American Humanitarian Citizenship
The “Soft” Power of Empire

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Recent advertisements for the US military state that the military is a ‘force for good.’ A US Navy advertisement shows images of black and Asian servicemen and women, while suggesting that the Navy is a “calling” and that, as with a religious path, it is a “calling to serve” in order to do good. Another advertisement for the US Marines, entitled ‘Towards the Sounds of Chaos,’ shows images of soldiers moving trucks with boxes labeled ‘AID’ in planes and helicopters, taking supplies to Haiti and working in tsunami-hit areas (Dao 2012). According to the New York Times, the ad campaign is partly the result of a national online survey conducted by JWT, the marketing firm, showing that many young adults consider “helping people in need, wherever they may live,” an important component of good citizenship (Dao 2012; see also Jelinek 2012). Such campaigns downplay the killing and the battles, or even the educational benefits of the military, and show the marines as bringing help in times of chaos. The opportunity to help others in times of disaster becomes a selling point for military recruitment. What seems evident is that in the US, humanitarianism has become a component of citizenship. This notion of citizenship is naturalized as Westerners—Americans, Europeans, and increasing numbers of individuals across the globe—feel compelled to rescue these others and see themselves as being able to enact this rescue (Adams 2013).

Under neoliberal conditions, the US nation-state’s exceptionalism has now dispersed to its citizens. Instead of an exceptional nation, there are exceptional citizens produced by their practices and participation in humanitarianism. The exceptional citizen is a key component of a growing ‘non-profit industrial complex’ connecting individuals to states and to private enterprises (INCITE! Women of Color against Violence 2009). As humanitarians grow in number, their relation to corporate practices is visible in the neologisms that describe such work: “social entrepreneur” and “social enterprises” are terms that suture exceptional individuals to a corporate and neoliberal citizenship. Charity takes on corporate mechanisms, and humanitarianism becomes connected to private enterprises via donations, support, and favorable tax advantages, as well as market-driven and corporate strategies. Whether as “social enterprises,” as NGOs, or as charities, these organizations and groups see themselves as separate from the state (Bernal and Greml 2014). Tax-exempt organizations are understood to be private organizations, distinct from corporations or the state that might be funding them, but also sharing personnel and management practices, resources, and benefits from the state, thus blurring the division between public and private entities in ways typical of neoliberal projects.

In recent years, scholarly work on humanitarianism has provided a number of important ways to understand this term. Didier Fassin (2012) analyzes humanitarianism through a notion of ‘humanitarian reason’—the affective and moral dimension—and ‘humanitarian government’—the biopolitical aspect. But he sees both of these as producing inequality, examining how the term came to be important for France’s ideas of government and colonialism and its application in distant regions. Luc Boltanski’s (1999) has suggested that distant suffering produces what he calls a ‘politics of pity,’ which can be distinguished from a ‘politics of justice;’ he argues that the former compels a viewer of suffering to connect politics with humanitarianism within a genealogy of Christian and French revolutionary subject formation. Boltanski’s analysis leaves out colonial and racial histories in his genealogy, and his focus lies more in analyzing how suffering plays into politics and thus poses a problem for the universalizing of suffering. My research places these histories as the foundation on which the new humanitarians construct their Western, Christian, and racial superiority. Lilie Chouliaraki’s (2010) examines the work done by ‘humanitarian communication’ in media and the repertoire of emotion generated by mediated images of suffering that become part of lifestyles and consumption. She has gone on recently to argue for a ‘post-humanitarian’ politics that emerges after compassion fatigue, connecting consumers to immediate and individualized modes of humanitarianism. Chouliaraki’s important interventions are helpful to understanding the affective and communicative mechanisms of mediated humanitarianism, and her work suggests that fine-grained analyses are required to examine the vast enterprise of humanitarianism.

Following on these interventions, I turn to a particular nation-state, the US, in order to reveal how humanitarianism enables neoliberal citizenship, and the ways that it both extends and reduces the historical power of the nation-state and its ‘exceptionalism.’ In the process I suggest that neoliberalism is not a unitary project but a shared one with specific social and political characteristics in particular locations.

Humanitarian citizenship, which is both national and transnational, is produced through representations, rationalities, spectacle, affect, and practices. One key mode of the humanitarian project in the US is the distinction between distance and proximity, between domestic nonwhite communities and international ones in the global south, between those communities seen as undeserving in the US and deserving distant others. Distance, especially as it is mediated through travel, journalism, television, cinema, and photography, is produced through representations and practices that
emphasize inequality and difference. In these mediated distances, certain “truths” are taken for granted: no entity except the West or “good Americans” can rescue these distant others, and those distant others are unable to help themselves. Whereas every now and then the Western media celebrates individual activists in Asia or Africa or Latin America, these individuals are understood as extraordinary and unusual rather than as normative citizens of their countries, as is the case with US humanitarians.

