Common Humanity in Humanitarian Communication

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In discussing '"the human" as a political stake', Vicki Squire notes that 'the category of "the human" is not given, but is made as such through humanitarian interventions.'[1] My dissertation assesses the construction of the human and its political stakes by going beyond the practice of humanitarian intervention as such and scrutinizing what can be called 'humanitarian communication'. This includes communicative practices of NGOs, charities and humanitarian organizations in which the construction of the human is paramount since it often relies on the imagination of a 'common humanity'.[2] This common humanity will be studied in three different forms of campaigns, those on: *disaster relief* (event-based campaigns; determined by their temporal nature) *long term development* (presented to us as part of day-to-day life and shaped by their ongoing, structural character) and *conflict and human rights* (campaigns dealing with delicate political issues in the face of the supposedly unambiguous notion of human rights). It is in these three different contexts that the question of what common humanity entails is addressed.

An example of such a campaign is 'The Family Meal'; a campaign launched by the World Food Program and a case study from which this dissertation departs.[3] At the start and end of all the videos of 'The Family Meal' intertitles pose the question 'What brings us together?'. The campaign aims at providing a daily family meal for 'the poorest and most vulnerable' and with respect to this, the question 'What brings us together?' plays out on two levels. The first is situated on a local level in reference to the habit of a family sharing an evening meal. Pointing to the moment when the different family members return home and settle around the evening meal, the daily habit of having dinner signifies togetherness on the local level. The second level is the global one, where the family meal is presented as a universal custom, naturally belonging to the human

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[1] Viki Squire, *Post/humanitarian Border Politics between Mexico and the US: People*, *Places, Things* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), p. 33.
[2] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[3] See <http://www.familymeal.eu> [accessed April 09, 2017]

way of life, across national or cultural borders or boundaries. In one of the campaign's videos it is indeed stated that 'it is important to convey that others, even in dire circumstances, want to have those natural, normal activities which are part of raising a family' — thereby stressing both the role of the family unit and its universality in deeming the family meal as a 'natural, normal' custom, that cannot even be challenged by the most dire circumstances.

Two interrelated yet contradictory claims stem from this example. Firstly, the notion of a family meal pertains to both an idea of material well-being in the form of a bare minimum of nutrition and to immaterial values in the form of family life. The concept of a family meal boils down the notion of humanity to what is perceived to be its essentials. Such an essentialization of universality in the name of the human can be understood in terms of identity formation; which means to go with Michel Agier's theorization of 'humanity as an identity':

> This identity, as a generalized system of transparency, takes on the name of 'humanity.' Like the god Janus, humanity has a double-sided identity, which, however, does not express any alterity (no 'other' is allowed in this bounded and total representation). Its double is only the reflection of a wounded, suffering, or dying humanity. It becomes the 'absolute victim,' who is nothing else or other than absolute and essentialized humanity when it is suffering.[4]

The foundation of humanity in the suffering body has for long been the primary reason for attaching the notion of common humanity to the representation of vulnerability. This means that humanitarian communication, which centralizes the notion of human vulnerability 'speaks the language of common humanity'.[5]

Secondly, the claim made in the video (and the campaign as a whole) stresses that it is important to convey that 'others' should be included in this idea of common humanity — thereby distinguishing between those for whom inclusion is deemed self-evident and those who can be understood as the 'vulnerable Other'. In this sense the discourse of 'common humanity' is structured and produced hierarchically, despite its appeal to a natural, a priori truth. Indeed, the production and reception of these campaigns is tied to local contexts. As a result, the alleged human experience is imagined from the perspective of those holding economic advantage and the ability to behold; bringing with it a distinction between a fortunate spectator and an unfortunate 'other'.[6] As this seems at odds with the idea of a global human experience, the question whether

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[4] Michel Agier, 'Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 1.1 (2010), 29–45 (p. 31).
[5] Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 30.
[6] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

universalism is an ethnocentric phenomenon[7] is as important as the question of how universalism is defined in mediated encounters between different places.

After taking 'The Family Meal' as an anchor point to explore the theoretical framework of common humanity, the dissertation will go into an in-depth analysis of disaster relief campaigns, long term development campaigns and human rights campaigns. Cases range from the response to the Haiti earthquake in 2010 by the Emergency Appeals Alliance, to campaigns by CARE and Save the Children. Methodologically, the project entails both a focus on textual analysis (scrutinizing the campaigns in word and image) and production analysis (assessing institutionalized production and circulation of these campaigns). For this the notion of 'conjunctures' will be employed, a term used by Chouliaraki and Fairclough to point to 'relatively durable assemblies of people, materials, technologies and therefore practices (in their aspect as relative permanencies) around specific social projects in the widest sense of the term'.[8] Conjunctures, in other words refer to those constellations in which different social actors, both human, institutional and material gather around a certain theme or event — in which it is important to note that 'the technologies and materials of production range from physical (…) to symbolic resources.'[9]

Common humanity (what the human is), universalism (claims stemming from this), cosmopolitanism (framing these claims in terms of citizenship) and globalization (the historical context under which this becomes important) set the theoretical stage for this dissertation. Around these themes, academia seems as divided as the world beyond. While Judith Butler for instance states that arguing with the notion of a 'common human vulnerability' is 'foolish, if not dangerous',[10] Roland Barthes asserts that the 'myth of the human "condition" rests on a very old mystification'.[11] Particularly in times of societal instability concerning the notions of globalization, migration and cosmopolitanism, these questions are brought to the fore once more. In this sense, addressing the simple-hearted question 'What brings us together?' means to address how these urgent issues are constructed in the arenas of popular culture, journalism and digital media — the sides that set the parameters for humanitarian campaigns.

[7] Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 24.
[8] Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 22.
[9] Ibidem, p. 23.
[10] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 31.
[11] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 101.