Material Enactments of Shifting Hierarchies
Emic Perspectives on Humanitarian Aid in the 1990s War in Sarajevo

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the local perceptions of the effects of humanitarian aid, conceptualised as a specific realm of global interconnectedness. As an aspect of global moral and political order, humanitarian aid has multiple concrete implications on the developments on the ground – from saving bare life to redefining hierarchies of power and effecting, with uncertain outcomes, the existent local socio-cultural orders. My empirical focus is Bosnia-Hercegovina, a country that, due to the four-year war in the 1990s, attracted one of the largest humanitarian operations of that decade, involving all most significant international organisations. Based on fifteen interviews conducted in 2013-14 with people who lived in Sarajevo in the course of the 1990s war, this paper suggests that war events are by no means ‘forgotten’ but have a staying effect on the perceptions of multiple hierarchies, local and global, that people have been immersed in because of living in Bosnia-Hercegovina. Three fields of concern emerge as important from the emic point of view, namely (i) the negotiation of the position of a generic ‘other’ in the global hierarchy of peace and conflict; (ii) the negotiation of the locally embedded socio-cultural order; (iii) the resistance to the negotiation of the moral order. These fields of concern indicate the local perceptions of and the modes of acting within the shifting hierarchies, here analysed with regard to their material enactments and in relation to the intersected spatial, socio-cultural, and moral frameworks.

Keywords
Humanitarian Aid, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Emic Perspectives, Hierarchies.

Humanitarian industry has been critically assessed as “a practice that constitutes subjects, both the operators of the interventions whose agency is cast within the humanitarian ideology, and those who would be their beneficiaries—the mute subjects whose dense sociality is reduced to thin descriptions in bureaucratic reports.” This paper focuses on the local effects of humanitarian aid, conceptualised as a specific realm of global interconnectedness. The central issue of interest is what impact the actual materiality of aid has on the ground, as seen from the local perspective.

My empirical focus is Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Hercegovina—a country that, due to the war in the 1990s, attracted one of the largest hu-
manitarian operations of that decade, involving most significant international humanitarian organisations. The abrupt and radical changes of the local setting occurred due to the military violence and siege that lasted over three and a half years, but that setting was, at the same time, sustained due to its multiple embeddedness in the web of globally spanning links. These links materialised locally not only in the presence of international observers and reporters, UN troops and diplomats, but also in material goods sent as humanitarian aid, which were crucial for the civilians. The so-called ‘air-bridge’ to Sarajevo was closed down after 13,000 flights which brought in 167,677 tons of humanitarian aid from twenty countries.

During the war, 90 percent of the population relied on international humanitarian assistance for survival. However, countless titles on war and post-war aid to Bosnia and Herzegovina predominantly promote the perspective of the so-called ‘donor side’. This paper focuses on the ‘recipient side’, with an interest in the micro-level of individual experience in the particular local context of Sarajevo during the war years (not the post-war development aid).

In the pilot study done in collaboration with the Sarajevo Centre for Refugee and IDP Studies, fifteen people were interviewed between November 2013 and April 2014. These are nine women and six men of different generations and with various educational backgrounds who lived in Sarajevo during the 1990s war. The interviews were explorative; the question on what the interviewees remembered about receiving humanitarian aid in the 1990s enabled them to raise any issue they found relevant. The transcribed material encompasses 180 pages of text.

On the basis of this material, emic perspectives on humanitarian aid can be discerned that indicate the local perceptions of the shifting hierarchies within the intersected socio-cultural, moral and spatial frameworks. The three fields of concern pertain to the donors’ classifications of aid recipients, to the uneven access to humanitarian aid and to the war-victims’ relation to the aid-providing ‘outside world’ as materialised in the humanitarian aid. The first two will be presented only briefly, while the third, most prominent field of concern, will be presented in more detail.
The Donors’ Classifications and the Uneven Access to Humanitarian Aid

The UNHCR was seen as religiously and politically neutral and its aid was “longed for and welcomed.” However, people in Sarajevo under siege had to turn also to faith-oriented organisations, with Caritas and Merhamet being most prominent.

Some interviewees praised the help they received from the organisations that were not meant to take care of ‘their’ group; however, several of them expressed frustration with donor-imposed hierarchies of ‘deserving’ aid recipients that pertained to their religious affiliation (presumably stemming from their ethnic origin and presumably signalled by their name). A few never sought help from such organisations, while others eventually succumbed to being recognised as ‘deserving’ recipients, even if they were not practicing faith or endorsing visible religious symbols before the war. This process of succumbing to the salience of ethno-religious identity is an important aspect of ‘negotiation of normality’ raised by Maček, who discussed the normality of a socio-cultural order of pre-war Sarajevo where ethnic origin and religious affiliation were not organising people’s daily interactions or their general access to resources. The heightened importance of ethnic and religious affiliation was by no means introduced to wartime Bosnia and Hercegovina by foreign donors, but they often reconfirmed it in a matter-of-fact manner that played into the hands of local nationalists who were responsible for the war in the first place.

On the other hand, the narrative material suggests the resilience of the pre-war moral order despite the changes of local power in relation to uneven access to humanitarian aid.