Terminologies emphasize how differences are produced. Humanitarianism, for the most part, has come to refer to international efforts to aid non-American others, whereas community service or advocacy seems most often to reference efforts within the US. Moreover, humanitarianism, in distinction to advocacy and community service, relies on notions of charity, missionary projects, and on voluntaristic projects, whereas advocacy groups may try (although not always) to promote rights and liberal citizenship efforts. Such distinctions rely on believing that distant others living in regions outside the US are true victims ready to change, whereas local communities comprise “welfare cheats” and “welfare queens.” Thus the very notion of “humanitarian” relies on racial difference in the US and outside it. Although race often functions as a mechanism through which even those who live in physical proximity can be distanced, these geographically proximate communities are believed to be unable to change and are often blamed for their own conditions, whereas others living outside the US are imagined as worthy, less intransigent recipients of humanitarianism.

As an example of how such mechanisms of distancing work, research shows that white evangelical Christians are unable to see how structures of racial inequality pervade life in the US (Emerson and Smith 2000). Perhaps such myopia explains why so many of these missions are directed overseas, and why so many (although not all) US Christian missions often work to “help” in Africa or Asia but continue to excoriate and blame minority groups in the US for their conditions. Such beliefs are not just limited to particular missionary groups, but extend to a broad range of religious and secular groups involved in humanitarianism.

Western knowledges have produced distant others as needing and requiring interventions, while celebrating white and Western humanitarians. Claims about successful humanitarian efforts can flourish without being contradicted because these efforts happen in distant places. When “on the ground” research reveals harmful effects of such humanitarianism, the findings can be ignored or understood simply as “controversial.” There is little in popular media about the differences and challenges of humanitarianism, or of challenges to the inequalities generated by such projects. A scholar or activist arguing against particular humanitarian aid practices may be heard by a small audience but also ignored; at best, it may take a long time for a critique to be heard simply because it means creating a counternarrative to the huge apparatus of images and knowledges in transnational circulation that argue for the value and success of humanitarian aid. Aid regimes have involved so many subjects, institutions, states, and cultural and knowledge productions that it is difficult to interrupt what now seems a hegemonic idea. Even if counternarratives are produced, few can circulate if they do not fit into the ideologies of transnational corporate ownership, of state projects, or of hegemonic ideas of dominant classes and groups. Narratives of “good Americans” circulate widely and profusely and influence perceptions of the US as a nation of exceptional people.

Humanitarianism is powerful also because it is not a new formation; rather it builds on histories of “charity,” missionary work, and the “civilizing” project in the so-called developing world through war and institutions such as the church and the state, as well as through newer formations, such as transnational NGOs. The visual and written culture of this long history of missionary and humanitarianism of the “West” legitimizes activities of Western rescuers in distant places (Calhoun 2010). Some scholars argue that the US has been participating in humanitarian imperialism since the war in the Philippines (Clymer 1976). Whereas the humanitarian projects of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries flourish within contemporary consumer and citizen practices in the US, they have emerged also from the work of many linked humanitarian and international agencies seen as “Western” projects since the middle of the twentieth century. From the UN to Amnesty International, Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, and Human Rights Watch, many of these organizations have based their advocacy on furthering a new international form of juridical power, either based on human rights or the International Court or on the need for there to exist some judiciary outside the powers of states (Clarke 2009). Some have argued that humanitarian NGOs constitute a new global civil society on Habermasian lines; others have seen them as the agents of a new imperialism (Kamat 2002). For instance, Kevin Rosario (2003) sees humanitarianism as the product of a sensationalistic mass culture that has existed in the US since the early twentieth century. Miriam Ticktin (2006) argues that humanitarianism constitutes new biopolitical practices and forms of transnational governance. David Rieff’s (2002) work has become well known for questioning the efficacy of US-sponsored humanitarian intervention. And Ann Vogel (2006) concludes that the formation of nonprofit foundations in the US during the 1990s has created elite mechanisms for wealth distribution, whereas humanitarian projects export American understandings of democracy and form notions of the “global” for many Americans. Despite all these interventions, which now continue with research that tries to assess the impact of NGOs, there remains the widely disseminated “commonsense” knowledge that without such work, “global poverty” or “global problems” would not be solved.

