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Emergency

Traditionally defined as an unexpected and serious situation requiring immediate action to solve it, emergency is the primary reason for mobilizing humanitarian actors to intervene in contexts affected by human-made or natural disasters. Employed in situations of human conflict, the notion of “complex emergency” first took place in Mozambique toward the end of the 1980s when aid to the displaced was needed (Calhoun 2008). It indicates a multiplicity of causes underlying emergencies, with the involvement of several actors, beyond just victim, and the need for an international response. Unlike natural disasters, complex emergencies “have a singular ability to erode and destroy the cultural, civil, political and economic integrity of established societies” (Duffield 1994: 3).

In more recent academic literature, the state of emergency is no longer interpreted as a matter of fate, but rather as a geopolitical strategy to set out specific global achievements, and the historical result of longstanding economic, political, and social failures. Thereby, most factors that give rise to emergencies are identifiable, even though largely dealt with by humanitarians as autonomous problems to which there is no solution but intervention. Humanitarian work tends to approach emergencies as discontinuities, for which intervention and aid are the only strategies able to restore linearity and predictability. As such, emergencies delineate the temporal and spatial limits of crisis and risk and, therefore, shed light on the urgent character of humanitarian action. Adopting a critical approach, emergency and general tendencies to interpret political processes as catastrophes have increasingly been studied as modalities of governance to preserve social and political order by establishing

“states of exception” that serve as repressive and control measures (Ophir 2010; Vazquez-Arroyo 2013). The idea of emergency has allowed interventionists to imagine a norm to which there should be an exception and a deviation from times of “normality.” The exceptional use of security measures protects the status quo in the Global North and highlights threats and risks in the Global South. For these reasons, emergency has been prioritized in the mobilization of international resources vis-à-vis chronic vulnerabilities and social predicaments, to the extent that scholars have talked of the “tyranny of emergency” (Minear 2002). In international media and global politics, the idea of emergency easily makes the headlines, and, therefore, its official declaration needs to be accurately considered as an important instrument of decision-making and the political organization of society.

Current concepts of protracted human displacement and consequent provision of long-term humanitarian assistance challenge emergency as the *sine qua non* condition for (both aid and military) humanitarian interventions, as international responses today continue when crisis becomes routinized. Likewise, while the concept of emergency has traditionally set the separation line between humanitarian and development practices, as well as short-term and long-term interventions, the increasing number of protracted crises has unraveled how problematic the technical tendency is to assess the beginning and the end of emergencies, and to place definitional and temporal boundaries around an emergency.

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