I would have appreciated a more intensive analysis of smaller, locally active aid organisations in addition to the focus on the big players UNHCR, MSF, and the Sphere Project. Third, the reader sometimes gets the impression that the book is a mere juxtaposition of several articles. In addition, the technical details and language make it sometimes difficult to remember the overarching

questions and to connect the various chapters. But thanks to a distinctive introduction as well as a pronounced conclusion, Glasman's main arguments, however, are never lost. Overall, the author successfully managed the challenge to combine historical and ethnographical methodology with empirical field work – undoubtedly a fascinating example and an inspiration for further historical and social science research, especially on concepts, actors, and practices of global governance in the humanitarian field.

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