Feminism in the US has also played a role in seeing women in the global south as targets of humanitarian projects, although, again, this project is not just an American one. In the aftermath of the UN conferences on women, the emergence of feminist and women’s NGOs has come to occupy
a large part of development discourse, and these NGOs are also numerous and ubiquitous in the US. Many of these, especially the transnational ones, participate in humanitarian endeavors around the world working on development projects such as “capacity building” or “microfinance,” focusing on women as targets of rescue. Many of these organizations see themselves as doing what the “corrupt,” “inefficient,” “patrician,” or “failed” state refuses to do in relation to improving women’s lives. As Sabine Lang (1997) has argued, the NGOization of feminism has replaced more movement-oriented projects; what Sonia Alvarez (1999) has called the ‘NGO boom’ has come to exist transnationally and in development discourse.

Rather than elaborating on the representational practices that construct these figures of “women” to be saved, I wish to focus on the subjects who are doing the saving and thus on the emergence of humanitarian citizenship in the US. This citizenship functions not only through meanings attached to notions of distance and proximity, international and national, as I have argued above, but also through changing ideas of public and private, state and civil society. It is transnational and national in that it is constructed against those who are not allowed to be citizens and on behalf of those believed to require Western rescuers; it works through networks of foundations, resources from state and from groups and individuals, and relies on privileged forms of mobility. It is normatively middle class, Christian, and “Western,” placing itself in the “West” and in “America” through civilizational, developmental, and human rights discourses. Although such a subject is also visible in other parts of the West, it has become hypertrophic in the US as a form of normative and exceptional citizenship. This emerging mode of citizenship is generalized across many institutions in the US, from the military to schools and colleges to churches and community groups, as well as big and small businesses and corporations. It relies not only on private foundations, but also on numerous state projects, institutions, and regulations. It is also, importantly, a government project endorsed by the White House, by Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, and by Democrats and Republicans (Clinton 2007). It constitutes what some call the “soft power” of the US state, combining care and surveillance, turning pastoral power into a form of sovereignty. Here “soft power” can be defined as “the power of the media to cast cultural difference and political struggle in the language of military conflict and war,” thereby revealing how war is mediated as humanitarian in the new century (Chouliarakis 2007: 8).

In this mode of citizenship, the emphasis falls on humanitarian projects as animating but also utilizing what are presumed to be the impulses of all Americans as “kind” and “caring” and as “good citizens” of the world and the US. It relies on the self-perception of Americans as “good” and “generous,” giving aid and coming to the rescue of distant others. Muehlbach (2009) has argued that in the case of Italy, neoliberalism has dissolved the difference between the Left and the Right through the articulation of a moral order rather than simply an economic one, and her analysis seems to ring true for the US. The humanitarian order encompasses a wide range of individuals, groups, and organizations from both the Left and the Right, and it brought them together within a neoliberal citizenship that partners the projects of militarism and empire.

Charity, missionary work, tithing—all these have been religious practices all around the world and in all kinds of traditions. So how is that this version of giving becomes formative of US citizenship? This is because humanitarianism, Christian missionary work, and community service do not remain distinct, but work across public and private institutions, suturing American nationalism with the state. These practices and their subjects depend on constructions of race, class, sexuality, religion, and gender that are both historically sedimented in histories of colonialism but also easily recuperable in new forms of media and consumption within new digital cultures. There is widespread media circulation of these projects through books, documentaries, feature films, television news and shows, websites, and journalistic as well as art practices. These images and practices traverse the realms of “civilizational” thinking, development discourse, state projects, racial, gendered, and classed divisions, missionary histories, commodity culture, and militarism. They are part of individualized self-improvement projects, as well as articulations of nationalism and geopolitics. They are neoliberal also because they rely on narratives and images that articulate the state as inadequate and uncaring as well as sovereign.

All of these practices governmentalize humanitarianism and nationalize it, as well; in Foucault’s terms, they combine pastoral, disciplinary, and sovereign modes of power, revealing a mobility of practices that suture NGOs, churches, the state, and corporations to American individuals, consumers, libertarians, conservatives, and progressives. They produce American citizenship as neoliberal, and can be either Christian or secular, as missionary projects or human rights protections. This citizenship is also multicultural (allowing participation of many racialized groups) as well as the work of a normative American who is white, because the dominant and widespread visual culture of these humanitarian projects constructs racial difference between the white donor and the nonwhite receiver. It is also gendered, sometimes relying on essentialist representations of masculine (and colonial) adventure and travel and sometimes on the nurturing feminine subject. Because humanitarianism is a term that references the “giver,” the “humanitarian,” rather than the receiver, it is as much about self-making as it is about a world in which such self-making is seen as essential to the welfare of not only many in the US, but also to the world. It combines the work of self-help with the work of “helping others” (volunteering helps in promoting self-worth, finding jobs and careers), relying on a media culture and its commodities to disseminate its narratives and power.

