

Humanitarian neophilia: the ‘innovation turn’ and its implications

Abstract: This paper critically examines the ‘humanitarian innovation’ movement, arguing that it represents a departure from classical principles and the entry of a distinctive new ideology into the sector. Labelling this ‘humanitarian neophilia’, the paper argues that it has resonances of Barbrook and Cameron’s ‘Californian Ideology’, with its merging of New Left and New Right within the environs of Silicon Valley. Humanitarian neophilia, similarly, comes from a diverse ideological heritage, combining an optimistic faith in the possibilities of technology with a commitment to the power of markets. It both ‘understates the state’ and ‘overstates the object’, promoting a vision of self-reliant subjects rather than strong nation-states realising substantive socio-economic rights.

‘Innovation’ is the new buzzword in humanitarianism. Over the past seven years there has been a succession of new funds, initiatives and papers calling for reforms and fresh thinking in the aid sector. Although there has always been an appetite for change amongst relief workers the current movement is on a different scale: it enjoys widespread institutional commitment, it embraces a wide range of activities and it is supported with unprecedented levels of funding. It is also distinctive because this current drive for humanitarian innovation is characterized by some very 21st century preoccupations. Enamored with technology, it is infused with the entrepreneurial spirit and ambitious sensibilities of Silicon Valley.

The current wave of enthusiasm for humanitarian innovation was born in 2009, launched into the world by ALNAP: the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action. It began with an ‘innovations fair’ at ALNAP’s 25th annual meeting, showcasing twenty-three ‘real-world examples of innovations that have helped to change the way in which humanitarian action is delivered’.¹ The concept was fleshed out in an influential paper and supported by the foundation of a Humanitarian Innovation Fund hosted at Save the Children.² Within a few years, the idea was taken up in other institutions: the World Food Programme and OCHA set up their own innovation grants, and similar initiatives were established at UNHCR and the ICRC.³

This year, in 2016, humanitarian innovation comes of age. It has been declared one of the four central themes of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, affirmed at the very

centre of international policymaking. ‘To innovate’, the summit’s literature declares, ‘means to do things in new or better ways’, but this vague statement does not do justice to the scale and significance of the movement.⁴ Ever since the idea reached higher education, with the Humanitarian Innovation Project at the University of Oxford, it became clear that it was a concept to be reckoned with.⁵

In this paper I examine the implications of the ‘innovation turn’ in contemporary humanitarianism, arguing that, far from a simple case of ‘doing things in new and better ways’, it replaces the classical principles of humanitarian action with a distinctive ideology, which I term ‘humanitarian neophilia’.⁶ The term ‘neophilia’ merges *neo* (new) and *philos* (love) to label an obsessive love of novelty.⁷ It can be used in a positive as well as a negative sense, describing people who are quick to adapt to new technologies as well as those who have an uncritical desire for the latest gadgets, those who are creative and innovative as well as those who fail to learn from the past. When applied to humanitarianism, I use this term to embrace all these features, but also, as will become clear, to describe an ideology that combines New Left and New Right with techno-utopian fervour. ‘Humanitarian neophilia’, as suggested in this article, designates a distinctive approach to aid, which combines an optimistic faith in the possibilities of technology with a commitment to the expansion of markets.

The article will proceed through five main sections. In the first I offer an overview of the humanitarian innovation phenomenon, examining its main characteristics, its recent trajectory, and some policy papers appearing to date. The second section pursues a more theoretical discussion, unpacking the idea of ‘humanitarian neophilia’ by establishing its relationship to the Californian Ideology of Silicon Valley and the work of Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron.⁸ In the third and fourth sections I look at two main features of the humanitarian innovation movement, drawing on an analysis of policy documents and technological objects respectively to build my case. In the fifth section I make a more explicit normative case against the innovation turn, arguing that many innovations serve aid workers rather than beneficiaries and contribute to an increasing deterioration of face-to-face relationships. After proposing that there should be ‘no innovation without representation’, the paper concludes with some lines for future debate. Humanitarian relief, I suggest, should stand apart from dominant ideologies rather than embracing them so enthusiastically, and this may well be the best response to the innovation movement as it gathers pace in the coming years.⁹

Defining humanitarian innovation

Even the proponents of humanitarian innovation admit that it is a nebulous concept.¹⁰ The vague call to manage emergency relief in ‘new and better ways’ makes it hard to pin down, but calls to innovate all involve an underlying commitment to novelty, embracing new technologies and shifting focus to ‘new actors’ in the private sector. Amongst the wider public the first of these characteristics is most associated with humanitarian innovation because new gadgets have fascinated the press. Certain objects, such as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or ‘drones for good’, have captured the imagination with their remarkable potential to map territory and drop supplies, but cutting-edge contraptions can be found throughout the industry.¹¹ In the field of water and sanitation, for example, there is the LifeStraw, a personal tube that filters water from dirty rivers as it is sucked into the mouth.¹² In the field of nutrition there is Plumpy’nut, a silver sachet of peanut paste that has been hailed as a ‘miracle cure’ for malnutrition.¹³ The shelter sector has seen the arrival of ‘Better Shelter’, a prefabricated and flat-packed refugee house with photovoltaic panels and heat control systems.¹⁴ And a great deal of excitement has surrounded ‘crisis mapping’, with the idea that big data and smoother information flows can revolutionise the sector as a whole.

Many of these technologies are ambitious ways for humanitarians to increase their reach, enabling aid workers to make the world legible, to map and understand distant terrains as well as take action at a distance. As a result, they not only make for good copy, but are also attractive topics for academic analysis. Over recent years a critical anthropological literature has emerged on these ‘humanitarian goods’: technologies, both large and small, with a social purpose and a distinctive vision.¹⁵ The LifeStraw, Plumpy’nut, and ‘drones for good’ have all been subjects of such analysis, revealing some of their more ambivalent roles in emergencies.¹⁶ Recent work in development studies has raised similar issues, tracing the rise of the private sector and other new actors.¹⁷ So far, however, the academic literature has not generated a critical examination of ‘humanitarian innovation’ as a distinctive and recent policy area. Innovation has not only become a buzzword in emergencies, but now goes far beyond the introduction of individual technologies to embrace what the influential ALNAP paper has described as the ‘four Ps’: not just new products, but also new processes (logistical or evaluation systems), new positioning (the use of social media to generate publicity), and new paradigms (completely original ways of thinking about humanitarian problems).¹⁸

The difficulty of picking apart the stakes of humanitarian innovation is largely due to the scale of the ‘four Ps’. After all, what unites innovation in so broad a sense? How could anyone object to such an inclusive and ambitious reform agenda? By focusing on two main characteristics in the humanitarian innovation movement, this paper brings this recent trend in

policymaking into sharper relief. It suggests that novel technologies remain a very important part of the innovation movement, despite the emphasis in policy papers that it need not involve anything genuinely new.¹⁹ Perhaps more importantly, however, this paper also emphasizes how humanitarian innovation is characterized by a resounding commitment to the market. Many large private companies are involved in the design of humanitarian objects, but humanitarian innovation has also introduced a new ‘business model’ in relief.²⁰ The vocabulary, theories, and approach of innovation come from the private sector, which is particularly clear in the policies that are produced in its name.²¹

