Reproducing colonial legacies:
technocolonialism in humanitarian biometric practices

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In June 2019 the United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP) temporarily suspended the distribution of food aid in Yemen as Houthi leaders, representing one of the sides involved in the protracted civil war, opposed the use of biometric data in aid delivery. The WFP, which insisted on biometric registrations as part of efforts to address low-level fraud in aid operations, was widely criticized for its decision to deny food to one of the world's most vulnerable populations. This episode received much attention not least because it revealed in stark terms the lack of meaningful consent in the biometric registrations of humanitarian subjects. Rather than being the exception, the Yemen example confirms the pervasiveness and normalization of biometrics in the humanitarian sector, especially in the management of displaced people. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) aims to record all refugee data in one single database, called PRIMES, which confirms the acceleration of rate of biometric registrations. Biometric technology is not just used to register refugees and authenticate those entitled to aid distributions; it is also integral to the increasingly popular 'digital identity' programmes for refugees.

My contribution to the Expert Workshop draws on my recent work on biometrics as part of a wider investigation of digital technologies, data and automation in the humanitarian sector (Madianou, 2019a; 2019b). In that research I have developed the notion of 'technocolonialism' in order to analyze how 'the convergence of digital developments with humanitarian structures and market forces reinvigorate and rework colonial legacies' (2019a, p. 2). Drawing on colonial and decolonial theory, I recognize the tenacity of colonial genealogies and inequalities. Quijano's notion of the 'coloniality of power' explains how the subjugation of the colonized continued well after the independence of postcolonial states as a result of the dominance of eurocentric systems of knowledge, the codification of social and racial discrimination and the exploitation associated with global capitalism (Quijano, 2000). For Stoler (2016), contemporary global inequalities are reworkings of colonial histories. Migration and displacement can often be traced to colonial pasts (Hegde, 2016) while the racial subjugation of migrants and refugees helps to preserve the 'coloniality of power' (De Genova, 2016; Quijano, 2000). Humanitarianism itself, despite being assumed as an expression of 'a supposed natural humaneness' (Fassin, 2012), has historical roots in colonial expansion and the parallel awareness of otherness and suffering (Lester & Dussart, 2014). The structural asymmetry between donors, humanitarian officers and aid recipients reproduces the unequal social orders which shaped colonialism and empire.

Techocolonialism acknowledges that phenomena like displacement, migration, refugee camps, humanitarianism as well as the development of digital

technology itself are steeped in colonial relations of inequality. Technocolonialism 'shifts the attention to the constitutive role of data and digital innovation processes in entrenching inequalities between refugees and humanitarian agencies and, ultimately, inequalities in the global context' (Madianou, 2019a, p. 2). In this sense, technocolonialism extends earlier debates on humanitarianism as neo-colonialism by emphasizing 'how digital and data practices rework and amplify colonial legacies' (Madianou, 2019a, p. 2). In earlier publications I have outlined ways in which inequalities are reworked and hardened:

> 'by extracting value from the data of refugees and other humanitarian subjects; by extracting value from experimentation with new technologies in fragile situations for the benefit of stakeholders, including private companies; by materializing racial discrimination; by contributing to the production of social orders that entrench the "coloniality of power"; and finally, by justifying some of these practices under the pretext of emergencies' (Madianou, 2019a, p. 2).

To understand the reasons behind the enthusiastic adoption of biometric and other digital technologies and computational methods, we need to understand the developments within the rapidly evolving humanitarian sector. In my earlier work I have identified five logics which represent the parallel and often conflicting agendas of different stakeholders within the aid field: humanitarian organizations, donors (typically national governments), host states and the private sector (Madianou, 2019a, pp. 4-7). One factor driving digital developments stems from the pressure to address the longstanding power asymmetries within humanitarianism. The *logic of humanitarian accountability* assumes that interactive technologies will give voice to affected communities to hold aid agencies to account. The use of biometrics is increasingly justified in the name of refugee protection and dignity (UNHCR, 2015) while 'digital identity' initiatives, which are based on biometric technologies, are assumed to empower humanitarian subjects. Biometric practices are also driven by the *logic of humanitarian audit*, which recognizes the potential of technologies and data as metrics for audit which donors demand. Biometric registrations were initially introduced in order to address issues of low-level fraud in humanitarian distributions and establish robust audit trails (UNHCR, 2002).