Humanitarianism has become an integral part of the economy, having brought together corporations, foundations, and individuals through common and diverse projects. As Denis Kennedy (2009) asks, ‘How has the
humanitarian project... been transformed into a $10 billion a year industry? The humanitarian economy flourishes because consultants, NGOs, and UN agencies benefit financially from being mediators of such work along with a network of wealthy corporations, donors, and states. Humanitarianism links corporations, states, and individuals within a corporatized political economy of charity. At its very worst, humanitarianism has emerged as a form of celebrity public relations that makes sure that certain figures continue to circulate and have value so that they can sell a variety of commodities. Numerous for-profit businesses have come into existence for such a purpose. The website Look to the Stars has, for instance, become successful publicizing lists of humanitarian projects done by media celebrities, gathering information from multiple sources to showcase how much charitable work is being done by wealthy and famous people. In doing so, it presents these wealthy elites as models to emulate. Celebrity events, such as charity balls, award ceremonies, auctions, parties, sporting and social events, have generated an economic infrastructure that supports NGOs and humanitarian efforts.

In many instances, whether actual support is given to the targets of such humanitarianism is often unclear and unknown. A trenchant article in the New Yorker reveals one example of this economy as John Colapinto (2012) describes the work of Trevor Nielson at the Global Philanthropy Group, based in Los Angeles, which works with wealthy individuals and celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. What the essay reveals is that for some entrepreneurs, such as Nielson, humanitarian work constitutes a new public relations machine useful for the business of rehabilitating reputations and building star image. These entrepreneurs make millions from their clients while their causes receive a trickle of that money. Colapinto gives the example of one celebrity who promised millions to a homeless shelter for youth but ended up just sending old T-shirts, all the while still promising funding for the shelter building. Much of the success of the humanitarian public relations project depends on lack of knowledge about what is actually accomplished.

Humanitarianism can, at its best, create publicity for causes and mobilize donations and sentiment. Yet it often does so in ways that contribute to global and national inequality by emphasizing the economic and racial difference between the West and the “developing” world, between rich and poor. It justifies unequal accumulation of wealth and suggests that private charity can supplant structural inequalities and violence generated by histories of colonialism or inequalities based on race or gender. In the US, the neoliberal practices of charity and humanitarianism are replacing demands for rights and entitlements from the state, so that humanitarian citizenship then excludes those who cannot become humanitarians from such citizenship. Class and race come to matter anew in these projects. Vincanne Adams (2013) has shown, for instance, how those impacted by Hurricane Katrina, predominantly those low-income or racial minorities, were deprived of any support by a state that shed its welfare function onto for-profit businesses contracted to supply aid. These businesses made millions while those who were meant to be the recipients of aid were left without support; in this case, the nonprofit sector also could not make up for all that was needed.

GREG MORTENSON AND THREE CUPS OF TEA: MEDIA AND PEDAGOGY

There are numerous examples circulating in popular culture and media of the value and importance of American humanitarian citizenship and its racializing and gendering processes. An excellent example of this kind of practice is chronicled in the publishing phenomenon entitled Three Cups of Tea (Mortenson and Relin 2006), which is an account of Greg Mortenson’s efforts to establish girls’ schools in remote areas of Pakistan. Recently, Mortenson’s account has been attacked as a fabrication and his NGO is losing its prominence and power, but the narrative is powerful because it belongs to a genre whose elements are understandable and familiar, widely disseminated and read. Educational institutions of various kinds, from schools to universities, have presented Mortenson as an example of a person to emulate, as an exemplary and exceptional individual. Mortenson’s account has been endorsed by celebrities and journalists and supported by wealthy donors and, importantly, by the US military. It is linked to tourist and consumer cultures by showcasing how a tourist and mountaineer, the rugged male and white adventurer, could become a humanitarian. In these websites and books, Mortenson creates a narrative that convincingly combines many of the key aspects of adventure: nationalism, masculinity, travel, tourism, and empire.