A more detailed analysis of this language and its implications will follow, but the stakes of the shift to the private sector can be briefly illustrated in a recent DfID-funded paper on the ‘humanitarian innovation ecosystem’. This paper starts by declaring the importance of innovation for both business and aid. ‘In the business world’, it begins, ‘[innovation] is a clear imperative – if we don’t change what we offer the world (products, services) and the ways we create and deliver them (process innovation) then we may not be in business for long’.²² The ‘four Ps’ were originally devised for businesses to achieve these objectives: in order to grow, expand, and increase their revenue streams, firms must develop new processes to improve efficiency, new products that draw on unrecognized desires, they need to position commodities in new markets and rethink their very purpose from time to time with radical paradigm shifts. Innovation ensures that firms are constantly adapting and changing in response to the changing environment, seeking to maintain or increase their market share.²³ The phrase ‘adapt or die’ and the idea of the ‘attacker’s advantage’ captures the spirit of innovation in business, and it is a language that has crossed to humanitarianism with ease.²⁴

In business, innovation is part of the cut and thrust of capitalism, the cycle of competitiveness and creative destruction that has been the key to its dynamism and success.²⁵ Humanitarian innovators assume that a similar logic applies in the aid world. Their central diagnosis is that the sector lacks competition and is sluggish, unwieldy, and unfit for purpose, and they seek reform of this sector, which is viewed as backward looking, top-down, and held back by tradition. With new threats, crises on a bigger scale, and shortfalls in funding and capacity, innovation is presented as a matter of survival. ‘Without innovation’, reads a background paper for the World Humanitarian Summit, ‘the humanitarian community will either become irrelevant or too rigid to function effectively’.²⁶ The theme is echoed in other papers, which declare: ‘if established aid organisations fail to prioritise innovations, they are in danger of losing popular support and being overtaken by new types of relief organisation’.²⁷

This diagnosis may be partly correct – the humanitarian industry is indeed top-down and unwieldy – but the innovation agenda is distinctive because it finds solutions primarily in the market. It presents a future for humanitarianism in which market forces, incentives to profit, and entrepreneurial subjects generate a more efficient and emancipatory brand of relief. It is tempting to see this as another example of neoliberalism’s inexorable spread, but this would ignore an important subtlety: that there remains a strong humanitarian ethos in the innovation turn, a desire to do good and a careful balance of impact and method that is only ever a *selective* embrace of the private sector.²⁸ The humanitarian innovation movement is, therefore, better described as neophilic: it sees markets as way to generate new ideas, new technologies, new ways of working and thinking, but it does not advocate a full-scale transformation of the sector along market lines. Above all, the innovation movement is driven by an idea of liberation – freedom from want, from suffering, from authority, from bureaucracies and top-down management. However, this ‘love of the new’, with its triumphant narrative of progress, makes humanitarian innovators blind to the often mundane humanitarian practices that really change people’s lives; it produces a disconnect between the enthusiasms of innovators and the lives of the people they are meant to assist. This, as we shall see, is reminiscent of Silicon Valley’s optimistic but problematic combination of capitalism, technology, and humanitarianism, which has been particularly well captured in the work of Barbrook and Cameron.²⁹

Humanitarian Neophilia and the Californian Ideology

In 1995, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron published an article on the ‘Californian Ideology’. Analysing the emerging phenomenon of dotcom business, they identified a worldview that combined individual rebellion, radical individualism and a utopian technological determinism, tracing its genesis to both the New Left and the New Right. In their words, the Californian ideology featured ‘a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley’. It ‘promiscuously combine[d] the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies’.³⁰ This worldview was, on the one hand, rooted in late-1960s counter-culture and the spirit of the New Left in that it involved personal liberation, identity politics, celebrating the voices of marginalized communities and shaking off older sources of authority. At the same time it drew on ideas from the New Right: it saw opportunities in business and imagined a world of radical individualism driven by capitalist opportunity. For Californian ideologues, these values were brought together by computers and the internet. Technology would act as a liberating force, letting citizens express themselves,

creating diverse political groupings, and freeing people from states and other forms of traditional social control. Technology was also an opportunity for business, trade, exchange and radical creativity. With its techno-utopianism, the Californian ideology imagined humans powerfully emancipated and in greater control of their destiny: Randian heroes of a new information age.³¹

‘Humanitarian innovation’ has clear affinities with the Californian ideology. It has the same progressive intentions, promoting humanitarian reforms and championing silenced voices. It has the same emphasis on liberation, freeing people from suffering and aid from top-down control. It places the same value on entrepreneurship, seeking to liberate the productive citizens of refugee camps from the dependency of aid.³² But most crucially it celebrates novelty. In the world of humanitarian innovation, effective aid comes through new markets and new technologies. In policy documents aid agencies are reframed as ‘suppliers of humanitarian goods’, recipients are described as ‘consumers in markets’, and the innovation agenda seems preoccupied with identifying new ‘products and business models’. This clearly shows the legacy of the New Right in humanitarian innovation, with its robust economic liberalism and its commitment to expanding the private sector into new areas.³³ Simultaneously, however, the innovation movement seeks technology with an emancipatory force: technology as a more efficient and effective way to realize human rights and basic needs; technology as a way to thrive and develop; technology as an opportunity for social and political transformation.³⁴ This has resonances of the New Left and its narrative of liberation. With both market language and faith in technology, ‘humanitarian neophilia’ is a distinctive new ideology in the aid sector, which has many similarities with Barbrook and Cameron’s documentation of New Left and New Right uniting in Silicon Valley.

There is an interesting debate about whether or not humanitarian innovation is genuinely new, and a number of scholars have argued that innovation looks very much like the humanitarian reforms of yesteryear.³⁵ The idea of empowerment through self-reliance, for example, has a long history.³⁶ ‘Bottom-up innovation’ looks a lot like the older emphasis on participation and local knowledge.³⁷ Humanitarians have also long sought solutions in the private sector, been attracted to new technologies, and purchased goods through the market, and the relationship between entrepreneurship, capitalism and philanthropic sentiment goes back to the very origins of modern humanitarianism.³⁸ Yet humanitarian neophilia is more than just the repackaging of old ideas; it is qualitatively different from the long-running relationship between humanitarian biopolitics and liberal markets. The combination of humanitarian sentiment with markets and technology has taken a new form, influenced by the ethos of Silicon Valley and the merging of New Left and New Right with techno-utopianism. It is this combination that

represents such a thoroughly ideological challenge to ‘classical’ humanitarianism. Humanitarians have long engaged with markets and technologies, but they have managed to retain a clear sense that their purpose and approach was distinct from businesses and state. Now, autonomous humanitarianism is increasingly under threat. Markets and technology are presented as the central cure for the failures of the aid system, which is eroding the distinctive humanitarian tradition in which independence played an important role.

Humanitarian neophilia, it should be clarified, is very different from ‘new humanitarianism’. They are based on different ideological underpinnings, and the former is a recent phenomenon while the latter goes back to the 1967-70 Biafran war.³⁹ ‘New humanitarianism’ emerged from the 1968 student rebellions and combined a desire to help suffering people with ideas of Third World liberation, opposition to authority, and transnational activism. The archetypal organization in this mould was Médecins Sans Frontières, or MSF, the ‘French doctors’ who broke ranks with the Red Cross and established an organization that was more nimble, less bureaucratic, and unconcerned with age-old conventions like sovereignty.⁴⁰ In declaring itself to operate without borders, MSF launched a movement of ‘sans-frontiérisme’ based on the idea that suffering does not respect borders, so neither should relief.⁴¹ Although the political texture of MSF may have changed from place to place and year to year, the origins of this movement lie clearly in the New Left, with its emphasis on collective forms of decision-making and the fusing of political struggle with cultural rebellion.⁴² Humanitarian neophilia can be distinguished from this movement of ‘new humanitarians’ by its absorption of additional ideas from the New Right.

