AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES AND HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATIONS

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COMMENTARY (END OF CHAPTER 8)

Between instrumentalisation, depoliticisation, and legitimation of humanitarian action in Venezuela

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Focusing on Venezuela, this chapter by Garlin Politis is a good example of how humanitarian action can be understood as an *arena*, as depicted by Hilhorst and Jansen (2010), in which multiple actors shape the everyday realities of aid by negotiating, contesting, and using its outcomes to further their interests. The political scenario in Venezuela shapes these interactions in particular ways. Here I would like to highlight two processes suggested in Garlin Politis' chapter: the instrumentalisation and depoliticisation of aid.

The instrumentalisation of aid is as old as aid itself (Barnett, 2012). In the humanitarian arena, it is common to see actors instrumentalising the outcomes of aid for their own agendas and interests (Donini, 2012). Alongside describing this reality, Garlin Politis' chapter also shows how the alliance of opposition parties, the Government of Venezuela, and multiple non-government organisations (NGOs) also instrumentalised the very idea of the existence of a humanitarian crisis. This is important, as declaring a humanitarian crisis is a political act that involves a range of messages that many actors contest, exploit, or remain silent about (Hilhorst and Mena, 2021). The messages can include statements indicating that the government in power is not capable of responding to the needs of the people, the recognition that there is an ongoing socio-economic predicament in the country, or the need to involve actors (many times external) in the implementation of public policy and in the delivery of goods and social services. Each of these three messages has been contested in Venezuela, as depicted in Garlin Politis' chapter.

A reading group discussion on humanitarian action in Latin America (see Mena, et al., 2022) and my ongoing research on the topic in the region suggested the idea that declaring or neglecting a humanitarian crisis is a sensitive topic for Latin-American states. Many countries see accepting the

presence of a humanitarian crisis as a problem of legitimacy, in which the government can be portrayed as failing in its duties. Moreover, humanitarian crises open the door to international aid, which is feared in the region due to possible interventionism from foreign powers. Last but not least, in Latin America, humanitarian crises are associated with images of problems happening elsewhere, such as famines in Africa or war-related conflicts in the Middle East. Governments therefore tend to reject the idea of crises for fear of being associated with such upheavals. In many authoritarian spaces, moreover, the idea of a conflict or large-scale disasters in their territories is usually vetoed, as the regimes themselves often come to power claiming they will solve ongoing crises.

The instrumentalisation of the crises and outcomes of aid, moreover, has resulted in the creation of spaces for collaboration whilst at the same time hindering humanitarian action in Venezuela, a not uncommon paradox in the humanitarian arena (Barnett, 2012; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). On the one hand, such instrumentalisation has forced collaboration between governmental actors, NGOs, and civil servants for the provision of aid. These collaborations, however, have introduced multiple dilemmas for the aid actors mentioned in Garlin Politis' chapter, ranging from the limits of humanitarian principles to the possibilities to be seen as legitimising the Government and human rights violations. On the other hand, the chapter indicates that actions such as the 'humanitarian concerts', instead of mobilising and facilitating aid intervention, actually hindered possible negotiations between the Government and opposition groups. Humanitarian actors are also seen as an instruments of political interference and therefore need to be contained. Thus, the instrumentalisation of aid in the case of Venezuela shows how humanitarian organisations can be seen as 'a prize to capture or a threat to neutralise' (DeMars, 2005, in Dijkzeul and Hilhorst, 2016).

Regarding the depoliticisation of aid, the chapter depicts well the tensions behind the historical assumption that humanitarian action can be separated from politics (Donini, 2012; Kleinfeld, 2007). It first illustrates how aid agencies and even opposition groups seek to 'humanitarianise' their actions and so dress them up as ethical and non-political, concealing 'their intended or unintended political roles' (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010, 1119). Secondly, in Venezuela, the depoliticisation of aid can be seen as a strategy to defuse political sensitivities of 'collaborating with those who would otherwise be considered enemies (strategic depoliticisation) and of remaining safe (coerced depoliticisation)', as described by Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni (2022, 1115), referring to other authoritarian cases.

The depoliticisation of aid, nevertheless, needs to be seen as a political act, particularly when aid becomes part of the delivery of public services

and is entangled with government actions and actors at the local level, as the chapter shows. As such, the depoliticisation of aid in Venezuela unveils two key characteristics of a humanitarian arena: the outcomes of aid result from ongoing negotiations between multiple actors, but not every actor is equally powerful in that process. While aid organisations see such collaborations as the only way to survive and use depoliticisation strategies to overcome the tensions and dilemmas of doing so, the Government has the power to impose these collaborations and by so doing ensures that its actions are labelled humanitarian and less political. The (de)politicisation of aid then becomes a legitimation strategy for different actors to interact and respond to the threat that each sees in the other.

As illustrated by these instrumentalisation and depoliticisation processes, Garlin Politis' chapter clearly indicates that humanitarian action is not only driven by the need to aid others and by humanitarian actors' relationship with those affected. It is also driven by those actors' interaction with other actors and by the context in which they operate, with authoritarian and conflict-affected spaces being a particular example (Mena and Hilhorst, 2022). Although these spaces are usually seen as restrictive with little space for an actor's agency, Galin Politis' chapter goes beyond that idea and shows the multiple and dynamic negotiations and actions that actors display to manoeuvre in these contexts. In fact, it seems at moments that these authoritarian spaces, due to their lack of legitimacy, can be more malleable that those more 'democratic' ones with the legitimacy to impose regulations, policies, laws, and frameworks.

While Garlin Politis describes the difficulties of conducting research in Venezuela, the chapter would have benefitted from somehow including the voice of those affected by and receiving humanitarian assistance. In a humanitarian arena, all actors have agency, including those affected, who often claim legitimacy in the system for being the ones in need and the victims of the crises – 'victimcy', as coined by Utas (2005), to represent the agency of self-representing as victim.

The humanitarian arena of Venezuela thus shows how authoritarian and conflict-affected scenarios in Latin America relate with humanitarian practices in particular ways as a result of the specificities of the region in terms of how humanitarian action is conceived and perceived, including the region's history of interventionism and the legitimisation strategies of its countries. More specifically, the chapter by Galin Politis manages to illustrate the everyday realities of aid in an authoritarian scenario: its contestation, depoliticisation and instrumentalisation mechanisms, and how these are negotiated by multiple actors to further their own interests and be able to build an aid *assemblage*.

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