The narrative constructs the hero as masculine and caring, enmeshed in a lonely and brave struggle. Mortenson emerges as the only person doing this work—the Pakistani state is inefficient and uncaring, locals are patriarchal and religious, and he becomes the lone savior of Pakistani girls (with some heroic sympathetic locals who help, despite being afraid of departing from what are seen as “cultural” norms). There is no other NGO, civil society, or caring Pakistani here. The mountain climber, whose goal was to ascend the highest peaks in the Himalayas, ends up doing humanitarian work, and this book combines the adventure and rugged travel experience—he is not the mass tourist but the heroic mountain climber—with the work of “helping” those presumed to be helpless. Consumption and charity are combined in a powerful package. For all the consumers who see themselves as different from mass tourists (Kaplan 1996), and who wish to combine environmentalism with travel, and for whom travel to the developing world has now come to be imbued with charity, Mortenson is a powerful example. In recent years, the numbers of Americans who travel to Africa or
Asia to visit slums, poor neighborhoods, and the children or communities to whom they send money has increased dramatically, producing new itineraries and projects that combine travel with humanitarianism far beyond the ecotourism model.

Mortenson has also published a children’s version of his project, *Listen to the Wind: The Story of Dr. Greg and Three Cups of Tea* (Mortenson and Roth 2009), which has become extremely popular as required reading in schools across the country. A new book, *Stones into Schools* (2009), continues this publishing juggernaut, claiming to show how peace in what is seen as a volatile region could be achieved and how, as a blur by Tom Brokaw states on the back cover of the book, ‘one man can change the world’ (Mortenson 2009). Images of Mortenson with hijab-clad smiling girls are visible on the cover of the book, he has a large Twitter following, and he has appeared on all kinds of media outlets and visited colleges, universities, and schools. What is especially remarkable is that the popularity of this book, promoted by the credibility and power of journalists such as Tom Brokaw, occurred at the same time as American drones, in search of the Taliban leaders, were bombing the mountains of Pakistan and producing so-called collateral damage in pursuit of winning the endless “War on Terror.” These are the same areas where Mortenson claims he did his school building, and this regional interest reveals how American “soft power” of humanitarianism circulates in the media and is enabled by powerful state interest.

In one news article about Mortenson published in the *New York Times*, there are some glimpses of the connections between Mortenson and the military, while the article provides information that maintains Mortenson as a heroic and credible figure and ignores any investigation into the results of the humanitarian project. On the front page of the *New York Times*, journalist Elizabeth Bumiller (2010) reports that ‘in the frantic last hours’ of General Stanley A. McChrystal’s command in Afghanistan in 2010, he reached out to ‘an unlikely corner of his life: the author of the book *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson.’ We learn that Mortenson came to McChrystal’s attention because of a military wife who asked her husband, based in Pakistan, to read the book. The husband then recommended the book to McChrystal. The article goes on to mention that Mortenson was present in meetings of village elders with the US military, showing that McChrystal and Mortenson ended up working together. Bumiller (2010) states that the initial note to Mortenson from McChrystal ‘reflected his [Mortenson’s] broad and deepening relationship with the US military, whose leaders have increasingly turned to Mortenson, once a shaggy mountaineer, to help translate the theory of counterinsurgency to tribal realities on the ground.’ What is remarkable in this article, which is typical of much coverage of Mortenson since his book was published, is that Bumiller accepts both Mortenson—the ‘shaggy mountaineer’—and his account seemingly without any further questioning or verification. Thus she tells us that Mortenson is ‘responsible for the construction of more than 130 schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, mostly for girls’ (Bumiller 2010) and has struggled to undertake this task despite lack of financial resources, even once living out of his car in Berkeley, California.

The article does not look to verify whether the schools have been operating or had actually been built—an investigation that was later undertaken by the news program *60 Minutes* and by Jon Krakauer, the author-adventurer. Both were able to show that Mortenson had either exaggerated or fabricated some claims. The story that appeared in the *New York Times* is instructive because it unquestioningly repeats a narrative of the bravery and deprivation of the heroic white man, one who eschews military solutions, and a personal story that provides a sentimental and heroic story. After leaving the military, McChrystal brought Mortenson to speak at Yale University, where McChrystal was teaching a seminar on leadership at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. In a YouTube video of that event, McChrystal presents Mortenson as an exemplary leader, and Mortenson speaks of his “soft power” credentials: he favors “empowerment” rather than war, schools instead of bombs. He emerges as a cosmopolitan who has lived in Africa and Asia, in diverse cultures, who speaks many languages, a seeming throwback to the missionaries and colonial adventurers who saw themselves as melding into the “native” cultures. He becomes a leader in the necessary cultural work of “soft power,” which has convinced some anthropologists and cultural experts in the ‘human terrain systems’ project to support the war in Afghanistan (Jackson and McFate 2005). Mortenson’s circulation across elite and powerful institutions reveals how humanitarianism has come to be so hegemonic. There are so many books, articles, films, and media productions that produce this humanitarian narrative that even if Mortenson has been discredited, there are others ready to take his place and show that they could be better humanitarians.