The journey from New Left to New Right is a well-worn path in many sectors, not least in politics itself. Many politicians of the early 21st Century have moved from an anarchist-tinged youthful leftism to a mature libertarianism, and the same is true for ‘new humanitarians’. Humanitarianism has long had affinities with liberalism but the ‘new’ humanitarians of the ‘sans-frontiérist’ movement found their commitment to anti-authoritarianism and personal expression transform into more neoliberal forms.⁴³ Parts of MSF, for example, moved from being a ‘medical wing to the worldwide guerilla movement’ in the 1970s to becoming a supporter of the United States in its anti-communist campaigns in the 1980s. They began moving beyond ‘sans-frontiérisme’ to adopt an ‘anti-étatisme’, suggesting not just that borders are ethically irrelevant when it comes to the provision of relief, but also that the state *itself* is an obstacle to relief.⁴⁴ This was the seed from which the innovation movement began to emerge. It shifted emphasis from one kind of liberation to another, changing the liberation of people from suffering and its structural causes, to the liberation of people from obstacles and constraints to their freedom as

homo economicus. As narratives about aid dependency gathered force humanitarianism became all about ‘helping people to help themselves’, encouraging the recipients of aid to flourish through the market, to become entrepreneurs and use modern technologies to do business.⁴⁵ This is the genesis of humanitarian neophilia, and although it can be traced back to the New Leftist influences of ‘new humanitarianism’, it became something quite distinct. The rest of this paper examines this ideology along three main lines, looking at markets, then technology, and finally to its effects.

New language, new markets

One of the most striking characteristics of the humanitarian innovation movement is the prevalence of business vocabulary. There are still only a limited number of papers on humanitarian innovation, despite its rapid growth as a policy area, but these papers reveal some recurring themes. They refer to ‘consumers or end-users in untapped markets’. They refer to ‘suppliers of humanitarian goods’. They call for ‘incentives’ and new ‘products and business models’, and at the global level, they make reference to the ‘market structure’ of humanitarian action.⁴⁶ These terms are relatively new, replacing a rather different kind of language: a lexicon of beneficiaries rather than consumers, aid agencies rather than suppliers, basic essentials instead of humanitarian goods, which were all operating in a sector that did not consider itself to be a market – let alone an activity with ‘competitors’ and ‘brands’. As always, the change in language is revealing, as it reframes the issues and paves the way for a different kind of intervention.⁴⁷

A good example is that term ‘consumers of aid’, a category that used to be referred to as ‘beneficiaries’. It is a linguistic shift that transforms aid into a transaction. ‘Consumers’ engage in an impersonal transaction of goods or services; ‘beneficiaries’, however, have a relationship with the organization providing for them. The word ‘consumers’ certainly corrects the rather paternalistic and patronizing language of earlier generations and replaces it with a more active, less dependent humanitarian subject. But this was also the intention of the rights-based vocabulary, which emerged in the 1990s and sought to transform recipients into holders of rights.⁴⁸ The language of ‘consumers’ does more. It transforms a sense of human obligation into an impersonal transaction between two independent parties, ‘consumers’ and ‘suppliers’. It erodes the sense of a shared human community, which was the primary organizing principle of humanitarianism. It turns the provision of relief, which has long been articulated as an act of compassion motivated by human solidarity, into the impersonal and instrumental delivery of

objects. It is worth quoting a recent innovation paper at greater length to illustrate the new vocabulary of humanitarianism:

In regular markets consumers purchase goods and services. In the market for humanitarian relief, however, the consumer – i.e. the aid recipient – neither purchases nor pays for the delivered service. Rather, public or private donors finance the transaction. In other words, there is an indirect producer–consumer relationship: aid agencies are the producers, donors the buyers and aid recipients the consumers. As a result, the market is loaded with asymmetries [and] moral hazards, such as weak incentives on the part of the aid agency to deliver good-quality services efficiently.⁴⁹

Without disagreeing with the central thrust of this analysis, one can critique the assumptions it is based upon: that the central humanitarian task can be re-articulated in the terms of a market. This economic vocabulary is not neutral; it changes the nature of the sector. It presents aid not as a gift, but as a commodity, and in doing so it removes human relationships and power differentials from view. Influenced by Marcel Mauss’s analysis of pre-capitalist societies, many scholars have found gift exchange a useful way to highlight how aid can reinforce social relationships and create networks of obligation.⁵⁰ Bornstein has examined how local philanthropy can be seen in terms of its power relations through asymmetric gift giving.⁵¹ Hattori has examined how Western aid can be interpreted as a form of symbolic violence.⁵² Mawdsley has shown how South-South humanitarianism has the potential to cement lasting egalitarian relationships.⁵³ One does not have to endorse Mauss’s theory of the gift to see the importance of these studies, which use the vocabulary of gift exchange to draw attention to human relationships and power differentials. Describing aid as a commodity, however, extracts such forces from the picture and gives the sector a rather different emphasis.

To put the point simply, the language we use to describe humanitarianism inevitably affects the way it is understood. It even changes the nature of the sector. A second example can be found in the way aid agencies are described as ‘suppliers’ of humanitarian goods, a term that prioritizes their logistical purpose over their more human-centred activities. Aid agencies are certainly involved in moving commodities from one place to another, but they also play other roles: listening to people’s needs, running participatory appraisals, assessing success with qualitative means, and responding to cultural peculiarities. If we describe relief organizations as mere ‘suppliers of humanitarian goods’ this reduces their activity to that material provision, placing other roles in the shade. Once that description takes root, there there is no reason why

the private sector cannot trump traditional ‘solution holders’.⁵⁴ It opens the sector for corporations who supply ‘humanitarian goods’ more efficiently.

A few years ago Stephen Hopgood published a provocative paper that tackled this situation. It questioned why traditional aid agencies like the Red Cross should hold a monopoly on the delivery of relief.⁵⁵ In a powerful thought experiment, Hopgood argued that companies like Wal-Mart, the supermarket chain, could theoretically be much more effective, since they excel in cost cutting and logistical capability. Although their motives and ideals are different, this may not matter if lives are on the line. If you were about to undergo life threatening surgery, Hopgood asked, would you prefer the kindly, generous, and moral surgeon with the 80% success rate, or the bad-tempered, selfish, and money-obsessed surgeon with a 90% success rate? Most people would choose the latter. Similarly, if you want supplies delivered to people in an emergency, is it really better to prioritize purity of motives over efficiency and effectiveness? Many people would say no. The central thrust of Hopgood’s challenge was that, when the stakes are high, outcomes may matter more than motives, and all this rhetoric about the need for a humanitarian ethos serves only to keep other actors out of an increasingly outdated sector.⁵⁶

It is a strong argument, but the obvious response – advanced by Hopgood himself – is that humanitarianism is not surgery, and nor can it be reduced to a need for things.⁵⁷ Process, inter-personal relationships, cultural awareness and participation are essential parts of the profession; they are keys to humanitarian success.⁵⁸ When we think about aid as a series of ‘products and business models’ we reduce it to just one of its elements, the provision of things, and we affect the whole sector with the same instrumental reasoning. Marina Warner has pointed out the consequences of this kind of discursive shift in relation to another sector: higher education.⁵⁹ The way we describe parts of higher education, she argued, subtly but significantly changes our understanding of those things. Calling the work of writing a book ‘generating an output’, or a university ‘a knowledge delivery solution’, she argues, ‘has a cryokinetic effect: it freezes the infinite differences that writing and research make possible, and sets them hard in the mould of market ideology’.⁶⁰ The same is true in humanitarianism. Calling a sack of grain a ‘humanitarian good’ and a hungry person a ‘consumer’ reduces this relationship to a purely material transaction when humanitarianism is far more than this. It involves making sacrifices for others and taking compassionate action motivated by ideals and internationalist aspirations.

