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Datafication & Dividuals: Exploitation and Shifting Subjectivities in the Context of Digital Humanitarianism

By Jeremy Ahearn

ABSTRACT

In his "Postscript on Societies of Control" (1992), Gilles Deleuze describes a fundamental reorganization of society that—through new technologies—transforms distinct, regularly-monitored individuals into aggregated, constantly-tracked dividuals. This change is reflected in the emergence of Digital Humanitarianism, a paradigm shift in humanitarian intervention that apprehends interrelated processes of digitalization and datafication as critical to life-saving projects. Grounded in "Big Data," this development is driven by transnational tech firms that profit from the generation, analysis, and sale of information for the "social good". However, critical scholars have expressed concerns that this digital-data episteme and its technologies continue colonial legacies of exploitation and epistemicide against vulnerable populations in the Global South. This paper, through an analysis of humanitarian wearables (specifically, mental health applications for refugees), argues that new technologies in digital humanitarianism are fundamentally altering the subjectivity of aid recipients and that a decolonial turn is necessary in future intervention.

Keywords: Deleuze, Humanitarianism, Humanitarian Wearables, Control Societies
JEL Codes: F54;H12; I15; Z13

INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian sector exists to help vulnerable populations in their time of need. Humanitarian action, "time-limited endeavour[s], bounded in space and content, with a narrow, principled focus on saving lives in times of extremis, and undertaken by a limited number of actors" (World Disasters Report 2018:19), is delivered from those with a perceived excess of means to deal with crisis to those with a lack. Though espousing ideological non-partisanship, besides industry-wide claims to some "higher moral principle that sees the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action" (Barnett 2013:381), certain principles pervade the aid industry. One such doctrine is "humanitarian neophilia" (Scott-Smith 2016)—a partiality toward technological innovation, entrenched in technologically deterministic attitudes obliging unidirectional transfers from the global North to the global South (Cherlet 2014; Avgerou 2010).

This tendency to view technology as panacea has contributed to a new paradigm in the sector, Digital Humanitarianism. Defined here as "humanitarian intervention conducted at a distance, sometimes without physical presence on the ground, through digital tools and often in an online, collaborative manner including citizen participation" (Aarvik 2020:43), the tools for this era of aid are increasingly developed by the social divisions of Big Tech firms engaged in partnerships with agencies like the UN, World Bank, and Medicines Sans Frontières. Critical to this epoch is a discursive shift—driven by Big Tech—toward a quantified, data-centric epistemology in which a "dearth of data is framed as a 'barrier' that endangers the very feasibility of social good" (Magalhães & Couldry 2021:346). Concurrently, this data generation is producing unforeseen profits for transnational tech firms (Thatcher et. al 2016; Ricaurte 2019; Couldry & Mejias 2019).

The means to collect such necessary data have come through increasingly prevalent "humanitarian wearables". These technologies are understood here as "smart devices that can be placed on or inside aid recipients' bodies for many purposes, including tracking and protecting health, safety and nutrition" (Sandvik 2019:34-35). One wearable of particular interest for this paper is "Trauma Apps" for refugees (Abdelrahman 2023), cost-effective software applications supposedly developed to help displaced peoples manage post-traumatic stress symptoms. However, researchers (Crawford & Finn 2014; Yates & Paquette 2010; Sandvik 2019; Magalhães & Couldry 2021; Abdelrahman 2023) have also found that in the context of humanitarian emergencies, data from these wearables is often mined from vulnerable populations without their full knowledge or consent. Questions of ethics arise as precarious individuals, such as refugees, become dividuals: indistinguishable "masses, samples, data, markets" subject to constant surveillance, aggregation, and exploitation (Deleuze 1992:5).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dividualization

Building on Foucault's (1978a;1978b) theorization of disciplinary societies—in which individuals are conditioned to self-regulate behavior by subtle, regular, and productive power relations—Deleuze (1992) declares that a new technique of population management, the society of control, is being developed in conjunction with the advent of digitalized technologies. Rather than facing exploitation in specific geo-temporal episodes (the school, the factory, the hospital), one is now constantly capitalized on by computerized tools that track, quantify, and analyze all aspects of life. The purpose of this surveillance is not just increased productivity or popular docility, as in previous paradigms. Instead, technologies of control work to produce data, the "new oil" (Abdelrahman 2023). This data makes populations hyper-legible, rendering them susceptible to more advanced techniques of control in which power is increasingly difficult to resist (Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Kelly 2006).