The long list of speaking engagements at and awards from schools, colleges, and universities for Mortenson attest to the ways that humanitarianism has become a job qualification as well as an essential part of education. Students travel to Africa, Asia, and Latin America to work and intern in NGOs, and often there is little known about what is actually accomplished or learned. Humanitarianism has become incorporated into school and college curricula. Entrance to colleges often requires evidence of such work, and many high school seniors are assigned community service as a graduation requirement. Businesses have emerged to enable such travel. Large corporations set aside a day for employees to undertake volunteer work; celebrities remake their careers by starting charities and foundations and by attending fund-raisers. Bill Gates, for example, has been able to use his wealth to address health issues across the developing world. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s budget is larger than those of most of the countries in which it works; the Gates Foundation’s efforts to eradicate polio, for example, have recuperated Microsoft Corporation’s public
relations image as a helpful rather than predatory organization. From concern about the poor or the world and more recently for “Africa,” “social service” seems to have become central to American subjectivities. The US state encourages such work with tax deductions, direct funding of NGOs, and the creation of service corps: AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and a host of other such programs.

KIVA AND MICROLENDING: THE NEW-MEDIA HUMANITARIANS

Visual media are also vital in transnationalizing these activities and, of course, the celebrity media is also full of these stories of helping those “less fortunate” in poor countries. The phenomenon of microcredit and microlending has also spawned new forms of armchair humanitarianism that combines the modes of online retailing with fund-raising practices such as cloud-sourcing. On Kiva’s website, there are no hard-luck stories; rather, there are narratives of would-be entrepreneurs who want loans to start small businesses. Lilie H. Chouliaraki (2010) has described such narratives as a new mode of “post-humanitarian” communication that is incorporated into lifestyle choices, distinct from previous humanitarianisms based on grand emotions and representations of suffering. This emphasis on consumption and choices without the discourses of suffering are certainly some of the elements of the online organizations such as Kiva, which use commodity and market strategies to “sell” the women and men seeking microloans. However, as I have shown in the case of Greg Mortenson’s project, grand narratives of suffering, complete with images of little children, remain powerful. The power of such narratives also drives the recent interest in the West in the story of Malala Yousafzai, a young girl from northwest Pakistan (the same region of Mortenson’s activism), who was shot by a Taliban member for advocating education for girls. But such humanitarianism seems to coexist with the more entrepreneurial projects of Kiva’s loanees. US imperialism and war rely on multiple forms of humanitarianism to hail diverse subjects into citizenship, through online and armchair participation, travel, and consumption that rely on narratives of heroism and suffering, as well as the power to transform distant others into entrepreneurial and neoliberal subjects through microlending.

It has become a rite of passage for middle- and upper-class Americans to be involved in such online activities so that such choices have become part of panoply of consumer choices—a Christmas or birthday or wedding gift can be a goat or money to these women on Kiva. Online sites enable donations to schools that have lost funding because of state retrenchment—you can give to your favorite teacher or to the school district—and many sites enable you to choose specifically the teacher or the project you wish to support in the local school, thus producing popularity contests that might be detrimental for the morale of many teachers. These sites have become so normalized as useful and good that they create an amnesia of the time when it was the job of the state to provide teachers and schools with what they needed.

The microlending model has taken over a great deal of online gift giving. Now even wedding presents can take the form of online gifts to deserving others. Despite the criticism and questions circulating around microlending, its popularity continues. Microfinance has often been understood as the new panacea for poverty globally even as critics of the practice have shown its many flaws. For example, microfinance may increase gendered inequality and rural indebtedness and indeed intensify the power of patriarchies (see, for instance, Karim 2011). It is also based on the assumption that giving aid or state subsidies to people does not improve their lives, and that poor people globally would rather have loans and become entrepreneurs. Yet, because these online organizations are understood to be motivated by humanitarianism, the questionable practices inherent in microlending seem not to matter.

Kiva.org is only one of several nonprofits that rely on new media to produce humanitarians online. But it uses its online and Silicon Valley credentials to claim it is different from other nonprofits, and that it is more transparent and provides more direct access and connections between donors and recipients. It encourages donors to form “lending teams” and to debate issues through being a community online,eschewing a corporatist approach and presenting a more communitarian one. However, the images and narrative again work to create distinctions between communities, domestic and international, between American givers and international recipients.