Many scholars – even those with a critical eye – have expressed admiration for these ideals, and it is hard not to be captured by the underlying vision: that if an emergency strikes, anywhere in the world, there is a community of people who will relieve the suffering of distant strangers with no direct benefit to themselves.⁶¹ This central idea has not been completely

discarded by the humanitarian innovation movement, but it has been transformed: expressed and realized through the market. Humanitarian sentiment has merged with hard-nosed business practices, hippies and yuppies have joined forces, and in the unique ideological terrain of humanitarian neophilia, this finds its most powerful expression in the use of technological objects, to which we now turn.

Understating the state, overstating the object

As we have seen, humanitarian innovation is often presented as a ‘paradigm shift’, in which the private sector takes more of a role.⁶² The vision is one of liberation – from camps, from bureaucracy –but also from the state itself, imagining entrepreneurial individuals freed from constraints. Aid workers, it is claimed, can adopt creative ideas from the private sector, corporations can offer new products to needy people, and beneficiaries can channel their natural entrepreneurship to help their families and societies. In this vision, the state has serious limitations: it is seen as inefficient, old-fashioned, and a source of dependence. The private sector, in contrast, is seen as progressive and creative.⁶³ These ideas are reflected not only in the commentary around innovation, but the technologies themselves. As we will see in this section, many new technologies have been designed for life outside the state; they are survival technologies designed for the absence of state infrastructure.

In many ways, this makes perfect sense. Humanitarian crises usually take place against the background of state fragility, and in such circumstances it is very useful to have tools that allow people to survive and prosper without relying on centralized services. Consider, for example, the LifeStraw – an object that has been the subject of detailed analysis by anthropologist Peter Redfield.⁶⁴ This object allows someone to drink safely from dirty, turbid river water. A simple tube, it is light and compact enough to be carried around the neck. The user sucks dirty water through the filtration mechanism inside the straw, delivering a fluid that is safe to drink. The LifeStraw promises clean water without piped services from a central government, so it is no wonder that it has generated a market for campers, outdoor enthusiasts, and libertarians preparing for the apocalypse. With a LifeStraw around your neck, you do not need the state. You no longer require networked water systems that are set up for communities and maintained centrally. The LifeStraw offers a personal water supply.

There are many other examples. The photovoltaic panel is designed to supply a personal source of electricity: with enough sunlight you can set it up, connect your lamp or your cellphone and enjoy amenities off the grid.⁶⁵ The PeePoo bag offers sanitation without the waste pipes or

sewerage system: it is a biodegradable sack that can be placed in a portable toilet to catch excrement for compost.⁶⁶ Plumpy'nut has been designed to provide therapeutic nutrition at home, freeing nutritional relief from the top-down complexities of the feeding centre.⁶⁷ These innovations are designed for minimal infrastructure. They offer self-reliance, which may be very appropriate in first phase emergency responses, when state infrastructures are absent and survival innovations may be necessary; moreover, the elegant design of many innovations seems to make a virtue out of necessity. But the danger is that they are presented as simply virtuous. They seem to offer a *celebration* of life beyond the state, accompanied by a triumphalist narrative of technological achievement and ingenuity. The effect is to undermine the state by suggesting that technology and the market are the best way to provide basic services.⁶⁸

The tendency of humanitarians to prepare for (and celebrate) life beyond the state has already been recognized by Mark Duffield, who traced the shift from a state-based to a market-based narrative in humanitarianism in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁶⁹ Until the 1990s, Duffield argued, emergencies were presented as exceptional and the failure of a state to protect its citizens was a temporary aberration, with the job of humanitarians to 'wall-off' disasters until the state could resume its developmental tasks. Now, however, emergencies are not treated as exceptional, but inevitable. Humanitarian policymakers have adopted refrains of 'preparedness' and 'resilience', with disasters presented as an ever-present possibility. The aim of humanitarians is no longer to wall off disaster until state-led development can be resumed, but to facilitate a world where people can survive *without* the state.⁷⁰ According to Duffield, humanitarianism today is oriented around the production of good neoliberal citizens: disaster-affected people who are linked into global markets and trained to see risk as an opportunity for enterprise and reinvention.⁷¹ Whether or not one agrees with this assessment, it is striking how the modernist emphasis on state-led progress has been replaced with a post-modern emphasis on fracture, instability, and the need for individuals to help themselves rather than relying on the state.⁷² Humanitarian innovation is just the latest example of this trend.

If humanitarian innovators tend to under-state the state, they also *over*-state the object, claiming that technological objects can revolutionize the provision of assistance.⁷³ This is not always inappropriate, since some technologies are genuinely revolutionary. Plumpy'nut is a good example. Through a simple and easily replicable design, it has replaced expensive in-patient feeding with the 'community-based management of acute malnutrition' (CMAM), making it possible for therapeutic nutrition to take place in the home rather than the resource- and time-intensive environment of the clinic.⁷⁴ Many technologies, however, simply do not deserve to be called revolutionary. When they claim to 'change the world', this is little more than marketing.

Such exaggerations have even led to calls from *within* the innovation establishment to regain perspective. In the words of one recent article from the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, ‘innovation is not the holy grail’.⁷⁵

The problem is that many innovation initiatives prioritize flashy technologies over time-consuming improvements. They pursue gadgets at the expense of routine activities. They risk reducing complex humanitarian problems, which need political engagement and have a significant social angle, to the provision of material goods. At their worst, they combine an excess of enthusiasm with a shortage of understanding, and far from being ‘game changing’, they offer only modest improvements to people’s lives.

Take two recent innovations by way of an illustration. The first is the Litre of Light: a transparent bottle, filled with water, which is suspended from the ceiling of a dwelling to refract the light into the room.⁷⁶ There is little doubt that this contraption can improve daily life, and it can be made very easily from recycled materials such as old plastic water containers and corrugated iron roof sheets. But the idea has generated a remarkable amount of hyperbolic commentary: it has been described as an initiative that has ‘changed millions of lives’, even one that can ‘change the world’.⁷⁷ It has been portrayed as a ‘shining beacon of hope’ for poor people and has won numerous awards, including a UNESCO award for ‘an innovative and transformative solution that addresses both climate change and wider economic, social and environmental challenges’.⁷⁸ There is something rather curious about the celebration of such a modest improvement to an already-appalling life. In the end, the ‘litre of light’ is just a discarded water bottle hanging from the ceiling of a hovel. It might make that hovel a bit lighter, but it still remains a hovel.

Another example is Sprinkles: a sachet of pale powder that can be sprinkled over a meal to improve its micronutrient content. The product responds to a real and pressing situation, the under-nutrition of young children, and it is designed to do so by ‘increasing the micronutrient content of a child’s diet without changing their usual dietary habit’.⁷⁹ The Sprinkles Global Health Initiative (SGHI) is careful to emphasise the ‘efficacy, bioavailability, safety, and acceptability of the product’, making reference to research and scientific studies.⁸⁰ Guidance from the World Food Programme and World Health Organization is also measured. But Sprinkles is an innovation that also inspires hyperbole: a journalist in the *New York Times* suggested its revolutionary impact was comparable with the Internet, and one of Sprinkles’ corporate sponsors, Heinz, was awarded a ‘visionary award’ for its financial support of the project.⁸¹ A careful look at Sprinkles, however, reveals that its main characteristic is a fundamental modesty. In the end, all this product can do is improve the nutrient content of a

poor meal. It may prevent deficiency diseases in the short term, but it cannot tackle chronic malnutrition, nor can it change the poverty that causes so many people to eat an inadequate diet in the first place – or even provide a good meal to people who need it.⁸² Sprinkles might make a meagre gruel a bit more nutritionally acceptable, but it still leaves people eating a meagre gruel.