The general issue of access to resources in war, the problematic organisational aspects of aid interventions and the specific issue of hierarchies of power based on uneven (legal and illegal) access to humanitarian aid are too broad and too complex to be discussed in this paper. May it suffice to say that the interviewees refused to negotiate the moral framework of proper behaviour, regardless of poverty and need in war circumstances. War profiteers and UN soldiers as providers of goods to be sold on black markets were judged in a non-negotiable negative manner. Several interviewees made clear that differences in access to aid and the better quality of aid available to people close to military and political power positions was morally upsetting, even if it was unsurprising.
One interviewee’s story concerning helping others by giving them extra aid needs to be singled out. It was framed as a story of a generous helper, but it can be read as a story of relative power gained due to occupying an administrative position that allowed privileged access to humanitarian assistance. The satisfaction permeating this man’s narration can be understood as satisfaction with a power-position that differentiated him from ‘common’ aid recipients even though they shared hunger, fear and danger in an under-siege Sarajevo.

**Generic ‘Other’ – Between Gratitude and Humiliation**

In the collected narrative material, remembering war seems to be an exercise in reconstructing respondents’ own agency and resourcefulness, for example, in combining parts of different humanitarian lunch packages to produce something resembling a traditional Bosnian dish. However, this material is also permeated by frustration and humiliation, deeply felt even twenty years after the war. This frustration and humiliation became very concrete in the accounts of, for instance, heaps of badly smelling old clothes available at the Red Cross, or plaids used to make warm overalls for children but whose stench gave them the nickname ‘horse plaids’.

The ICAR can of minced meat, referred to at length by most of my interviewees, features among the most important objects in the virtual war museum and has been discussed in scholarly articles, in Bosnian media and in social forums. This can also features as “a monument to the international community” signed by “the grateful citizens of Sarajevo”. It is remembered as notoriously disgusting, as something that even cats refused to eat while people had to. As an iconic object, ICAR gathers layers of humiliation in the interconnected experience of hunger, necessity and charity.

The popular consensus in Sarajevo and beyond is that ICAR is the symbol of the relation between international political actors and the people living in Sarajevo in the 1990s—a relation that needs to be shielded by cynicism and black humour. In my reading, it is a symbol of Sarajevans’ position as the generic ‘other’ in relation to the people sending them food to survive on.

At the same time, it created a generic figure of donors, since neither my interviewees nor the web discussion groups discussing “The riddle of ICAR” (see endnote 14) seem to have any idea concerning who produced these cans. However, as
stated by a middle-aged female respondent, her and other Sarajevoans’ interest was reduced to survival; their realm of control was reduced to one’s immediate, basic needs and did not leave space for considerations of who exactly is producing and sending aid items:

“I have no idea who produced it. To be honest, you cannot care less. When aid comes, it doesn’t matter. … And you get the flour — whose is that flour? I don’t care! I mean, you have that ICAR, you got what you are entitled to — OK, super, thank you. You get it, you are not interested in anything; just give it to me, to conclude this [queueing for aid], to go home.”

A distinct memory shared by many concerns also the so-called ‘Vietnamese cookies’ — the square metal tins sealed by wax, with the year 1960 printed on them, as some respondents claimed. One of the interviewees, a medical doctor in her fifties, described them in terms of absurdity:

“Cookies, I remember them — from the Vietnam War. … They didn’t have any taste; you had a feeling that you [were eating] wood. … So, you laugh — it is really, totally absurd. Everything is totally absurd. In that moment, there is nothing else to do but to laugh.”

Another interviewee remembered those cookies as humiliation materialised; in her statement, the ‘us’ of aid recipients in Sarajevo is juxtaposed with the generic ‘them’ who sent the aid:

“That was really terrible. I saw how old they were; I saw how awful it was but I simply had no other choice but to give them to my children to eat because I didn’t have anything else. If I had, I would certainly never give them that to eat. That makes me angry because I had a feeling that they just wanted to get rid of them. To give them to us to eat — even if I knew it was not good, it was not healthy — but I simply had no choice. I am a little angry since I had a feeling that those people who sent that humanitarian aid to us actually manipulated with us because they sent to us something they would never eat themselves.”

The statement that she is only ‘a little angry’ needs to be understood in the context of the entire interview, in which this 53-year old psychologist also expressed her genuine gratitude for international help. Her ambivalence between gratitude and frustration resembles those expressed in stories concerning old medicine sent as a part of aid; for example, medicine that expired two years earlier helped some
people in Sarajevo but caused serious allergies for others. Much of the medicine was not used, and a cynical local interpretation was that sending it to a country at war was a clever way of not having to deal with it as chemical waste. One interviewee told of a ward receiving a great quantity of anti-malaria medicine—definitely not needed in Sarajevo yet posing a serious problem as waste.