On its website, we find images and descriptions of large numbers of people around the world seeking loans for myriad entrepreneurial activities. Unlike the Mortenson narrative that seeks charitable donations to support his work, Kiva seeks microloans from all those who believe that poor people around the globe need more work, rather than aid or even social justice. There are images of brown and black women and a paragraph of information about each recipient who can be helped if the user “chooses” him or her. Donors are urged to give small amounts, even twenty-five dollars, thus seeking to draw ordinary people to become global humanitarians. Most donors for Kiva seem to be based in the US, although there are others across the world. Similar to eBay or other retail sites, some loans include a sense of urgency and opportunity to the deal by listing the hours remaining for the donor to give. More recently, Capital One, the credit card and finance company, has donated half a million dollars as a matching loan to expand its partnership, adding some strength to all those who critique microlenders for charging excessive interest on loans (Yahoo Finance 2013).

Whereas Kiva’s microlending was formerly focused on international giving, the economic downturn led to calls for enabling microlending to US
entrepreneurs. In 2009, at the urging of Maria Shriver, then the California first lady, Kiva.org began to include US recipients who wish to start businesses, although international recipients remain the main borrowers. It partnered with US microcredit organizations, ACCION USA, and the Opportunity Fund in order to disburse loans. Yet this change to microlending within the US created some dissatisfaction among Kiva donors, who wanted the organization to focus on international issues where they felt the need was more dire and where small sums might go further, reflecting the belief that distant others are more open to change than proximate others. A lending team, Unhappy Kiva Lenders Group, came together to voice this dissatisfaction. In response, an oppositional team, USA against Kiva Bigots, was created, which has now morphed to USA 4 Equality. In the process, the Unhappy Kiva Lenders Group has disappeared from the Kiva.org home page, indicating that the website is more corporate than community, promoting its policies and monitoring participants’ interaction to achieve its goals. But this change also reveals that changing economic conditions in the US are having some effects on the belief that US low-income communities are cheating the state and cannot be helped.

An additional source of dissatisfaction among some Kiva lenders was the realization that Kiva did not provide loans directly, and that the loans went to intermediaries at distant sites. Although the visual technology of Kiva’s site provides a great deal of information, there is no way for anyone to know whether their money has actually reached anyone, because the funds go to local microlending organizations and Kiva is not in the business of seeing if the funds have actually reached borrowers or improved their lives. There is little information on Kiva’s website about the workings and finances of the organizations to whom Kiva provides the loans, so that there remains a distance between the lenders and the borrowers. Whereas Kiva.org does provide a graphic of the ways in which the money gets to the recipient, the model does not show us exactly how those “field partners” who are working in the regions where the aid recipients come from find the recipients or give them the funds. Indeed, the visuals of Kiva’s website provide pleasures for the donor-viewers in scrolling through the photographs and narratives of borrowers that foreclose any probing questions while providing the satisfaction for donors that they are helping people in need. Nikolas Kristof’s tweet in 2009 is evidence that such donations allow Americans to feel ‘good’ in both the moral and affective registers of that word: ‘Just made a microloan on www.kiva.org to a Nicaraguan woman. Great therapy: always makes me feel good.’ Sitting at a computer and sending money to an unknown woman provides Kristof with the ability to improve himself, suggesting Nikolas Rose’s (1989) argument that one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism is the self-improving subject.

What also makes Kiva so popular is that it provides consumer choices, enabling viewers to scroll through the names and descriptions of people in need, or to choose whether to give to a male or female or community.

There are quite a few choices—Kiva shows there are so many needy people around the world—even as we learn nothing about why and how so many become needy or even if their needness and the US consumer’s prosperity are linked. Megan Moodie (2013) has argued that Kiva obfuscates a highly unequal relationship enabled by these networked connections that are assumed to be ‘peer to peer’ but that are actually organization to organization, and that the site, like so many others, provides no information on how and why borrowers (most of them women) become needy; Moodie points out that the risk that is of concern in these transactions is that of the donors, rather than the borrowers. She critiques the belief that such site and online giving provides a closer connection to the clients, as many claim. For instance, the Wall Street Journal reports:

some of the newer Web-based nonprofits, such as DonorsChoose and Kiva, are attractive because contributors say they allow them to connect directly with their recipients. Donors or lenders can hand over money directly to, respectively, teachers and students in urban public schools or individual entrepreneurs in developing countries, rather than sending a check that ends up with an abstract recipient. (Silverman 2007)

This narrative about both digital media and humanitarianism—that most organizations or states involved in development are corrupt but digital media can provide transparency—utilizes what are seen to be the democratizing aspects of new media. Thus digital media is assumed to be more direct and more transparent because clients are vetted by the new-media organization and because the donor can choose among recipients. These sites rely on the putative closeness and the immediacy of the Internet experience and its possibilities for encouraging consumption, even as they rely on distance to enhance the narrative of need.