These two examples are both old – for neophiliacs, at least – but the tendency to ‘overstate the object’ is a recurring feature of the innovation movement.⁸³ Recent designs can be found on the ‘Innovation Station’ website, and in just the past six months a number of suggestions for the Syrian refugee crisis have had some of the same characteristics.⁸⁴ One such innovation is the ‘wearable dwelling’: a coat that can be opened out and transformed into a tent for use on the long overland trek from Turkey through the Balkans to Western Europe.⁸⁵ Another is a scheme to use material from discarded lifejackets and dinghies on Lesbos to manufacture bags for refugees.⁸⁶ Both examples share a scale of vision that is characteristic of humanitarian neophilia, which prioritises novelty over suitability, and applies this novelty on a severely restricted horizon. The ‘wearable dwelling’ and the bag made from dinghy-rubber can tackle human suffering at only the most superficial level. The novelty evaporates as soon as one considers the sheer scale of this crisis. Like Sprinkles or the Liter of Light, these tiny improvements are wrapped in hyperbole. They might make it easy to carry belongings on an arduous and dangerous journey to asylum in Europe, but they still leave refugees taking an dangerous journey without protection or safe passage, whilst turning their suffering into a spectacle.

Innovation without representation

It is hard to write about humanitarianism without straying into normative terrain, and in this section I pursue a critique of the innovation movement that asks: who is ‘humanitarian innovation’ really for? In response, I argue that it is often the humanitarian community rather than the beneficiary community who request, drive, and benefit from the innovation, which is a serious ethical challenge to the movement as a whole.

Sprinkles is a quick, lightweight and relatively cheap way to enhance the nutritional profile of a meal, and humanitarians have good reason to promote it on grounds of efficiency. Tackling micronutrient deficiencies simply requires the ‘end user’ to open the sachet and sprinkle the powder on their food, but the problem with this product – as with many humanitarian technologies – is that it is hard to imagine a beneficiary household requesting a sachet of micronutrient powder as their preferred intervention. Any gain in efficiency and convenience, at

least in this case, is more for the aid workers than the recipients. The recipients of Sprinkles would immediately see that it does not change their fundamental situation and would be far more likely to prefer regular, balanced meals of proper food on their table, or at least some support in making this happen. They may benefit from Sprinkles in a limited way, but this kind of intervention does not reflect a deep engagement with the priorities of beneficiary communities.⁸⁷

In pursuing this kind of critique, a good slogan to adopt is ‘No innovation without representation’. Innovations should be representative in their design, in their production, and their effects. If humanitarians are going to innovate on behalf of others, they should make sure there is maximum participation and involvement from beneficiary communities, and if they do not – if they are unable to involve people, and if the product has overwhelming advantages without the need for participation – then this has to be explained and defended. Certain innovation initiatives acknowledge this, most notably in the call for ‘bottom up’ innovation that comes from the Humanitarian Innovation Project at Oxford.⁸⁸ There is also the phenomenon of ‘human centred design’. Too many innovations, however, suffer from a crisis of representation, in which aid workers fail to consult or involve the people they are trying to help, which can lead to problems with acceptability and appropriateness – practical problems as well as ethical ones – deriving from unchecked neophilia: a love of the new for its own sake.⁸⁹

Humanitarian neophilia does not just lead to innovation without representation; it also generates a wider disconnect between aid workers and recipients: a trend that has been growing for some time.⁹⁰ In some quarters, it has been described as ‘bunkerization’, and much has been written about the way aid workers, particularly since 9/11, have retreated into armoured SUVs and behind the high walls of fortified compounds.⁹¹ Bunkerization has become a vicious circle, which began with the abandonment of humanitarian neutrality during the 1990s, when aid agencies hitched its fortunes more clearly with Western liberal interventionism. The subsequent rise of attacks on aid workers led to greater concerns for their security, the rise of tightly guarded accommodation, and the construction of bunkers that made aid workers appear more and more like military targets – reinforcing rather than dispelling their association with the West.⁹²

Bunkerization prevents aid workers sharing in the daily lives and struggles of the people they are there to assist, placing obstacles in the way of participation and mutual understanding. It is very difficult to generate trust – and even have a conversation – with beneficiaries if you live behind razor wire and travel to work in a guarded SUV. Humanitarian innovations can make this worse, especially if they are designed to manage crises from a distance. Satellites and drones are used to collect data from the air: tracking population movements, monitoring military activities,

and mapping humanitarian responses.⁹³ Again, these technologies certainly have their uses, but they also feed into a humanitarian retreat, as ‘digital humanitarians’ do their work from New York City or London, crisis mappers make disasters legible from a distance without talking to people on the ground.⁹⁴ In future years, humanitarian drones may be able to intervene directly, dropping supplies into crisis-affected areas, raising the possibility that, as ‘assistance from a distance’ becomes common, humanitarianism could, ironically, end up requiring no human contact at all.⁹⁵

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been threefold: to introduce humanitarian innovation as a distinctive policy area, to set out its main features, and to produce the outlines of a critique. By developing the term ‘humanitarian neophilia’, the paper has also advanced a central argument: that there is an ideological underpinning to the innovation movement representing a serious challenge to classical humanitarian principles. This ideology involves commitment to new technologies and new markets as a solution to the ills of the humanitarian sector. It is distinctive from earlier humanitarian interests in technology and markets by its unique combination of New Left, New Right, and techno-utopianism. The effect, I have argued, is worrying. Humanitarian neophiliacs are so optimistic about novelty that they can lose sight of whether an innovation is genuinely game changing or whether it fiddles around the edges. They miss when innovations might take place at the expense of more routine activities, which have a far bigger impact on the poor. They also may forget who the innovations are for, and their push for change places autonomous humanitarianism at risk. My aim in this conclusion is to draw out such implications in more detail and suggest some area for future debate

The argument so far has been constructed in five main parts. The first section defined humanitarian innovation through its interest in novelty, with a particular stress on market mechanisms and new designs. Section two developed the idea of ‘humanitarian neophilia’, drawing on the work of Barbrook and Cameron to define this ideology in more detail. Section three examined key policy documents, critically examining the language of innovation to show how thoroughly it embraces the market, transforming aid into a more impersonal transaction and contrasting the perceived forces of liberation that come with an expanding private sector with the inefficiency of the state. Section four examined some technological objects, showing how the innovation movement relies on an assortment of ‘off-grid’ technologies, promoting a

triumphalist narrative of progress that overstates the object whilst understating the state. Section five then developed a normative critique of the innovation movement.

What does all this mean for the future of humanitarianism? As I pointed out at the start of this paper, there is relatively little scholarly debate surrounding innovation as a humanitarian policy area because the term remains so vague, and because it is hard to disagree with the basic idea of doing things in ‘new and better ways’. Opposition ends up looking nihilistic or conservative: the product of either a lack of concern for reducing human suffering or a lack of interest in change and reform. A clear and persuasive oppositional narrative, therefore, is important to move the debate forward, and to close this paper I would like to suggest two possible options. The first is to embrace conservatism by calling for a return to classical principles. The second is to make a more radical case, arguing that humanitarianism needs a more politically assertive agenda. The first strategy is probably easier, since it means returning to a familiar and respected reference point amongst practitioners. The second strategy is riskier, since it involves puncturing the myth of classical principles and encouraging a robust debate about central humanitarian values. It does, however, present a more diverse and vibrant arena for future discussion.