What results from this transition between socio-productive organizations is a change in subjectivity for affected populations. In that the data that s/he is constantly producing through perpetual surveillance must be aggregated to be of higher value (Thatcher et. al 2016), his/her ego is essentially incorporated into the collected information-mass of the entire population. In this way, "contemporary subjectivity [is] increasingly less bound by the outlines of what we conceive as an individual in modern terms" (Bastidas 2023:2). Those exercising power do not govern individuals but dividuals—ever-modulating subjects whose identifiable features can only be understood in the aggregate. In this subjectivity, one is not a rational, autonomous whole but the amalgamation of data points contributing to now-inseparable assemblages of information. Policy and projects are then modeled for datasets, not people, leading to generalizations that facilitate exploitation, repression, and an under-delivery of services.

Humanitarianism, Data Colonialism and Its Discontents

Critiques of the digitalized Humanitarian Sector relevant to this paper are evaluations of its epistemic monism, technological determinism, and neo-colonial structure. Barnett (2013) addresses the first of these issues by deconstructing the supposed anti-political (Ferguson 1990) nature of humanitarian intervention. Although portrayed as objective, unbiased, rational actors (Escobar 1995), humanitarian organizations act "every bit the sovereign, they have the power over life and death by virtue of their ability to move action and supplies to some populations rather than others" (Barnett 2013:393). These biopolitics (Foucault 2018) are conducted with a specific worldview in mind—one grounded epistemologically and teleologically in the historical moment of Big Data (Ricaurte 2019:350). In this era, the generation of billions of amalgamated datum dominates the direction of social, technological, and economic change. What results is "epistemicide," the elimination of diverse knowledges and experiences to accommodate an imposing, universalistic worldview (de Sousa Santos 2020:217). To receive lifesaving aid, populations must submit to this data-centric ideology and its mechanizations.

As with the broader development industry, the humanitarian sector—reflected by the digital humanitarianism paradigm—is influenced by residual technological determinism. Although the opposite is generally understood by industrial professionals, there is a lingering sentiment that the newest technologies, regardless of their intellectual context, can and should be transferred to vulnerable populations in a unidirectional exchange between North and South (Cherlet 2014; Ricaurte 2019; Avgerou 2010). However, as Tomaya explains, this strategy is ineffective as technology cannot "substitute for deficient intent and capability on the part of the stakeholders" to effect greater institutional change (2011:76). Therefore, this method of technology transfer without political reform may contribute to greater inequality in situations of humanitarian crisis.

Scholars (Thatcher et. al 2016; Ricaurte 2019; Magalhães & Couldry 2021; Abdelrahman 2023) have also charged digital humanitarian systems as contributing to "data colonialism". This phenomenon is understood here as combining "the predatory, extractive practices of historical colonialism with state-of-the-art methods of quantification" (Abdelrahman 2023:522). Integral to this expropriation is ongoing digital accumulation by dispossession (Thatcher et. al 2016; Harvey 2003), in which more and more of the world is being quantified, commodified, and appropriated. The datafication— "the conversion of ever more aspects of life into digital data for algorithmic mining and semiautonomous decision making"— of life is supported by the adverse digital incorporation (Heeks 2022) of vulnerable populations into digital systems by humanitarian aid agencies. As data is produced by now-constantly surveyed dividuals, Big Tech extracts the surplus value created from this information without the knowledge, consent, or democratic involvement of the exploited—reflecting colonial patterns of domination and exploitation of the South by the North.

Humanitarian Wearables & Informed Consent

Humanitarian wearables have the potential (Müller & Sou 2019) to assist in life-saving humanitarian interventions but, reflecting the technological determinism of the sector, are often implemented without a holistic consideration of ethical consequences. Although wearables have existed in forms such as prosthetics and distribution wristbands for as long as humanitarian assistance, novel digitalized technologies such as tracking devices and wellness applications provide previously unknown levels of information on wearers. The incredible amount of data—spanning from physical biodata such as DNA, fingerprints, weight, and race to immaterial "mental prints" consisting of attitudes, sentiments, and thoughts—gathered from these devices has contributed to the creation of "digital bodies" for the wearers (Sandvik 2023; Abdelrahman 2023:513). Reinforcing a Cartesian Mind-Body dualism, scholars (Sandvik 2023; Abdelrahman 2023; Thatcher et. al 2016) have declared this intrusion into the mental facilities of aid recipients a new stage in the legibility-production of vulnerable populations: so much so that the subjectivity of these peoples has shifted. Sandvik (2019; 2020; 2023) is especially key to evaluating these concerns, developing theorizations of not only what humanitarian wearables do beyond their stated goals but also what further possibilities can be expected by likely functional creeps.

