Rezension

Claudia Böhme

Joël Glasman: *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs. Minimal Humanity*

London, New York: Routledge, 2020, 260pp. [ISBN 9780367464165]

Humanitarian suffering and crises like the effects of forced migration are largely defined by numbers. Universal ‹minimal› standards of humanitarian interventions build on these figures making human suffering commensurable. The same is true for migration studies, and scholars all too often uncritically reproduce these created categories and numbers.

With his book Glasman takes us back to the origins of the definition of «humanitarian needs» and forces us to look behind the «current hype around ‹humanitarian data›» (p. 243) and «evidence-based humanitarianism» (p. 1). He unravels the historical contexts, negotiations, actors and power struggles in the production of humanitarian standards, which makes the book highly relevant for migration studies.

The book is based on Glasman's research on the crisis of war and displacement in Central Africa between 2014 and 2016. He observed the work of humanitarian agencies in the borderlands to Cameroon and identified a humanitarian «infrastructure of commensurability» as entry point to the quantification of needs in the region. Glasman's approach is an ethnographic-historical one; he uses observation and interviews on the ground as well as the analysis of written documentation and grey literature.

In the first chapter, the author retraces the genealogy of «needology» going back to the late 19th century, the birth of the Geneva Convention. Early humanists who had described the suffering of soldiers, war victims, workers and the poor and sick (restricted to the Global North) had shaped the development of humanitarian principles. The political administration, legal codification and academic evaluation of the knowledge of needs led to its quantification. In the search for universal minimal standards in the 1970s, needs became separated from their

 Zeitschrift für Flucht- und Flüchtlingsforschung 6. Jg. (2022), Heft 1, S. 140 – 143,
DOI: 10.5771/2509-9485-2022-1-140

immediate context and the notion of equality. Interventions were legitimised on universal grounds regardless of the specific circumstances of individual suffering.

Glasman exemplifies the quantification of needs in chapter 2 with the example of the UNHCR's classification of refugees in Central Africa. Refugees are created through a distinction from migrants and are ordered according to their legal status, vulnerability, legal assistance and needs. To manage the crisis in Central Africa, UNHCR used a model of classification based on mixing different modes of ordering.

The role of materiality and artefacts in the process of the quantification of needs is at the core of chapter 3. Glasman reconstructs the ‹triumphal march› of the mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) tape, a tool to objectify and verify malnutrition. Despite criticism of supposed universality, lacking accuracy and difficulties in handling it, the MUAC is still used today. Through its ‹hidden script›, it has tremendously changed the way malnutrition is understood and addressed by humanitarian agencies.

In chapter 4, we learn about the Sphere Project, which should define a set of minimum standards to ensure the quality of aid. As Glasman shows through the reconstruction of the production of the Sphere Handbook, its completion depended mostly on the mutual agreement of actors involved rather than on the identification of needs. Triggering protests and rejection from NGO's and leading humanitarian agencies, the Sphere Handbook is still the classical canon in the field. The fight over the Sphere Project represents an important moment of reflexivity in humanitarian action as well as the common wish to improve assistance through the codification and reinforcement of shared and commensurable principles.

In chapter 5, Glasman returns to Cameroon, which became a case of humanitarian intervention and object of knowledge since the 2014 refugee crisis. The intervention resulted in a leadership dispute between the UNHCR and other agencies as well as a struggle over how to generate knowledge, be it a status or vulnerability/needs-based approach. In the following, Glasman explores the counting and registration of refugees in Cameroon as an ethnographic case. He describes in detail the personal actors, technical equipment and materials involved. Despite the digitalisation of registration, the author shows that it has remained a practice that is done on the ground. It is an analogue, not digital, time-consuming practice, complicated and not as sufficient as digitalisation promises. The digital equipment is a challenging add-on, which remains unstable.

The book's last chapter deals with the construction of numbers on malnourished children by UNICEF and the application of a software to handle the data.

We learn about the interrelation between digital tools and face-to-face work as well as the fragility and weaknesses of numerical data produced. The nutritional SMART surveys entail several geographical and temporal biases and take refugee camps as a panopticon of producing reliable data – a view that largely ignores that refugee camps are not closed and static places with a homogenous population of passively governed asylum seekers.

As Glasman shows, the production of quantitative data relies in the end on the pacification of the different competing actors in the field and the creation of a consensus on how knowledge is produced. Glasman provides an insightful ethnographic and historic account of today's humanitarian quantified rationale. It is especially this interplay between ethnographic encounters, historic documents and science and technology studies that makes the book unique and interesting in understanding the evolution of today's global humanitarian regime. By taking «need» as a central point to shed light on its four dimensions (concept, system of classification, material apparatus, set of standards), Glasman is able to take account of the assemblage of humanitarian encounters taking place during the negotiation of the definition of standards of humanitarian needs.

Even though Glasman puts attention on different actors, coming along with competing interests as well as cultural, political, institutional and theoretical backgrounds not much is revealed about the people whose needs are quantified. Their position as actors only shines through in singular accounts. With a focus on the ‹humanitarian sector› and its evolution, those counted seem to get lost in the production of artefacts, concepts, classifications and standards. By concentrating on ‹humanitarian professionals›, Glasman does not elaborate on the dynamics, flexibility and fluidity of quantification in localised social interactions. The book implicitly calls for further research on the local use, adaptation or rejection of these standards.

While reading the book one is tempted to ask if we are approaching the dusk and not the dawn of «quantification» as trust and accountability are produced by qualitative practices. As the book shows, ‹digitalization› has changed humanitarian practices considerably. Due to the increasing demand of funding institutions and elaborated monitoring systems, more and more data is collected. Most of the collected data is not analysed or its interpretation is guarded by specialist data experts. By relying on intransparent (blackboxed) algorithms this data remains functional in the system of control, classification and triage. Its assessment and evaluation becomes difficult for non-‹digital humanitarians›. Thinking about the challenges in tracing quantification processes via algorithms and artificial intelli-

gence, humanity has maybe already entered an epistemological change returning to more ‹qualification› of human needs.

«Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs» is a highly recommended reading for practitioners and researchers in the area of humanitarianism, migration and refugee studies. It is yet to be seen whether history and humanitarianism is ready for Glassman's work to reproblematise, or repoliticise human needs.

Author

Claudia Böhme, Dr., Postdoc Researcher, FB IV-Fach Ethnologie, Universität Trier

Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Zeitschrift für Flucht- und Flüchtlingsforschung

Manuskripte für die verschiedenen Rubriken können jederzeit bei der Zeitschrift für Flucht- und Flüchtlingsforschung (zflucht@fluchtforschung.net) eingereicht werden. Alle Beiträge sind in einer anonymisierten und einer nicht-anonymisierten Version einzureichen. Manuskripte dürfen nicht bereits an anderer Stelle veröffentlicht oder gleichzeitig zur Publikation angeboten worden sein.
VerfasserInnen haben die AutorInnenhinweise hinsichtlich der formalen Gestaltung der Manuskripte zu berücksichtigen. Weitere Informationen finden sich unter www.zflucht.nomos.de.