The conservative response means acknowledging that older forms of humanitarianism have a value that is being lost, a value that was often progressive because it prioritized fairness over efficiency. The argument mirrors the opposition to neoliberal reforms in other areas of life, which also hark back to the past. Many European progressives, for example, have become conservatives in recent years, arguing that a relatively successful combination of egalitarianism and autonomy was achieved in Western European societies in the years from 1945 to 1979: an era of strong welfare states, redistributive policies, nationalized utilities, social security, and in many cases a cross-party consensus on such matters.⁹⁶ Humanitarian progressives, too, have a ‘golden age’ to recall: an era of classical principles and relative independence, which lasted from the 1960s until the end of the Cold War.⁹⁷ For all the cant and myth surrounding these principles and this independence, their central purpose was always relatively clear: they were designed to distinguish the value-driven sphere of humanitarianism from the interest-driven spheres of politics and profit. They were meant to carve out an autonomous space that allowed aid workers to prioritize suffering. In short, they were articulated *against* politics and the market, and it is this independence that is being eroded by the turn to innovation through the private sector.⁹⁸

The second option is more complex, because it involves addressing the myth of humanitarian principles as well as the implications of innovation.⁹⁹ It involves recognizing that the ‘golden age’ of humanitarian autonomy never really existed, and humanitarians have always

been influenced by political agendas, taken money from the private sector, and purchased goods in the open market.¹⁰⁰ It suggests that aid agencies can maintain their distance from states and markets by adopting a more robust set of values – not through classical principles, but through an assertive humanitarian politics. This is by no means an original idea. From the internationalism of Eglantyne Jebb, Dorothy Buxton, and the founders of Save the Children, to the radicalism of MSF doctors and the quietly rebellious middle-classes of Oxfam, a succession of inspirational humanitarians have managed to find that autonomous space to assist suffering people in a way that is separate from both states and markets – *yet still firmly political*.¹⁰¹ Such oppositional politics are part and parcel of the humanitarian tradition, but are in danger of being lost with the snowballing of humanitarian innovation, which is closely aligned to dominant neoliberal ideas rather than maintaining a healthy distance from them.

It might be said that humanitarianism has always been liberal, if not neoliberal: reformist rather than transformative, working with ruling ideologies rather than against them. This is a common argument from Marxists, who present humanitarianism as a bourgeois tool of social control, smoothing the blunter edges of capitalism to the detriment of the poor.¹⁰² It has long seemed a rather weak argument, however, ignoring the radicalism that is central to the humanitarian movement, the way that humanitarians have so often challenged powerful structures, changed political discourse, promoted human equality. But in more recent years, the case seems a lot stringer, as the humanitarian innovation movement does not just involve forging temporary alliances with businesses in order to secure funding or purchase supplies; it adopts, wholesale, the priorities, language and worldview of the private sector. Humanitarianism does not just indirectly serve bourgeois interests in a way that is impossible to truly prove; it is explicitly involved in a project of opening up new markets for companies that have an interest in testing their products at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’, amongst the two billion people who live on less than two dollars a day.¹⁰³

The proponents of humanitarian innovation may respond by saying that businesses are dynamic, responsive and innovative, but this does not mean they are good at humanitarianism. Aid work, at its best, involves commitment and compassion, caring for people in difficult circumstances. Although the innovation literature calls for an end to the ‘instinctive antipathy for the private sector’, it might be precisely this antipathy that keeps the spirit of humanitarianism alive.¹⁰⁴ When engagement with the private sector was just an issue of whether or not to accept money there could be a simple cost-benefit calculation, which meant humanitarians were able to retain a relatively independent and firmly pragmatic stance. Sometimes the best approach was to speak out and oppose people in power, at other times it was to work with them to get access;

sometimes the best approach was to condemn businesspeople for prioritizing profit, at other times it was to negotiate with them for money and supplies. This kind of independence becomes much harder if humanitarians become in awe of the private sector, seeing business as the cure for its failures. A far better approach is for humanitarians to regain their self-confidence, to guard their independence from the market, and to regain an oppositional political position that, regrettably, is in danger of being lost.

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¹ For a list of the innovations featured at the ALNAP fair, see <http://www.alnap.org/ourwork/innovations/fair>. Accessed 8th September 2015.

² Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action."

³ For an overview of innovation initiatives, see Betts and Bloom, "Humanitarian innovation", 8-9.

⁴ 'Initial Scoping Paper – WHS Theme 3: Transformation through Innovation'. Available at: https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_Innovation. Accessed 8th September 2015.

⁵ <http://www.oxhip.org>. The technological work of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative in the United States also, to a certain extent, reflects the innovation trend. <http://hhi.harvard.edu>.

⁶ This paper considers humanitarianism as the act of providing basic needs in emergencies, rather than as a wider logic of government in the Foucauldian sense.

⁷ An early use of this term comes from Christopher Booker, one of the founders of Private Eye, in his 1969 book *The Neophiliacs*. It was popularized for the technologically savvy counter culture by Robert Shea and Robert Anson Wilson in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* of 1975-1984.

⁸ Barbbrook and Cameron, "Californian ideology".

⁹ This article concerns recent policy developments in the humanitarian sector; similar trends have been forming in the development sector and have been the subject of recent issues of this journal. Richey and Ponte, "New Actors and Alliances in Development". An equivalent, and recent, volume for the humanitarian sector is Sezgin and Dijk, *The New Humanitarians in International Practice*.

¹⁰ Betts and Bloom, "Humanitarian innovation", 5-6. Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action." Although its parameters have become clearer over the last two years, with a succession of conferences, position papers and the World Humanitarian Summit, there remains a diverse range of activities under the label of innovation even today.

¹¹ 'Drones for Good' has become a multi-million dollar competition encouraging innovators to develop new uses for UAVs. See <https://www.dronesforgood.ae>. For an example of media coverage, see A Sniderman and M. Hanis, 'Drones for Human Rights', *New York Times*, 30 January 2012.

¹² <http://www.buylifestraw.com/en>. For media coverage, see J. Hoffman, 'LifeStraw Saves Those Without Access to Clean Drinking Water', *New York Times*, 26 September 2011.

¹³ <http://www.nutriset.fr/index.php?id=92>. See A Rice, 'The Peanut Solution', *New York Times*, 5 September 2010 and M Wines, 'Hope for Hungry Children, Arriving in a Foil Packet', *New York Times*, 8 August 2005.

¹⁴ <http://www.bettershelter.org>.

¹⁵ Symposium at the University of Edinburgh, "Humanitarian goods: towards an anthropology of things that care", 4th-5th June 2015. For a useful summary of relevant literature, see <http://humanitariangoods.com/resources.php>. In 2012 the journal *Public Culture* (volume 24, issue 1) had a theme on this topic, entitled "Poverty Markets: The New Politics of Development and Humanitarianism."

¹⁶ Redfield, "Bioexpectations"; Scott-Smith, "The fetishism of humanitarian objects."; Cross, "The 100th object"; Sandvik and Lohne, "The Rise of the Humanitarian Drone"; Sandvik, "The Humanitarian Cyberspace"; Redfield, "Vital mobility and the humanitarian kit."; Street, "Food as pharma".

¹⁷ Richey and Ponte, "New Actors and Alliances in Development"; Banks and Hulme, "New Development Alternatives or Business as Usual"; Ponte and Richey, "Buying into Development?"