It is worth presenting here an instance of ‘a close encounter’ of the local and the global described by the psychologist quoted above. A pretense of normality was created by international humanitarian organisations’ seminars, with no straightforward recognition of the needs of the local seminar participants whose pressing worries were the fear of shelling and snipers and their children’s hunger. This is an example of the reality of international institutions that remains undisturbed by the reality of the place in which their agenda is implemented. Nevertheless, there was a material point of connection of those disparate realities in the shape of food otherwise unavailable to the civilians under siege. It was much appreciated by the locals whose professional background entitled them to a privileged position in yet another locally established hierarchy of access to the ‘crumbs’ of global resources:

“In connection to humanitarian help, I also remember in Sarajevo it was important that seminars were organised that were financed by UNICEF, UNDP or some other UN organisation: we were getting very good lunches there. It was connected to trauma or work with people during the war, education and similar. People went there primarily for the very good lunch we had there; most of us would pack the lunch and take the bread and some things we could take home in plastic bags — we would not eat it there. The people [who] gave those seminars; they did not understand the cultural aspects at all, the nature of the war. They were sometimes… tactless in the way they explained some matters, since they were not sensitive to the emotions of the people who were surviving the war. And so, people went to those seminars, myself included, primarily for the lunch. Really, going to hotel Europe, Hollywood, Holiday, I don’t remember those hotels. Europe (a hotel; MPF) was in, it was really a privilege to go there and have such an expensive lunch, which revealed the imbalance between what was outside and what we could afford at that seminar. So, generally, after lunch, after we received this, the room remained empty because everyone would take that lunch to their children. So, that was it, and if we could get a daily allowance as well—because UNICEF was giving that, too, for participation at those seminars—the income was very good.”
The Open Society Fund sent USD 2 million worth of pumpkin, carrot, tomato, lettuce and corn seeds.\textsuperscript{17} Watching the seeds transform and enjoying the fruits might have filled people with hope, confirming the existence of a framework of meaning that was not affected by war-violence: a framework of natural cycles, of \textit{life} itself.\textsuperscript{18} However, at the same time, this was also a message about the nonexistence of the will to deal with the root causes of the situation.\textsuperscript{19} As observed by Maček,\textsuperscript{20} inaction could be tolerated since the terror that informed the Sarajevans’ lives made them essentially different from Westerners.

A 56-year old medical doctor had to decide between using the onion seeds to spice the food or to make a rational decision and let the seeds grow, thereby admitting the siege of Sarajevo would continue into the foreseeable future.

“I think it was the third year of war when those seeds arrived; that is completely so cynical and ironic in the entire story. That was the feeling we had. We were not happy when someone gave us the onion seeds! I mean, I don’t know, maybe someone was pleased, who had a garden, but, I mean, it is absurd! I mean, you are definitely disappointed in everything, absolutely in everything. And you expect neither help nor a solution nor an ending. I mean, it is a torture without an end. And those seeds were, I think, just a dot on the ‘i’.”

\textbf{Conclusion}

In this paper, I have shown that as an aspect of global moral and political order, humanitarian aid has multiple concrete implications on developments on the ground. It redefines hierarchies of power and effects, with uncertain outcomes, in the existent local socio-cultural orders. In Sarajevo during the 1990s, the negotiations of the locally embedded socio-cultural order were affected by the instances of donor-imposed hierarchies of ‘deserving’ aid recipients pertaining to the recipients’ religious-cum-ethnic affiliation. At the same time, the resistance to negotiating the moral order was affected by the perceived hierarchies of power based on uneven access to humanitarian aid. The negotiation of the position of a generic ‘other’ in the global hierarchy of peace and conflict was affected by the need for aid provided by the ‘outside world’—particularly by the perceived humiliation contained in the material qualities of the received aid. This can be seen as a ‘perverted’ situation of global interconnectedness: a
global interconnectedness that sustains the life of people in a town under siege who simultaneously experience a radical physical disconnection from the outside world.

One interviewee summarises it as follows:

“You have a very pronounced consciousness among the people here about how much you are, in fact, abandoned—how insignificant you are. And you are very much aware of that, and you do not lose a single moment; it does not matter if you are an intellectual or not—I mean, any fool understands that. Nothing has any purpose. And you just wait. So you wait for something to end, but for a long time you do not wait for a [military] intervention.”

Endnotes

5. See, e.g., Forman and Patrick, eds. *Good Intentions*.
6. Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, provides an ethnographic account on everyday life in Sarajevo under siege. Her book is essential for understanding the context of experiences focused on in this paper.
7. Thirteen interviews (one with a married couple) were conducted in Sarajevo by Dr. Nina Bosankić, who acted as research assistant. Dr. Nina Bosankić is assistant professor at the International University of Sarajevo and senior researcher affiliated to the Centre for Refugee and IDP Studies in Sarajevo. I interviewed the fifteenth interviewee over Skype. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ native language, Bosnian. The translations into English are mine.

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11. See http://h.etf.unsa.ba/stp/projekat.htm [Visited 8 December 2014]


16. The people quoted here experienced the war as adults. The interviewees who were children in 1990s did not talk about humiliation and gratitude but about the excitement of, e.g., getting precious sweets from humanitarian lunch packages. For a generational perspective, see Povranović Frykman, “Sensitive Objects of Humanitarian Aid: Corporeal Memories and Affective Continuities”.


