

Summary

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IPW-Lecture

Humanitarian Borderwork

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Moderation:

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Zusammenfassung

Seit 2000 kamen mehr als 46.000 Menschen an den globalen Grenzen ums Leben. Dies führt zu einem verstärkten Aufkommen humanitärer Akteure in den Grenzregionen, welche Menschen in Not retten und versuchen, die Risiken zu reduzieren. Polly Pallister-Wilkins spricht in ihrem Vortrag über die Logiken und Auswirkungen dieser humanitären Praktiken an der Grenze und erklärt, warum eine humanitäre Logik Grenzregime verändert und sogar zu deren Expansion beitragen kann. Am Beispiel von NGO-Aktivitäten an europäischen Außengrenzen erläutert sie, wie humanitäre Praktiken an der Grenze durchgeführt werden und wie sich diese auf die Grenzpolitik auswirken.

Abstract

Since 2000, more than 46,000 people are known to have died at the international borders. This leads to increased activity of humanitarian actors in borderspaces who aim to rescue people in emergency and to mitigate risks. In her talk, Polly Pallister-Wilkins outlines logics and effects of these humanitarian practices at the border and explains why a humanitarian logic changes border regimes and contributes to their expansion. Drawing on the example of NGOs' activities at the external European borders, she illustrates how humanitarian practices are conducted at the border and how they affect the politics of the border.

1. Introduction – why is there humanitarianism in border security?

Polly Pallister-Wilkins commences by outlining the complex relationship between humanitarianism and border security practices and introduces the concept of “humanitarian borderwork”. Humanitarian borderwork, in short, describes the humanitarian practices and actions that reproduce notions of the border. It results from the increasing significance that the concept of humanitarianism possesses in the field of border security, particularly as migrants take increasingly dangerous routes in order to reach their destinations and therefore are exposed to life-threatening situations. For this reason, humanitarian logics have been implemented into the everyday practices of border guards. According to Pallister-Wilkins, this leads to serious contradictions and complications – as border guards are mainly required to guard the border, humanitarian practices such as rescuing migrants in peril might contradict their other obligations. However, as Pallister-Wilkins outlines, humanitarianism does not serve as a mere rhetoric, prevalent in strategies and political discourse, but strongly affects everyday work at the border. The humanitarian practice of Search and Rescue (SAR) missions includes new actors in border security, such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and national institutions involved in SAR. Increasingly, non-governmental organizations, such as Médecins sans Frontières, are taking a leading role in conducting SAR and providing humanitarian assistance particularly at the Mediterranean EU borders.

2. Defining humanitarianism

What is understood by the concept of “humanitarianism”? Pallister-Wilkins outlines that there is an ongoing debate on the exact definition of the concept and that approaches such as Critical Humanitarianism Studies have challenged widespread assumptions about the concept. Pallister-Wilkins proposes a definition which conceptualizes humanitarianism as the release of suffering and the maintaining of human dignity.



Humanitarian crises require a response to emergencies and a quick provision of means to maintain the basic conditions of life. Therefore, humanitarianism follows a different logic than Human Rights, which are described as more normative while humanitarianism is mainly concerned with the re-establishment of the status quo. In addition, Human Rights are often seen as a particular political agenda whereas humanitarianism is considered an apolitical practice.

Humanitarianism at the border emerges with the increasingly dangerous procedure of crossing the border. This is not limited to the geographical border alone, but includes, for example, visa policies that are an impediment to legal migration. The lack of legal migration routes often makes migrants dependent on human traffickers, which drastically increases the risk of dying en route to the final destination. Between 2000 and 2017, 46,000 people are known to have died at the world's borders. This number does not include the many who are missing, rendering the actual number of deaths at the border much higher.

The emergence of the humanitarian border is the result of borders having turned into spaces of suffering. The type of humanitarian action is also determined by the types of dangers that migrants are exposed to, for example, in the Mediterranean there are efforts to protect migrants from drowning through the conduct of SAR-missions. The increasingly risky borders lead to what Pallister-Wilkins defines as a particular governmentality of modernity which centers on the suffering of migrants. This is due to the knowledge about and visibility of suffering, enabled through modern communication technologies and imagery. The critique of humanitarian action at the border results from the fact that it tends to obscure the political, social or economic reasons for suffering and the root causes of migration.