Ignored in this data collection are the ethical concerns (Crawford & Finn 2014; Thatcher et. al 2016; Magalhães & Couldry 2021; Yates & Paquette 2010; Ricaurte 2019) of extracting data from the world's most vulnerable populations. Big Tech and governments—the beneficiaries of this extraction—response to this quandary has been to appeal to a discursively reconceptualized "greater" or "social" good. In this epistemological reorientation, what is "good" is universalized as "datafied, probabilistic, and profitable" (Magalhães & Couldry 2021:343)—with Big Tech uniquely positioned to be the sole provider of services, greatly reducing expenses for ever-retreating states. Therefore, when data is unquestionably scraped from social media posts during disasters (Crawford & Finn 2014), sensitive data is regularly sold to third-party affiliates (Sandvik 2019), and children have their behavior digitally monitored without parent's consent (Magalhães & Couldry 2021), it is in the name of some higher moral initiative. Additionally, firms require users to sign onto convoluted End-User-License-Agreements to use their services, knowing that one cannot digest all the privileges this affords the corporation. In this asymmetrical relation of power and information, users cannot give informed consent (Nijhawan et. al 2014) to the tech firms that coerce them into providing data.

METHODOLOGY

The resources collected to construct this essay were provided by multiple online academic research engines (e.g., scholar.google.com; jstor.org; lse.ac.uk/library); the course syllabus for DV 483-Information Communication Technologies and Socio-Economic Development; and the author's prior knowledge of French post-war philosophy. There is a gap in the literature regarding the application of Deleuze's philosophy to the paradigm of digital humanitarianism and this paper hopes to help fill said space. The irony in using AI-powered algorithms to find supporting evidence for a critique of an increasingly datafied world is acknowledged.

The analysis conducted on the literature comes from a critical viewpoint not to discourage the use of new technologies in the humanitarian sector, but to assist future projects in considering a wider range of factors in aid intervention. Although there were time and funding limits for this project, it would have been strengthened by interviews with users of humanitarian wearables to gain a more intimate knowledge of their experience with these technologies in direct relation to the subject matter here discussed.

ANALYSIS

In her evaluation of the range of applications designed to help refugees manage the symptoms of mental health issues, Abdelrahman (2023) details the deepening commodification of vulnerable populations brought about by technologically deterministic digital humanitarian intervention. One such method of profit-generation is connected to the pathologizing of trauma for displaced peoples. Often diagnosed with the principally Western, neoliberalizing diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Syndrome Disorder (Linklater 2020), refugees are encouraged by aid organizations to utilize humanitarian wearables to address their newly labeled afflictions. In using these "gamified" applications—which use epistemic determinist (Cherlet 2014; Escobar 1995) features such as goals, levels, and feedback to "influence or trigger a desired behavioral change among" refugees (Abdelrahman 2023:520) —wearers simultaneously develop tendencies of self-discipline and generate incredible amounts of data from aspects of life not-yet-datafied (Ricaurte 2019). This collected information supplies the almost $70 billion market for biometric data dominated by Big Tech, a reward for taking on the digital man's burden of service provision for the world's most vulnerable (Abdelrahman 2023; Thatcher et. al 2016).

Besides volunteering information to these applications for the perceived benefit of trauma management, refugees may be coerced into utilizing these wearables so that they can "prove their state of trauma" to access services such as protection, resettlement, and asylum (Abdelrahman 2023). As detailed, this obligation follows a trend of questionable data-collection ethics in digital humanitarianism (Crawford & Finn 2014; Yates and Paquette 2010). Generally induced to quantify phenomenon of the body and mind, the displaced individual engaged with these digital tools is molded into a "smart refugee…a node in a network of information flow, constantly connected to digital technology, at once receiving and providing real-time data" (Abdelrahman 2023:513). Herein lies the instrument effect (Ferguson 1990) of humanitarian wearables—tracking and quantification are made "a permanent feature of life, expanding and deepening the basis on which human beings an exploit each other" (Couldry & Mejias 2019:244). The individual's subjectivity is thus changed into one of perpetual division and fragility: their socially constructed identity restructured under pressures of data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias 2019), neoliberal "gamification" (Abdelrahman 2023), hyper-surveillance (Sandvik 2019) and the "greater good" (Crawford & Finn 2014).

