

From Violent to Subtle Humiliation: Case of Somali Victims of UNOSOM Living in the Refugee Camps in Kenya

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Introductory note – guiding sentiments

According to one of the founding fathers of Sociology, Max Weber, "an attitude of moral indifference has not connection with scientific 'objectivity'. Value-judgments of the practical interest of the scientist will always be significant in determining the focus of attention of analytical activity and there is no harm, according to Weber, in allowing personal values, interests or social commitments to guide the researcher in the selection of his/her research topics. However, once the research process starts, individual sentiments should be kept separate from scientific analysis in order to avoid transforming social science into a personal prophecy. In order to reach value neutral sociology, Weber suggests that all recognizable value judgments should be made rigorously explicit to both the researcher him/herself and his/her audience.

My interest in the victims of military humanitarian interventions is most probably a result of the feeling of frustration, betrayal, impotence and humiliation experienced during NATO bombardments of my hometown, Belgrade, in 1998. My family, my friends, myself and the majority of the people I knew in Belgrade were profoundly and bitterly opposing the regime of our ex-President Slobodan Milosevic. Being deeply hurt and betrayed by our own country, we tended to idealize the outside world. And the outside world became the only imaginary solution for our tragedy: either we would have to reach it, by foot if necessary, or the outside world would come and help us.

When bombardments started in 1998, I was no longer living in Yugoslavia. However, I lived the experience intensely, through my relatives, my friends and traumatic dreams which persisted from the very beginning to the very end of bombardments. Psychological effects of the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia overgrew physical and material damage in the country to such a large extent to make the latter appear insignificant. People lost their belief that the world was essentially just, they lost their point of reference, their direction, hope and the last fragments of dignity. Some of the people were suddenly converting to the Regime, some to criminality and the majority accepted to live as psychologically internationally dispersed, as morally mutilated, emotionally disfigured but silent living dead. In the name of 'humanitarian' intervention the world turned its back to them.

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Study Case - Somalia

The idea that was obsessing my mind was how someone can pervert the morality to that extent to provoke such immeasurable suffering and long term collective psychological scars in the name of humanitarianism. What horrified me even more was the degree of the long term psycho-social consequences of such scarring and suffering. If I was deeply changed by an experience which I witnessed from far, what was in the hearts and minds of the people whose flesh and souls have been thorn apart by it?

Since Weber advises that once the research begins, sentiments and moral commitments should be kept aside, I preferred my study case to be an, at least, culturally, historically and geographically distant location – Somalia. I intended to find Somali people who suffered as a consequence of UNOSOM and Operation Restore Hope military humanitarian intervention in Somalia and to collect their stories. The hypothesis was that victims of humanitarian interventions suffer particular powerlessness due to: a) difficulty in identifying the perpetrator; b) frustration generated by association of the perpetrator with the morality of human rights; c) impossibility of complaint since human rights are ‘the last resort’¹; d) socio-political invisibility since the victims are often regarded as inevitable ‘collateral effects’ of the humanitarian intervention.

I started collecting stories of the victims of humanitarian intervention among Somali refugees and immigrants in London. Later on, I continued my research in Nairobi and finally in Dadaab Refugee Camps in North-eastern region of Kenya. As a part of my agreement with CARE International who facilitated my field research in Dadaab, I wrote a field report which contains a raw picture of my findings. Four months after my field research, I did another research for CARE, this time on the attitudes of Somali refugees towards eventual repatriation. Although none of these two separate studies is focused mainly and exclusively on humiliation, both of them more or less directly enlightened the fact that the feeling of humiliation plays such an important role in any kind of interpersonal and inter-group relationship. The importance of humiliation becomes exasperated in situation when one person or group depends on another for its survival and yet receives humiliation as an indelible part of aid.

By conducting two separate researches on the relationship between Somalis and the foreign humanitarian actors, I had a precious occasion to observe how this relationship of humiliation evolved over time, producing new forms and responses to it. It was of particular interest to analyze thoughts and feelings of the people who were direct victims of UNOSOM in Somalia and are currently feeling humiliated, once again by the UN, as a refugees. As I am still working on a paper which would connect the findings from the two studies, for the purpose of our discussions, I am now presenting the two reports about the past and present condition of the Somali refugees in Dadaab.

¹ See Donnelly, J. *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, London: Ithaca, 1989, p.13