After the criticism from its donors, Kiva had to admit that they do not actually have direct connection with borrowers. However, they continue to suggest that technology can one day provide this experience. Preetal Shah, one of Kiva’s founders, admitted that although legal issues prevent direct peer-to-peer contact, he sees this ‘disintermediation’ happening in the future ‘when people in the developing world begin using their mobile phones to use credit and make payments’ (Strom 2009). Yet the problem is not just technology. It also is that sites such as Kiva.org imply that the viewer is able to decide the more worthy recipient simply by consuming the available online images and narratives. Although these images seem to be different from the usual images of the pain and suffering of distant others in the global south (Chouliarakis 2010), instead producing entrepreneurial and capitalist subjects, all of these projects intensify the inequality between donors and borrowers or suffering others and generous humanitarians.

In online NGOs such as Kiva, there is often an underlying assumption that these websites are created not by entrepreneurs, but by those
who genuinely wish to help. And indeed they could be. But they also do the work of consolidating the power of the humanitarian. They provide images of suffering others that provide a contrast with those who are the rescuers of the suffering. The latter are visible as the communities of Kiva: as lenders and lending teams blogging on the site, who are described on the website as ‘Kiva’s vibrant community of active and inspiring lenders.’ Kiva also supports subcommunities and divergent identities among donors who have “self-organized” into many different identities: Kiva Christians; GLBT lenders; Nerdfighters. There are not only representations of rescuers and victims, but an active production of the interactivity and community formation of digital viewers, revealing thereby how much humanitarianism helps in self-making, and in producing Americans’ own identities.

CONCLUSION

Didier Fassin (2012) uses the notion of ‘states of emergency’ and Agamben’s formulation of the ‘law of exception’ to argue that the state of exception is a global project of government. In another publication, Fassin and Pandolfi (2010) argue that even groups that are well meaning and ethically motivated to work within humanitarian intervention share a great deal. For instance, they have in common ‘the temporality of emergency ... reject the sovereignty of states in the name of a higher moral order’ (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010: 15) and ‘together construct a previously unseen political and moral order in which cynicism and ethics mingled and became indistinguishable’ (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010: 22). Fassin and Pandolfi (2010: 15) argue that what has emerged is the formation of a ‘new international political order’ in which ‘the politics of military intervention is now played out in the name of humanitarian morality.’

In the widespread circulation of the humanitarian project in the US, the ‘moral order’ that Fassin describes has become domesticated as an American project through the reiterations and intertextualities of popular media in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations, state security projects, and histories of empire. Sovereign power, finally, also includes the ability to produce the ‘moral order’ in which the moral subject is a US citizen. The numerous networks, economic and social projects, and multiple institutional sites that span public and private entities supporting this moral order suggest that such humanitarianism cannot separate itself from the workings of the state, even though neoliberal ideologies might claim the separation. Building on the discourses of efficiency of private and grassroots organizations versus the inefficiency and corruption of states, humanitarianism has become the purview of NGOs and private citizens who are deemed to be more caring, efficient and honest than many states. However, these organizations and individuals are supported by state funding, citizenship privileges, tax rebates, documents, transportation, and other forms of implicit and explicit support. Whereas the visual culture of humanitarianism that circulates in the US constructs public and private divides between state and private citizen, the US government and the American citizen, it also constructs humanitarianism as an American project, propelled by the needs of American citizens to see themselves as generous in helping alleviate the suffering of distant others. In the context of ongoing militarizations and an endless “War on Terror,” neoliberal welfare and humanitarianism are important partners of national and imperial power.

NOTES

3. Multiple editions of the book have been published and there is also now a website promoting the book and humanitarian endeavors: http://www.threcupsoftea.com/, accessed on 10 July 2013.
4. For Mortenson’s intervention at Yale University, see http://jackson.yale.edu/jackson-conversations-leadership-stan-mchrysal-greg-mortenson-now-yale-youtube-0, accessed on 16 July 2013.
6. One example of the coverage of Malala Yousafzai is a BBC article titled ‘Shot Pakistan Schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai Addresses UN’ (BBC News 2013).
7. See the following page http://www.kiva.org/teams?queryString=unhappy+kiva+lenders&categories=all&membershipType=all&sortBy=total.LoanedAmount, accessed on 17 July 2013.

REFERENCES