¹⁸ Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action," 3-4.

¹⁹ Betts, Bloom and Omata, "Humanitarian innovation and refugee protection", 3-4.

²⁰ IKEA was behind the design of the Better Shelter; DHL in a logistics partnership with OCHA; Deloitte funds a humanitarian innovation programme; Plumpy'nut and LifeStraw were developed through private enterprise; a range of technology companies have been involved in bringing mobile telecommunications and 'big data' to the humanitarian field. Carbonnier and Lightfoot, "Business in Humanitarian Crises"; Meier, *Digital humanitarians*.

²¹ Betts and Bloom, "Humanitarian innovation", 6. Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action," 4, 60. Rush et al., "Components of the Humanitarian Innovation Ecosystem."

²² Bessant et al., "Innovation Management, Innovation Ecosystems and Humanitarian Innovation", 1.

²³ Francis and Bessant, "Targeting innovation." Henry and Mayle, *Managing innovation and change*. Examples of these innovations in the private sector are offered in Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action," 15-16. Bicos were an innovative product innovation made by BIC in the 1950s; internet banking was an

innovative process development adopted by the high street banks in the 1990s; the rebranding of Levi jeans from work clothes to fashion items in the 1940s is an example of a positioning innovation; and the complete transformation of Nintendo playing card manufacturer to a computer manufacture is an example of a paradigm innovation.

²⁴ Foster, *Innovation: the attacker's advantage*.

²⁵ Innovation is part of the dynamism and creativity of capitalism, which even Marxists are keen to acknowledge. See, for example, Berman, *All that is solid melts into air*.

²⁶ Approach paper, WHS Theme 3: Transformation Through Innovation Available at https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_Innovation. Accessed 8th September 2015.

²⁷ Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action," 3.

²⁸ A number of scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with the label 'neoliberalism' to explain such a complex and equivocal movement. See, for example, Redfield, "Bioexpectations", 159. It cuts both ways. Roy has described the relationship between capitalism and humanitarianism as the 'ethicalization of market rule'. Roy, "Ethical Subjects", 108.

²⁹ Barbrook and Cameron offered a relatively early interpretation of the emerging ideology of Silicon Valley in a paper published in the 1990s. There are now countless accounts of its distinctive characteristics, including many that critique its vision of liberation and progress through technology. For a recent example see Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*.

³⁰ Barbrook and Cameron, p. 364.

³¹ The basic outline of the Californian Ideology – the merging of counterculture and libertarianism – is also discussed in Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, Streeter, "That Deep Romantic Chasm", and other scholarly texts in the late 1990s.

³² Betts and Collier, "Help Refugees Help Themselves".

³³ The language of the market and its role in humanitarian innovation will be more fully developed in the subsequent section, 'New Language, New Markets'.

³⁴ The role of technology in humanitarian innovation will be more fully developed in the subsequent section, 'Understating the State, Overstating the Object'.

³⁵ Sandvik, "Humanitarian innovation, humanitarian renewal?"

³⁶ Easton-Calabria, "From Bottom-up to Top-Down: The 'Pre-History' of Refugee Livelihoods Assistance from 1919 to 1979". See also Kibraeb, "The Myth of Dependency", an article from 1993 that covers many similar points to recent innovation literature on self-help. I am grateful to Jeff Crisp for drawing attention to this link.

³⁷ Sandvik, "Humanitarian innovation, humanitarian renewal?"

³⁸ For a classic account, see Haskell "Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility" and Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*; Mark Duffield's work also has a lot to say in this regard. For a more detailed exploration of neophilia in the 1960s and 1970s, see Scott-Smith, "How projects rise and fall".

³⁹ Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*; Chandler, "The road to military humanitarianism"; Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 132-58.

⁴⁰ Redfield, *Life in crisis*, Allen and Styan, "A right to interfere?", Chandler, "The road to military humanitarianism", DeChaine, "Framing humanitarian action", Fox, "New humanitarianism."

⁴¹ Fox, "Medical humanitarianism and human rights.", Benthall, "Le sans-frontiérisme."

⁴² Berman, *Power and the idealists*, 230. MSF was, as Berman pointed out, 'one more 1968-style uprising against the hierarchies of command-and-obedience in a well-established institution'. For more on the changing political allegiances of MSF, see Weissman, "Silence Heals." Davey, "Famine, Aid, and Ideology", Taithe, "Reinventing (French) universalism".

⁴³ Berman's book, for example, discusses in detail the political trajectory from Left to Right of Joschka Fischer as a paradigmatic example

⁴⁴ Berman, *Power and the Idealists*, 232. Weissman, "Silence Heals". The innovation movement is being driven as much at an international policy level than at a civil society level. The UN has been a strong driving force. The anti-étatisme of innovation, therefore, might be seen as much as a get-out clause for governments – seeking solutions in the market rather than through their own action – as it is for non-state actors. I am grateful to Louise Bloom for highlighting this point.

⁴⁵ Betts and Collier, "Help Refugees Help Themselves".

⁴⁶ Betts and Bloom, 9-11. Ramalingam et al., 11-15.

⁴⁷ Cornwall and Eade, *Deconstructing Development Discourse*.

⁴⁸ Slim, "Not Philanthropy but Rights".

⁴⁹ Binder and Witte, *Business engagement in humanitarian relief*, 6. Also quoted in Ramalingam et al., "Innovations in international humanitarian action".

⁵⁰ Mauss, *The gift*, Gregory, *Gifts and commodities*. The various ways in which gift theory has been applied to humanitarianism and development is well summarised in Mawdsley "The Changing Geographies of Foreign Aid" and Bornstein, *Disquieting gifts*. For some approaches to using the gift in the examination of international aid, see also

Kidd, "Philanthropy and the 'Social History Paradigm'" 183-4 and Cross, "The Coming of the Corporate Gift". Bornstein, *Disquieting gifts*, has examined how local philanthropy can be seen in terms of its power relations through asymmetric gift giving. Hattori, "The Moral Politics of Foreign Aid", has examined how Western aid can be interpreted as a form of 'negative giving' characterized by symbolic violence. And Mawdsley, "The Changing Geographies of Foreign Aid", has shown how South-South humanitarianism can be presented in more egalitarian terms as formenting lasting relationships.

⁵¹ Bornstein, *Disquieting gifts*

⁵² Hattori, "The Moral Politics of Foreign Aid"

⁵³ Mawdsley "The Changing Geographies of Foreign Aid"

⁵⁴ Betts and Bloom, "Humanitarian innovation", 10.

⁵⁵ Hopgood, "Saying 'no' to Wal-mart?"

⁵⁶ "Saying 'no' to Wal-mart?", 113-4.

⁵⁷ Scott-Smith, "The fetishism of humanitarian objects".

⁵⁸ So, too, is politics, although humanitarians are less keen to acknowledge that side of their work.

⁵⁹ Warner, "Learning My Lesson."

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 10

⁶¹ Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, x-xi. Redfield, *Life in crisis*, 6.

⁶² Betts, Bloom and Omata, "Humanitarian innovation and refugee protection", 5.

⁶³ "Humanitarian innovation and refugee protection", 1-6.

⁶⁴ Redfield, 'Fluid technologies: The Bush Pump, the LifeStraw and Microworlds of Humanitarian Design' *Social Studies of Science*.

⁶⁵ Cross, "The 100th object".

⁶⁶ Redfield, "Bioexpectations," 175-77. For a recent initiative seeking off the grid sanitation methods see the 'reinvent the toilet challenge', promoted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/Global-Development/Reinvent-the-Toilet-Challenge>

⁶⁷ Scott-Smith, "The fetishism of humanitarian objects", 916-20; Redfield, "Bioexpectations", 166-170.

