

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

15 March, 2012 at 09:00-18:00

SESSION 1 ABSTRACTS

Socio-political construction of crisis and suffering

Chair: Julian Reid, Professor, Univeristy of Lapland

1. Robot technology and the drone stare: seeing or unseeing humanitarian suffering?

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How will the proliferation of remotely operated and increasingly autonomous robot technologies reshape our perceptions of human suffering? Framed as an exploratory research agenda, this paper considers this question through a discussion of the linkage between human suffering and current and potential future uses of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones.

On the “global battlespace”, surveillance drones such as Predators (General Atomics, US), Herons (IAI, Israel) or Watchkeeper (Thales, France) provide intelligence for armed attacks (Pakistan) or occupation (Gaza), while weaponized drones like MQ-9 Reapers (also General Atomics) and Hermes 450 (Elbit Systems, Israel) are deployed to eliminate individuals identified as insurgents or terrorists. The dominant politico-military rationale for the so-called drone wars is the notion that the “drone stare” enables operators to see, strike or reach everything with “surgical precision”, thus lessening human suffering. Global civil society increasingly disputes this view of suffering through contestations over ethics, law and (civilian) casualty counts.

Through civil-military cooperation and private sector developments making drones cheaper and more accessible, we foresee that drones will increasingly find their way into humanitarian missions. It is already possible for surveillance drones to supply crucial information about the unfolding of a humanitarian crisis, and the plight of individuals experiencing it. In the near future, cargo drones will be capable of dropping relief to remote populations in need. For the humanitarian community, these developments mean big opportunities but also a plethora of technological-ethical challenges. We are interested in how transfers of technology may engender re-articulations of human suffering.

In the emergent, U.S centric academic literature, the question of suffering in lethal drone strikes is primarily illuminated through discussions of the distance and

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intimacy of killing. To understand how drones may shape *sensibilities* of humanitarian suffering we draw on these insights as well as the literatures on humanitarian suffering and humanitarian technology. Ideally, the improved capacity for surveying human misery should give us deeper insights into we can move from crisis to action: Better data should generate more decisive political responses, the persistence of crisis would more easily be revealed not as inevitable misfortune but as a deliberate politics of injustice. However, we hypothesize that the use of drone technology may also entail new ways of *un-seeing* humanitarian suffering.

2. War, ethical encounter and the issue of 'strategic communications'

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Under the epithet of 'strategic communications', Western militaries are devoting substantial resources to efforts at 'communicating effectively' with local populations in the context of large-scale military intervention. Identified as a key priority in Afghanistan by the Obama administration, communication has become considered pivotal to mission success by military and political leaders alike. In light of contemporary interventions having assumed the character of 'policing' missions – here understood as military interventions aimed not at winning wars but at creating a new social and political order in target societies – the recent focus amongst decision makers on the issue of communication is noteworthy. To begin, the concern with the flow of information/communication appears indicative of a prioritization of form (the means of communicating) over substance (what is actually being communicated). Philosopher Charles Taylor has identified this order as intrinsic to the late modern condition, where 'everything would become a matter of means' (Taylor, 2004). Drawing on Taylor's prediction, it is worth asking whether such preoccupation with means over ends signals that war is assuming a new politico-ethical form in the early twenty-first century. Above all, this paper is concerned with the issue of ethical encounter in war and suggests that faith in 'strategic communications' constitutes an extreme expression of the utter disregard for 'the Other' in war.

3. Citizen camera witnessing and crisis reporting

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In recent years, the explosion of citizen-created photography and video has become a crucial resource for news journalism's symbolic definition of world events. What we call "citizen camera witnessing" is increasingly serving to shape our encounter with

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distant and traumatic events such as war and disaster. For instance, the public sharing of amateur images of the post-election protests in Iran in June 2009 or, of the last moments of Libya's former leader Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011, effectively brought these events to international prominence. Eyewitness imagery in the early hours of the tsunami in Japan in March 2011 relayed the human suffering of victims to distant audiences.

In this paper, we will examine what implications these new images have for the ways journalism addresses its publics. The key questions are: How do news organizations integrate amateur images into news reports? Does the alternative aesthetic of authenticity in these images – with their perceived immediacy, subjectivity, and often raw emotionalism – redefine news narratives by bringing in new sets of codes and conventions for the visual documentation of breaking news events? To what extent do amateur images interplay with news narratives, and what may be the implications for projecting boundaries between “us” and “them”, those “close” and those “distant” in geo-political terms?

Thus, we will pay attention to various kinds of making use of the citizen camera images during several crisis events, in terms of subject-matter and aesthetic form, and the relationship between the verbal and the visual – i.e. how a specific image/language combination makes a distinct claim to reality and thus invites a particular emotional, even moral response on the part of the viewers.

4. "Building Aceh Back Better"? - Discourses of 'New Aceh' as Performative and Politicised Social Space

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The slogan ‘building Aceh back better’ has become widely used by organisations and governments involved in the post-tsunami and post-conflict reconstruction aid efforts in Aceh, Indonesia. Aid organisations state that the importance of reconstruction processes is in rebuilding lost and damaged values and norms. Thus, it could be argued that one of the aims of the reconstruction aid is to re-establish the ‘normalcy’ through agendas such as ‘build back better’.

The paper discusses the politics of reconstruction by offering visual and poetic constructs of the landscapes in Aceh. Linear and progressive images of improvement, normalised and closed narratives of new and better lives have become an important part of how reconstruction aid machinery constructs normative temporal and spatial logic of the reconstruction.

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Through the analysis of selected works of two female Acehnese artists, ceramic installations by Endang Lestari and poems by Debra H. Yatim and their strategic use of silence, this paper illustrates how attempts to govern disaster landscapes break down and landscapes of embodied experiences of political violence escape the attempts of categorisation or governance (Edkins 2011, ix) and open up space for feminist political subjectivity. Thus, this paper suggests that reconstruction landscapes, or "Aceh", should be treated as a multitude - an open, performatively produced social space through which the post-tsunami landscape is continuously politicised and traumas of the tsunami and armed conflict are kept open.

This paper is a continuation to my PhD research that analysed the governmentality and feminist subversive potential embedded in the gender mainstreaming initiatives in the reconstruction aid in Aceh and is part of my post-doctoral research which aims to locate the performative activism in Aceh within the wider context of governmentality of aid, yet recognising the feminist potential for transgressive subjectivity, identity and norms as sites of cultural resistance.

5. UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars: Mission Possible?

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This paper examines why the UN has been more successful in managing certain internal conflicts. A mission is considered successful if it limited violence, reduced human suffering, as well as contained the conflict and fulfilled the mission's mandates. General capabilities and contextual factors of 27 UN peacekeeping missions in civil wars are analyzed in order to conclude which aspects of the mission lend strongly to a fully successful conclusion. The four major factors contributing to mission success that the research points out to are the level and consistency of UN commitment, the successful results of diplomatic efforts, and the absence of external support for the belligerents. Peace-enforcement seems to have contributed to success in some missions but complicated the overall peacekeeping effectiveness in other cases. While making overall conclusions on factors leading to success or failure of peacekeeping, the paper examines more in depth the issue of diplomatic efforts focusing not only on their extent but on the ability of peace-makers to achieve the results of negotiations and mediations that would address the underlying conflict issues.