3. The concept of Humanitarian Borderwork

Pallister-Wilkins subsumes humanitarian actions under the broader concept of humanitarian borderwork. Borderwork, according to the speaker, comprises the everyday practices that continuously perform and reproduce the border. These practices are not necessarily merely conducted through border professionals, but through all actors that directly or indirectly perform the border. That includes legal decisions of whether access to territory is granted or denied and other legal practices, such as migration and asylum laws.

Humanitarian borderwork therefore describes all humanitarian practices that reproduce and reinforce the border. The humanitarian logic of rescue contributes to the reproduction of borders through acknowledging borders as a space of suffering, but also a space of exclusion. The borderwork assemblage is extended through humanitarian action as it introduces new actors, such as NGOs, and new logics, for example the logic of Search and Rescue.

However, as Pallister-Wilkins states, humanitarian borderwork possesses more influence on borders than mere performance. Through engaging with people in need, humanitarian actors move the border to the spaces where this engagement happens. Interactions with border security actors

extend their influence as well. As humanitarian action is accorded with the Rescue Centers, e.g. in Rome, SAR-operations conducted by NGOs result in the handing over of migrants to border authorities, which, as the speaker argues, extends their sovereign power to intercept migrants. This is also enabled through a shift in the involved actors – while the coast guards were exclusively responsible for the guarding of the external borders, this changed in the 1990s and humanitarian actors became more strongly involved. In this regard, the humanitarian engagement in international waters leads to an externalization of migration processes.

4. Why does it matter and what are the challenges?

Pallister-Wilkins cites a statement of the Head of Amnesty International in 2015, who maintained that resources in the Mediterranean were not sufficient to rescue people. In addition, criticism about state action in the Mediterranean arose, particularly surrounding sea operations. The Italian Navy's operation Mare Nostrum, conducted in 2013, was a dedicated SAR-mission. However, it operated in a region which was too far from the area where most migrants were at risk. In 2014, Mare Nostrum was succeeded by Frontex' Joint Operation Triton, which was explicitly a border security operation and not a humanitarian SAR-operations. This fostered the emergence of humanitarian actors in borderspaces.

However, also Joint Operation Triton possesses a humanitarian dimension. This results from the Law of the Sea, which prohibits border guarding taking place in international waters, however, allows SAR to be conducted. The logic of SAR and humanitarianism therefore extends the geographical boundaries of securing borders. Through the formulation of imminent threats



to the lives of migrants, interventions on their bodies are rendered possible, also in non-European spaces. As a consequence, more migrants can be intercepted in seemingly limitless areas.

A logic of arbitrariness also underlies humanitarian borderwork – there is no constant effort to save lives, administrative decisions render the process highly volatile and may put migrants at additional risk. Because migrants who are rescued are often directly brought to camps in border regions, their subjectivity changes from being a humanitarian subject to an illegal, deportable one. The camps also represent a specific place of waiting and insecurity – while no security forces are allowed in these

areas, the border is performed through decisions of access, and only limited forms of care are present.

To conclude, the speaker outlined the various challenges in the conceptualization of humanitarian borderwork. While it is common sense and hard to criticize the practices of saving lives, it is important to outline the various interventions these practices enable. Humanitarian actions renders an expansive geography possible as it extends the border zones and the spaces of action. For this reason, it cannot be solely regarded as a relief of suffering, but as an act of reproducing and enhancing borders and borderspaces. Through their decisions on where to act, humanitarian actors also reiterate decisions of living and dying – migrants that are not considered to be at risk are often left to die, which increases the number of victims in borderzones. While humanitarian borderwork is important in order to mitigate risks for migrants en route to their final destinations, it should not be regarded as a solution to the root causes. Humanitarian action does not improve the political, social and economic structures that lead to suffering, it does not reduce the structural violence migrants often encounter.