The *logic of capitalism* captures the entry of business interests in the humanitarian space as evidenced by the proliferation of public-private partnerships and the outsourcing of digital practices, including biometric registrations, to private vendors. Linked to the logic of capitalism is the *logic of solutionism* - the idea that technology can solve complex social problems. The logic of solutionism explains the prevalence of technological experimentation and hype which are also evident in biometric experiments like the *Building Blocks* scheme taking place in Al Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan (Madianou, 2019b). Finally, the *logic of securitization*, reduces refugees to a security threat (Anderson, 2014) and explains the push for biometrics especially by governments which aim to detect 'anomalies' and control their borders (Aradau & Blanke, 2015). Humanitarian agencies have data sharing agreements with states and conduct biometric registrations in partnership with them as evidenced in the Rohingya registration in Bangladesh. One of the concerns here is 'function creep': the idea that biometric data collected for addressing one issue (eg., low-level fraud) can be reused for very different purposes (eg., to populate a registry of potential terror suspects). These five logics are elaborated in earlier publications (Madianou, 2019a; 2019b) so please refer to those for more details.

These logics intersect and combine producing the phenomenon I term technocolonialism. In the remaining essay, I will illustrate how these logics combine and rework colonial legacies.

Contemporary biometrics involves machine learning and novel developments such as blockchain technology: elsewhere I have described this convergence as a 'biometric assemblage' (Madianou, 2019b). Despite the assumption that technological developments have enhanced the reliability of biometrics, there is evidence that biometric data codify existing forms of discrimination (Browne, 2015; Magnet, 2011). Biometric technologies 'privilege whiteness' (Browne, 2015) with significantly higher margins of error when measuring, or verifying 'othered bodies' whether in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability or age (Magnet, 2011). By privileging whiteness, biometrics codify discrimination, thus inscribing the coloniality of power. The algorithmic sorting and automation which underpin biometric technologies are known to entrench racial and gender biases (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). Elsewhere I have argued that 'technological convergence amplifies risks associated with each technology: for example, the immutability of blockchain can have disastrous consequences if the biometric records are erroneous. AI bias increases the error rates in identification record matches. Such mistakes can have devastating consequences for displaced people, who are already living in extreme precarity' (Madianou, 2019b: 595).

Recent biometric registrations have revealed that the above biases are further compounded by local political agendas. In the recent Rohingya biometric registration, jointly conducted by UNHCR and the Bangladesh government, the choice to use the term 'Myanmar nationals' on the refugee digital identity cards was interpreted as a symbolic annihilation of the Rohingya (Madianou, 2019a, p. 9). The power asymmetries involved in biometric registrations are further exacerbated by the fundamental lack of meaningful consent during refugee registrations when refusing to register amounts to refusal to receive assistance – something refugees can hardly afford. This is evidenced in the WFP / Yemen controversy which opened this essay. The replicability of biometric datasets exacerbates data sharing practices with nation states. While data sharing with host nations is common (as humanitarian agencies operate at the invitation of nation states – see Jacobsen, 2015), the nature of digital datasets streamline sharing and accentuate the potential risk of 'function creep'. Apart from states, sharing also takes place with private companies, in their role as humanitarian partners, donors or private vendors conducting biometric registrations (Madianou, 2019a; 2019b). We can see how the logics of capitalism and securitization explain the extraction of value from refugee data. Even in digital identity projects when refugees are imagined as empowered subjects with 'digital wallets' there is little evidence of direct benefit to displaced people themselves.

In fact, digital identity initiatives, despite their ambitious claims of 'financial empowerment' and 'sovereign identity', show little evidence of success. But even when they fail, digital identity initiatives still succeed in producing social orders (Madianou, 2019a, 10). Digital identity programmes, which are often funded by large technology companies, are very successful in generating 'hype' around new technologies such as blockchain (Madianou, 2019b, pp. 593-596). Experimentation with new technologies among vulnerable populations echoes the medical experiments that took place under colonial regimes, where 'failure was outsourced to the global periphery' (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 31). Driven by a logic of solutionism, digital identity programmes depoliticize forced displacement whilst advancing a business agenda (Madianou, 2019b, p. 595). At the same time, the neoliberal discourse of financial

empowerment occludes the colonial lineages of such practices (Madianou, 2019a). Ultimately, biometric practices reconfirm the hierarchy between aid providers and refugees – and in so doing reaffirm that contemporary iterations of humanitarianism are not dissimilar to their colonial counterparts.

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