

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Symposium at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

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

SESSION 4 ABSTRACTS

Migrants and camps in a global humanitarian gaze

Chair: Pierluigi Musaro

1. Global Flows as a Theatres of Cruelty: Portraying and Policing Human Mobility from West Africa to EU

Dr. Mika Aaltola, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

mika.aaltola[at]fiia.fi

Politics of compassion for the suffering distant other comprises a spatial geopolitical imagery. The mental separation between communities of good-doers and the communities of distant suffering re-establishes a global map that has existed since the colonial times. However, it is claimed here that spatial imagery camouflages and insulates many of the actual contexts of suffering. Suffering is increasingly being embedded in flows of people across geographical boundaries and in practices aimed at stopping these flows. Global migratory flows constitute a purposeful repetitive action whereby people move and are moved between physically disjointed positions. These flows are disjunctive and chaotic when they collide with boundary practices of existing political community. The mass suffering results from the active efforts to contain the global flows of people escaping their increasingly inhospitable localities plagued by multiple crisis factors. This essay charts the European imageries of the flows of people from the Western Africa to the Canary Islands. Instead of leading to a spectacle compassion, the dying, drowning, and stranded masses were seen as signs of Europe being engulfed by hostile elements. In the public cognition, Europe became the endangered community and compassion was redirected towards it. The essay examines the discursive practices whereby the suffering bodies can be left unrecognized and instead treated as signs of looming danger.

2. Scenes of misery: Inquiring after the responsibility of the consumer?

Anitta Kynsilehto, Eeva Puumala, Tiina Vaittinen & Tarja Väyrynen, COMPORE – Research group on corporeality, movement and politics; School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere

All authors: firstname.lastname at uta.fi

Undocumented or 'irregular' forms of mobility are a site *par excellence* for the convergence of different forms of knowledge. They arouse suspicion on behalf of policy-makers becoming scapegoats for different emergency operations. One of these spectacles was the destruction of 'the Jungle' – an unofficial camp of 'irregular' migrants – in Calais, France, in September 2009. The suggested paper discusses a

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Symposium at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

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

variety of 'theaters' of suffering; 'theater' used in a metaphorical sense. Combining imageries used in the media, products of popular culture such as the film 'Welcome', and a sample of pictures taken at various unofficial migrant camps and squats in Calais and Dunkerque, France, the paper first interrogates the processes of producing these imageries. It then turns to its main focus: the spectator, asking what could be the responsibility of witnessing these imageries. The position of the spectator is analyzed through the figure of 'consumer' of suffering, and the academia is analyzed as one among the wider circles of consumers. The analysis is done by exemplifying the ways in which the photographic material of particular theaters of suffering can be consumed in various different ways within the academia, and by asking what kinds of responsibilities are imbued in these different forms of consumption. Instead of simply picturing suffering within human displacement in contemporary Europe, the paper suggests alternative ways of reading that go beyond a critique of European (mis)management of asylum and migration towards, perhaps, imagining a fundamentally different way of visioning mobility.

3. The politics of maritime surveillance as a tool for alleviation of boat migrants' suffering: does seeing more offer a better humanitarian gaze?

Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, Senior Researcher, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
margab[at]prio.no

The Mediterranean has over the past years become not only the interface between two contrasting continents, but also a theatre of suffering for irregular migrants seeking to reach Europe by sea. This paper argues that maritime surveillance as a tool for better seeing, and thus witnessing at a distance the irregular migrant vessels, has a double edged effect on the plight of these new "boat people".

The paper describes how efforts to build up a European external border surveillance system (EUROSUR) aim at "saving more lives at sea", in addition to the more self-interested efforts of protecting Europe's borders and hindering undetected entries. A stated policy goal is that a more coordinated surveillance effort, with a mutual alert system, can have positive results as it makes it more difficult for each national border guard to claim "we didn't see anything". The paper however shows (1) that surveillance affects migrant strategies, and (2) that seeing does not necessarily lead to a more "humanitarian gaze" (depending on what is done with the information collected). Hence it is argued that seeking to "see more" through surveillance technologies may create new forms of suffering, just further away from our sight. The paper identifies two ways in which this effect is produced. Firstly, increased border surveillance encourages the migrants to find other, and more dangerous routes to reach Europe, with for example longer distances on the open sea. Secondly, while enabling more interceptions of irregular vessels may save lives at sea, the "push-back" strategy that follows, conducting these migrants back to their port of origin, may create new situations of insecurity and suffering.

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Symposium at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

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

4. Urbanization as a Balm: Instant Refugee Camps and an Architecture of Aid

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, Ph.D. candidate, New York University

iyersiddiqi[at]gmail.com

The depiction of refugee crises systematically refer to the architectural tropes of ephemerality: the ubiquitous blue tarp, the military grid of the encampment, the spatial emphasis on the roof rather than the walls. These silently portray the rush of the aid industry to engage with human suffering, an urgency demonstrated by the lack of any permanent construction. Nevertheless, this architectural imagery belies a concrete infrastructure frequently at hand in international aid missions—global supply chains, state-of-the-art satellite hardware, and the housing and public buildings that accompany a globally mobile workforce. As displacements become increasingly protracted—the average lasting seventeen years—this semi-permanent impermanence leaves a spatial footprint.

This construction of an architectural imagery of humanitarian response, and its correlation in actual humanitarian space, traces back to the concept of prefabrication of dwellings that emerged in the early twentieth century and dominated architectural discourse in the post-World War II era. With the advent of the shelter “kit,” an *ad hoc* city could be assembled overnight from materials flown or driven to sites. For example, a delivery for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF/Doctors Without Borders) may now include an inflatable medical hospital and 10,000 prefabricated shelters. The on-site juxtaposition of these imported commercial-grade items with more “organic” components of a settlement—like dwellings constructed in a timeless local architectural vernacular—challenges the tropes of the temporary camp, and the attendant imaging of a vital response to suffering. On a larger scale, the bricks-and-mortar outcomes of refugee crises in the past two decades—for example, Dadaab, Kenya, as one glaring example of a settlement approaching half a million denizens—further complicates the notion of suffering and its abatement via spatial means, as the humanitarian aid complex engages overtly with the professional practice of city planning.

Architectural historical discourses ranging from debates on new town planning to the aesthetics and politics of pneumatic architecture have wrestled with issues of mechanized rollout in ways that might help to reconceptualize the political or sociological terms of the refugee camp. This paper aims to examine these in light of recent examples from the Horn of Africa. These will be supplemented by first-person interviews and on-site studies of critical nodes in the global humanitarian supply chain.