A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Estella Carpi, *The Politics of Crisis-Making: Forced Displacement and Cultures of Assistance in Lebanon*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780253066398 (paper); ISBN: 9780253066381 (cloth); ISBN: 9780253066404 (ebook)

Few volumes offer such a comprehensive and layered examination of the catastrophic workings of aid in Lebanon as Estella Carpi's *The Politics of Crisis-Making: Forced Displacement and Cultures of Assistance in Lebanon*. Carpi's telling account confronts the shortcomings and shortsightedness of humanitarian operations, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Beirut's Dahiye district and in the northern region of Akkar since 2011. Weaving together an impressive array of narratives collected from local and international aid actors, displaced citizens, refugees and migrants, as well as government officials, Carpi draws out the ways that aid in Lebanon is far from apolitical. She argues that aid operation is bound in ethnicized moral economies that deny its own politics, reproducing a self-fulfilling prophecy that Lebanon cannot be trusted to take care of itself.

Humanitarian scholars of other Southern localities subjected to self-moralizing Northern aid interventions would find this an all-too-familiar story. But this constitutes only part of Carpi's exposé. Carpi is interested in how the long-term presence of short-term humanitarianism—a temporal contradiction she terms "develop-manitarianism" (p.6)—mediates Lebanese society as it cycles through a rapid succession of emergencies that resulted in the displacement of Lebanese citizens as well as Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and Sudanese since the July War in 2006. The cyclicality of aid inscribes displacement with sociopolitical and moral codes that constantly re-classify and re-sculpt societal relations through the distribution and withdrawal of resources, international personnel, and care. Such emergencies fuel the aid sector, through which international aid workers, local aid and faith-based organizations, and Lebanese politicians construct crisis out of emergency: "The crisis-making machine thrives on emergencization, rather than on emergency per se" (p.161). This "tyranny of emergency" (ibid.) is used by politicians and humanitarians to explain away the dire conditions shaped by legacies of colonial violence and proxy wars, re-assigning blame or creating new problems altogether, paralyzing long-term development.

A significant contribution of *The Politics of Crisis-Making* lies in its capturing of the voices and emotions of those who receive or wish to receive aid. The incisive commentaries Carpi cites throughout the book reveal that those on the receiving end of aid are not only aware of the ethnic and moral politics humanitarians and politicians play into—they are also angry, frustrated, and disillusioned. Many believe humanitarians are, in the words of one Syrian refugee, "as corrupt as the people who manage to get something from them [Lebanese politicians]" (p.83). Tapping into their emotionally charged rhetoric, Carpi bypasses common debates over dichotomies of the deserving versus scheming refugee, or the passive versus agentive aid recipient. Instead, she once again shows that there is a more interesting argument to be made by simply listening to their critiques: humanitarian actions are often misplaced, neglectful, and even harmful despite intentions to "do good". For example, distributing bread and other foods to displaced communities and ignoring their financial struggles to find housing and buy medication causes more problems than it claims to solve—and the claims themselves mask underlying structural inequalities. Furthermore, humanitarians require Syrian refugees to depoliticize their own histories, "encouraging passivity and inviting refugees to embrace a politics of victimhood" (p.97). Carpi writes how refugees became outraged by this reduction to bare life, with many endorsing rejecting aid outright as the ultimate symbol of their "autoreconstruction, self-determination, and the rehabilitation of their political life" (ibid.). Most cannot afford to reject aid due to the lack of legal avenues for participation in economic activity in Lebanon, pointing to the real catastrophe: not displacement itself but the catastrophizing of displacement by the aid regime's denial of political realities. While these stories are numerous and poignantly illustrative of the complex position of aid recipients within a pan-politicized context—where the need for humanitarian assistance is narrowly measured in relation to suffering caused by the enemy of a particular political moment (Israel or Assad's Syria, for example)—the book would in places benefit from more in-depth storytelling to accompany the quotations.

Carpi's work offers an abundance of new and original concepts in addition to develop-manitarianism: from "humanitarian tourism" (p.148) to "epistemic failure" (p.145) and the "violence of absence" (p.87) to "humanitarian distances" (p.142). At times, I found these multi-

layered frameworks to over-complicate otherwise clear arguments where lay terms could suffice. Still, perhaps Carpi's strongest conceptual contribution is the framework of "Southism" (p.142), outlined in her penultimate chapter. Southism is the product of the coloniality of humanitarianism in which international aid workers hold biases and prejudices regarding the capacity of people in the South to help themselves. It is a "structural relationship" (p.143) within which the professional expertise of foreign aid workers, who are migrants themselves and often lack contextual knowledge, is deemed more valuable than that of the local aid provider or the displaced or migrant aid recipient. As Carpi acknowledges, she is not the first to make this argument, but her novel concept provides humanitarian scholars and aid actors with specific language for examining the structural inequalities built into humanitarianism along relational and intersecting axes of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion that are not always geographically bound.

The concept of Southism should invite new reflections on North–South encounters in humanitarianism studies. Recent humanitarian scholarship has worked hard to problematize the homogenized figure of the "local" in response to the contemporary donor-driven humanitarian trend toward localization. However, as Carpi states, the "international" is rarely afforded the same critical depth (p.155). The book illustrates that, by unwittingly playing into blurred boundaries between aid recipients, aid providers, and nonrecipients in local politics, international actors can also complicate distinctions between the local and the international. Indeed, at its core, the book could be taken as an argument against siloes in humanitarian studies. It invites questions about what happens when the local does not map neatly onto the South, or the international onto the North, or when local or Southern actors occupy international positions. Following on from Carpi's proposition that Southism be "degeographicized" (p.155), I would like to throw in a question for scholars and aid actors to widen our lens beyond the local–international dichotomy: as university departments of development studies have begun moving from the "international" to the "global", what could Southism enlighten about the "global" in humanitarianism? What does *global* aid look like? What *could* it look like?

This brings me to my final point. Carpi's discussion of Southism arrives at a conclusion in the final line of the fifth chapter: "there is no such thing like a 'natural instinct' to be a

humanitarian" (p.156). Though not explicit, Carpi seems to speak here of humanitarianism in the professional sense; that is, in what kind of world is humanitarianism a lucrative career for a select few and possibly the only source of welfare for most others? But taken in the broader sense, this statement appears to contradict the picture she paints just a few pages later of Beirut residents looking after one another following the 2020 explosion of ammonium nitrate at the Port of Beirut (p.162-163). Beyond the bureaucratized international aid system, this book implies, there already exists a natural inclination to care for others that the system (often intentionally) overlooks. But the final chapter stops short of following this argument to imagine what humanitarian futures should or could look like: "Whether or not humanitarianism should be there is an unhelpful and, fundamentally, an impossible question to answer" (p.168). On the contrary, I believe there is no better time to finally confront (and go beyond) this "whether or not" question, especially if, as Carpi astutely contends, we as researchers are implicated in the very inequalities we aim to critique. How would collective action, like the kind displayed in the aftermath of the Beirut blast, frame emergency differently? In a world of territorially bounded nation-states, how might de-geographicized "collective action" (p.168) transcend international-to-local borders or North-to-South lines? And what are the moral economies involved in these new relations? Humanitarian scholarship has begun taking the question of humanitarian futures seriously (Khoury and Scott 2024; Pallister-Wilkins et al 2023; Slim 2024) and Carpi's *The Politics of Crisis-Making* has much to contribute to this conversation.

References

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August 2025