The transition in subjectivity entailed by Abdelrahman's (2023) article should be understood as exemplary of the dividualization of vulnerable populations in an increasingly datafied world, supporting the epistemological reorganization from disciplinarity to control societies (Deleuze 1992). The dividual is victim to their hyper-legibility, s/he is governed not as a coherent ego but as thousands of generic models built from the amassed information collected from others with shared characteristics. The smart refugee—in his/her constant production of data-value, repressive self-monitoring, and endless submission to aggregation—is therefore the archetypal inhabitant of the control society. S/he does not receive the individualized, docility-producing psychotherapeutic treatment pertinent to the disciplinary society, (Foucault 1978a), s/he is provided a generalized trauma management program based on a caricature of his/her identity-experience. "The specific experience of the refugee characters" (Abdelrahman 2023:518) is avoided in these applications because they are designed for dividual subjects, who are engendered to modulate their behaviors to align with the data-predicted caricatures of the groups with which they associate. Their personhood—their actions and outlook—is fundamentally changed by these imagined, amalgamated versions of themselves. The smart refugee, the dividual, is endlessly reducible to the datasets to which s/he is forced to contribute. Besides being highly exploitative, these applications are ineffective in treating refugees in that they do not provide specific, tailored mechanisms of care.

The vulnerability of these reoriented, dividualized refugees is key to their profitability for transnational tech corporations. Abdelrahman (2023) makes the point that the market for mental health management apps has exploded in the context of states shrinking away from their responsibilities toward susceptible populations and turning toward private-public-partnerships to find cost-effective alternatives. To assist with "[t]he burden of mental health care for refugees" (Abdelrahman 2023:517), Big Tech has dispatched its social divisions to help international aid organizations in developing and implementing technologies for the so-called social good. Predicting such a development 30 years prior, Deleuze writes, "[w]e are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world" (1992:6). Equipped with a fiduciary responsibility to their shareholders, firms rapidly enter and exit this market—leaving a "digital litter" of hundreds of defunct, haphazardly constructed applications in their wake (Abdelrahman 2023:514). The result of the market incentive's entrance into the realm of humanitarian intervention—supposedly only committed to life-saving aid—is a gold rush to extract as much profit as possible from refugees who are obligated to use these wearables by need of genuine assistance or requirement for other service provision. A perverse quid-pro-quo occurs, where "[i]n exchange for the quantification of the everyday, individuals are offered notional advantages" such as their survival (Thatcher et. al 2016:999).

To expand the society of control—to create more vulnerable, exploitable, trackable populations—those who exercise power need information. A dividual is only produced once an individual is hyper-legible, his/her subjectivity divisible among innumerable indicators that can predict and mold behavior. For this reason, "what is really the most valuable commodity in this market of mental health apps is not the gadgets and treatment models themselves but the huge amount of data they generate from users" (Abdelrahman 2023: 521). Information bred from the recounting of grief, loss, and suffering is translated into datasets, analyzed for patterns, and sold for their possible insights into issues of consumption, surveillance, and resistance to measures of control. All the while, the producers of these datasets are granted no recompense, decision-making power, or knowledge about where their most intimate details are distributed. They only receive more intricate, repressive measures of monitoring facilitated by the devices that were supposed to help them manage trauma, not create it.

Such processes of refugee-dividual exploitation can only happen in a digitalized world. The society of control hinges on innovative, impinging forms of technology that permit those who exercise power to track, analyze, and repress without geospatial restraint. The humanitarian wearable, specifically mental trauma management applications, is particularly effective in that its uses are "short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit" (Deleuze 1992:6). Contrasting the older epoch of wearables in which refugees had to come to a certain location, at a certain time, and interact with staff to record information (Sandvik 2019), mental health applications can be accessed for any duration, in any location, and without having to divulge information to a physical person (Abdelrahman 2023). In what seems like a moment of less imposition, the refugee is actually participating in his/her dividualization in a greater way. In the same way that the production of goods no longer just takes place in the factory, signifying a change from disciplinary societies (Foucault 1978b), so does the production of data-value no longer just take place in the OCHA tent.