⁶⁸ This effect is reminiscent of De Waal's now classic argument that international aid undermines political institutions, threatening state development and accountability. See De Waal, *Famine Crimes*.

⁶⁹ Duffield, "Challenging environments", "How did we become unprepared?"

⁷⁰ Duffield, "How did we become unprepared?"

⁷¹ See also Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*; Loewenstein, *Disaster Capitalism*.

⁷² O'Malley, "Resilient subjects.", Walker and Cooper, "Genealogies of resilience", Chandler, *Resilience*, Evans and Reid, *Resilient life*.

⁷³ For good examples see Pilloton, *Design revolution*, Architecture for Humanity, *Design like you give a damn*. For a robust response, see Johnson, "The Urban Precariat".

⁷⁴ For more on Plumy'nut's revolutionary design see Scott-Smith, "The fetishism of humanitarian objects" and Redfield, "Bioexpectations".

⁷⁵ Seelos and Mair, *Innovation Is Not the Holy Grail*.

⁷⁶ See <http://www.literoflightswitzerland.org/> <http://literoflight.org/> and

<http://sculptthefuturefoundation.org/portfolio/my-shelter-foundation-global-lighting-project/>

⁷⁷ See <http://www.literoflightusa.org> and the comments by Lea Truttmann, president of Liter of Light Switzerland at <http://blog.podio.com/2014/12/10/a-liter-of-light/>

⁷⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/features/liter-of-lights-solarpowered-diy-lamp-made-from-a-plastic-bottle-is-transforming-lives-9993728.html> see also <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23536914>

<http://www.literoflightusa.org/about-us/awards-and-recognition/>

⁷⁹ http://www.who.int/elena/titles/micronutrientpowder_infants/en/

⁸⁰ http://www.sghi.org/about_sprinkles/proof_safety.html

⁸¹ World Health Organization, 'Guideline: use of multiple micronutrient powders', World Food Programme, *Hunger and Health*, 101-3. S Loewenberg, 'Easier than taking vitamins', *New York Times*, 5 September 2012.

http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/easier-than-taking-vitamins/?_r=0 and

<http://www.heinz.com/data/pdf/foundation07.pdf>

⁸² For this reason, most nutritionists have been very careful when making recommendations to use this product

⁸³ It could also be argued that the 'liter of light' is not really a *humanitarian* intervention at all. It was designed for situations of persistent poverty rather than acute emergency, and is a relatively humble bottom-up solution that only later became accompanied by hyperbole when it was championed in the global north. I am grateful to Louise Bloom for making this clarification

⁸⁴ <http://www.tis.tv/video/refugees-innovation/>

⁸⁵ See "RCA students design wearable dwelling for Syrian refugees" at <http://www.dezeen.com/2016/01/27/royal-college-of-art-students-wearable-coat-tent-dwelling-syrian-refugees> and "The 'wearable dwelling' – a coat for refugees that turns into a tent" at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design->

blog/2016/jan/21/wearable-dwelling-coat-tent-sleeping-bag-refugees-royal-college-art-london. Accessed 19th March 2016.

⁸⁶ See AJ+ 'Bags made of Boats and Life Jackets' at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbIyB_SXtFY. Accessed 19th March 2016.

⁸⁷ Sprinkles has been devised to solve a specific problem articulated by humanitarian nutritionists; it reflects a worldview in which food is reduced to nutrients, hungry people to bodies lacking nutrients, and aid to an efficient matching process between the two. If micronutrient deficiencies are the problem, then Sprinkles is the answer, but if the problem is reframed in its wider context – tied to politics, poverty, and purchasing power – then it is a wholly inadequate answer. Moreover, most cultures do not see food as merely a vehicle for nutrients, but emphasize food as part of social life and cultural ritual, its role in expressing status or personal taste. For a fuller development of this point, see Scott-Smith, "Control and Biopower in Contemporary Humanitarian Aid". For an overview of the multiple roles food can play in society, see Mintz and Du Bois, "The Anthropology of Food and Eating".

⁸⁸ Betts, Bloom and Weaver, "Refugee innovation: humanitarian innovation that starts with communities". <http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/publications/other/refugee-innovation-web-5-3mb.pdf>

⁸⁹ This concept of 'humanitarian neophilia', in other words, not only describes the main characteristics of the innovation movement (its pursuit of new technology and new market opportunities); it also implies a critique: that humanitarian neophiliacs are so interested in novelty that they can lose sight of whether an innovation is genuinely game changing or whether it fiddles around the edges. They miss when innovations might take place at the expense of more routine activities, which have a far bigger impact on the poor. For a historical example, see Scott-Smith, "How projects rise and fall".

⁹⁰ This disconnect has generated enough concern amongst humanitarians for some to publicly criticize their colleagues for being invisible. See, for example, Healy and Tiller, *Where is everyone?*

⁹¹ Duffield, "Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound."

⁹² Chandler, "The road to military humanitarianism", Vaux, *The selfish altruist*, 17-43. Fast, *Aid in danger*. Hammond, "The power of holding humanitarianism hostage". The subsequent withdrawal of frontline aid workers has led to a backlash from some humanitarian agencies. See Healy and Tiller, *Where is everyone? Responding to emergencies in the most difficult places*.

⁹³ Sandvik, "The Humanitarian Cyberspace".

⁹⁴ Meier, *Digital humanitarians*, Duffield, "The digital development-security nexus."

⁹⁵ Innovation without representation is not universal; indeed, Alex Betts and Louise Bloom have emphasized that there are 'two worlds' of innovation, advocating a more a bottom up approach in the sector. The Humanitarian Innovation Project at Oxford has been a leader in this regard, positioning itself against external 'top-down' solutions to 'build directly on refugees' own skills, talents and aspirations. This, of course, entirely consistent with the innovation agenda, and change is organized again around freedom and entrepreneurship.

⁹⁶ The election of Jeremy Corbyn as the 18th leader of the UK Labour Party is the latest illustration of this trend

⁹⁷ Rieff, "Afterword." Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist*, 43-69.

⁹⁸ Harroff-Tavel, "Neutrality and Impartiality?", Minear, "The theory and practice of neutrality", Slim, "Relief agencies and moral standing in war", Redfield, *Life in crisis*, 98-123, Pictet, *The fundamental principles of the Red Cross*.

⁹⁹ Principles like neutrality and independence, as many humanitarians know, are not absolute; they are tactics for achieving humanitarian goals – readily dismissed when the circumstances demand it. See Magone et al., *Humanitarian negotiations revealed*, Weiss, "Principles, politics, and humanitarian action.", Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis". Redfield, *Life in crisis*, 98-123.

¹⁰⁰ Vaux, *The selfish altruist*, 43-69.

¹⁰¹ Baughan and Fiori, "Towards a new politics of humanitarian solidarity.", Gill, *Drops in the ocean*, Ticktin, "Medical humanitarianism in and beyond France".

¹⁰² The Communist Manifesto lambasted 'philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organisers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, [and] hole-and-corner reformers of every kind' for 'redressing social grievances in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society'. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 70. For more on the 'social control' critique of humanitarianism see Kidd, "Philanthropy and the 'Social History Paradigm'"

¹⁰³ Cross and Street, "Anthropology at the bottom of the pyramid.", Elyachar, "Next Practices.", Errington et al., "Instant Noodles as an Antifriction Device.", Schwittay, "The Marketization of Poverty."

¹⁰⁴ Betts, Bloom, and Omata, "Humanitarian innovation" 4.