

Life Lived in Relief by Ilana Feldman studies the relationship between refugee politics and humanitarianism through the experience of generations of Palestinian refugees. Refugee politics is studied through the lens of politics of living. The author shows how the Palestinians have transformed what it means to be a refugee in an attempt to both survive in the short term and preserve hopes for and possibility of returning to their homeland in the future.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the rest of the developments. In particular, it explains what are the principal values of humanitarianism and introduces the notions of politics of living, punctuated humanitarianism and discordant politics. The next chapter focuses on humanitarian classification and how dynamics of punctuated humanitarianism is reflected in the definition of refugees. Chapter 3 drives home the point that humanitarian intervention is not of constant nature at all, and can even oscillate between two extremes like rations delivery and development projects. Chapter 4 discusses the dilemmas of the humanitarian purpose and discordances in the humanitarian space.

Chapter 5 presents in great detail how humanitarianism, which is ideally apolitical, is intertwined with Palestinian refugee politics. Chapter 6 discusses how the elderly people expected to prepare to die in a refugee camp. Chapter 7 elucidates the many roles played by the aid workers, who are often refugees themselves, and narrates the history of “revolutionary humanitarianism” in Palestine. Finally, the last chapter links Palestinian refugees to the rest of the world, and contemplates what kind of future is possible for refugees today.

A central object of study of the book is politics of living, defined as “the ways that people survive and strive within humanitarian spaces”. The politics of living in a Palestinian refugee camp is in itself of independent interest; however, as the author argues, it is also crucial to understanding Palestinian politics in general as “the ways Palestinians come

together to make claims” does not conform to the usual separation between the private and the public sphere. Given that the host governments may view organized politics in camps as threatening, it is unsurprising that a major part of Palestinian politics takes place in the form of politics of living.

A substantial amount of work is dedicated to investigating how humanitarianism ends up playing a role in refugee politics. More specifically, the author argues that humanitarianism provides a language and tools for not only politics of suffering, but also “politics of aspiration, of existence, and of refusal”. For example, the meeting at the Community Development Office in Jerash refugee camp with a Jordanian politician described in Chapter 5 is an example of Palestinians presenting rights that would improve their standing in the host country as humanitarian rights. The latter three kinds of politics are usually carried out by first invoking the notion of a “refugee”.

The book argues that the humanitarian classification of who is a refugee is the impetus for many types of politics of life and at the same time one of the biggest causes of its discordance. Both points are well-supported and bolster the author’s main thesis that the Palestinians, over the course of their protracted displacement, have transformed a refugee from a person eligible to receive aid to a political entity. A recent proof of this would be the presence of a refugee team in the 2016 summer Olympics.

As we read Chapter 5, the true breadth of the term politics of life becomes clearer. For example, the author states that “this politics of living does not always entail, or require, a change in conditions” and gives the act of ascribing a value to certain actions by refugees as an example of politics of life. Having such a broad definition that captures many aspects of normal human life affects the conclusions derived, most notably the central statement that the refugee politics is discordant. Recall that the politics in refugee camps is rarely a “politics of

assembly”, and that the fundamental concerns of Palestinian refugees to secure a living and to maintain the right to return, among many others, are inherently competing. Therefore, the refugee politics is inevitably unaligned as it involves a wide range of things done by a group in a precarious condition with competing objectives. But it is also the case that the book identifies many instances of politics that are discordant in “in their address, aims, and frames of reference”, and even across generations. Another prominent example of this would be repeated resistance by Palestinian refugees in Syria to long-term developmental projects by UNRWA (Gabián, 2012). The contradiction apparent in this case is canonical in some sense: the refugees need both economic safety and long-term development, but they are worried that any semi-permanent settlement and loss of the refugee status would make returning home unlikely. Therefore, they engage in long-term expansion of the rights of refugees while remaining refugees.

The other main object of study of the book is how humanitarianism has evolved during the Palestinian ordeal. The author argues that protracted conflicts are incompatible with the nature of humanitarianism. As Miriam Ticktin (2016) also writes in “Thinking beyond humanitarian borders”, “humanitarianism addresses only the present: emergencies that require immediate action”. As a result, it is unsurprising that the humanitarians lose the sense of purpose over time, despite the fact that refugee populations tend to periodically need immediate relief as their condition oscillates between “cruddy” and “acute”. But we should also carefully consider the possibility of switching from aid to developmental projects. As mentioned before, this is against certain political interests of the Palestinian refugees, and their right to self-determination obstructs such a transition. However, the possibility still remains, as illustrated by the past activity of organizations like Samed and Palestinian Red

Crescent Society. These are remarkable examples of “revolutionary humanitarianism” that was aligned with long-term national interests.

In her concluding remarks, the author evaluates the Palestinian problem against the backdrop of other protracted refugee crises and concludes that the situation of Palestinian refugees is unexceptional, and that from the humanitarian perspective, it is in fact paradigmatic. This is convincing as the many features of how refugee politics and humanitarianism have evolved since 1948 are manifestations of fundamental aspects of human condition and agency, as opposed to the fact that the displaced people were Palestinians. For example, any group of refugees with a strong desire to eventually resettle back in their homeland who are forced to live in grave economic conditions would probably end up pursuing discordant politics focused on both survival and holding onto the right to return. But the strength of the desire to return home may be a factor that distinguishes Palestinian refugees from other groups. For example, consider the Japanese foreign aid aimed at “making persons” (Watanabe, 2014). It is not inconceivable that a group of refugees may be willing to accept this form of developmental aid and to assimilate to their host country, and their host country may not view such integration as a threat. This, combined with other specific properties of the Palestinian refugee crisis (e.g. the fact that the camps are stretched over multiple countries), could make one hesitant to deem the situation as perfectly general.

Life Lived in Relief, through describing and analyzing experiences of ordinary people, shows us how Palestinians have transformed the notion of a refugee and made us understand limitations of humanitarianism. The generality of the Palestinian case and the modern exodus of people from war-torn Middle East makes this study poignantly relevant today.

References

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