DISCUSSION

The creation of smart refugees in the digital humanitarian sector is an exemplification of the wider process of dividualization occurring in this episteme of Big Data. Reflecting a change from disciplinary to control societies, the digital accumulation by dispossession materializing against the world's vulnerable is facilitated by new, penetrative technologies including digitalized humanitarian wearables. These smart devices mine data without the full knowledge or consent of information producers and are ultimately used to alter their subjectivities to the benefit of Big Tech companies and austerity-riddled states. Dividuals affected by these processes are stuck in a cycle of exploitation in which they must divulge personal information for ineffective services of relief but are then repressed by new mechanisms of control that operate based on the amalgamation of data collected in this exchange.

To prevent further subjectification, exploitation, and epistemicide in vulnerable populations, this paper calls for a decolonial turn in the digital humanitarian paradigm, in which critical analyses of present power structures should inform transformative discourses prioritizing transparency, democracy, and pluriversality (Kothari et. al 2019) in aid interventions. The point of these critiques is not to halt necessary humanitarian intervention, to do so would be a life-threatening disservice to the millions of people served by aid organizations (UNICEF 2023). Instead, these analyses should seek to improve the provision of aid implementation with greater consideration of ethical, political, and epistemological considerations.

A politicization of the humanitarian sector is a necessity in beginning to establish a decolonial turn in aid. It must be recognized that "[a]lthough humanitarian governance operates in the name of the victims of the world, governance is about rule, and rule is about power" (Barnett 2013:382). Scholars and practitioners should not make anti-political claims of objectivity without reflection. The instrument-effects of projects must be scrutinized as intensely as the intended outcomes. The "continuity of economic, technological, political, physical, cognitive, and emotional forms of exclusion" results from unquestioned dynamics of power that empower historical and novel experiences of exploitation (Ricaurte 2019:361).

Similarly, reflection and action must come from communities experiencing dividualization/exploitation as well. For example, Ricaurte (2019) describes how exploited individuals have used digital tools to recentre the voices of the vulnerable. In her case study, she found multiple grassroots actors democratizing information pages on underreported femicide in Mexico by compiling reports from state and non-official reports—bringing national media attention to the issue. States and firms should connect with these movements and make the changes that the affected want to see. However, these efforts do not always lead to such momentum—necessitating alternative methods. Deleuze, somewhat nihilistically, remarks that "[t]here is no need to fear or hope, only to

look for new weapons" (1992:4). To this point, Abdelrahman notes that certain refugees, in their refusal to be subjectified, have noticed these new weapons— "abandoning, tinkering with and destroying gadgets and other wearables which are hoisted on them by governments and humanitarian agencies" (2023:524). Demonstrated here, the vulnerable can make their voices heard in more than one way.

Further, more intimate research on conceptualizations of the self and others should be conducted in areas where digitalized humanitarian wearables have been implemented to amplify the voices of the affected and inform the future design, policy, and implementation of these devices.

CONCLUSION

Deleuze writes, "[t]here is no need to ask which is the toughest or most tolerable regime, for it's within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another" (1992:4). In the society of control—in which populations are constantly tracked, analyzed, and repressed with the assistance of innovative technologies—the negative forces are clear. In this societal reorganization, the subjectivities of individuals are shifted—no longer governed as coherent persons but as the amalgamation of associated datasets. As demonstrated by Abdelrahman's (2023) study of mental health management applications for refugees, humanitarian wearables have the potential to act as devices that facilitate the exploitation and dividualization of vulnerable peoples. Supporting these processes of unequal power exertion is Big Data—an episteme grounded in the ever-expanding datafication of lived experience. The detriment of the smart refugee is the benefit of Big Tech, who profit greatly from the generation and capture of this data through ineffective service provision.

However, it must also be recognized that the humanitarian sector has the potential to effect more significant, more equitable change in the world through a decolonial turn in policy and practice. This entails acknowledging unequal dynamics of power in humanitarian relations, reflecting on a wider set of considerations for aid intervention, and engaging with (not placating) the recipients of aid in a more collaborative way. These are the tools of liberation to which Deleuze speaks.

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