Review Essay

Algorithm Blues

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Mark Duffield, *Post-humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World*. **London: Polity Press, 2019. 224 pp. £17.45 paperback.**

Mark Duffield was prompted to write *Post-humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World* when he discovered a number of related facts about international responses to the human rights catastrophe in Darfur from 2003. He learned, for example, that advocacy groups were using satellite pictures of burnt buildings as part of their documentation of abuse. In part because 'seeing is believing', such images were sometimes held to be more 'objective' and 'convincing' than reports from the ground. Duffield was also struck by the fact that the United Nations (UN) was working with geospatial research institutes to locate camps in Darfur near to water sources revealed by satellites. And he discovered the UN was using algorithms to estimate the changing size of the camps in Darfur; such estimates could be made, in Duffield's words, 'without the need to go there' (p. viii).

Of course, there were plenty of aid workers who did go to Darfur, but in this fascinating and highly original book, Duffield plots the synergy between the growing technological sophistication of humanitarian aid and a growing concern with insulating Western aid workers — and the West in general — from the dangers associated with such conflicts. He points to a 'permanent emergency' arising from the workings of capitalism itself and from increasing automation, and he points to a systematic devaluation of human interaction and human thought in the formulation of responses.

While humanitarianism has sometimes involved at least the aspiration to understand politics and culture, Duffield presents post-humanitarianism as an attempt to use technology to understand people's conditions and behaviour (often remotely and without talking with them), and then to nudge these people — through the circulation of information and perhaps through the strategic giving and withholding of aid — into behaviours that promote welfare and 'resilience'. This is a kind of biopolitics that does not necessarily require the physical presence of the 'interveners' and is consistent with

a growing bunkerization of aid workers increasingly hemmed in by security protocols. Whilst the argument is complex and cannot be reduced to sound-bites, it is tempting to say that the book offers a nightmare vision of people being replaced by robots who then find that their distress is also being managed by robots.

We may in fact say that, given the role of algorithms in food price speculation (see, for example, Chadwick, 2017) and given the dependence on food imports of countries like famine-hit Somalia and Yemen, we do now appear to inhabit a world where algorithms are helping to generate both the original humanitarian emergencies and the response. In this not-so brave new world, post-humanitarianism comes across as a kind of science fiction of the present — a wake-up call for a global system that seems increasingly happy to delegate assistance (and even thinking itself) to machines, while somehow basking in the illusion that politics has been banished to the margins.

DE-POLITICIZATION

The 'permanent emergency' highlighted by Duffield — and the continued supremacy of a very bloody politics — has been shamefully epitomized by Darfur itself, where widespread malnutrition and violence persist to this day even as the *technological* content of assistance has become more and more sophisticated. As Duffield points out — and here he draws on Susanne Jaspars' research over many decades, set out in her excellent book *Food Aid in Sudan* (2018) — you would get very little sense of such underlying political processes (or of the continuing role of violence) from all the reports of the successes at the level of nutritional interventions and individual and household behaviour. The role of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) illustrates the limitations of a technical approach to suffering in Darfur. The RSF were deployed in 2014 as Sudan's primary border force, and this initiative was part of Sudan's effort to demonstrate to the European Union that it could stem irregular flows of migrants from and through Sudan to Europe. Yet the RSF have also been a key instrument of repression in the face of popular protest, and indeed grew out of the notorious Janjaweed militias that played a key role in devastating Darfur from 2003 (see, for example, Baldo, 2017a, 2017b; Jaspars, 2018; Jaspars and Buchanan-Smith, 2018). This means that many of those on the 'wrong end' of the Darfur genocide and mass displacement have been prevented from leaving Darfur by many of those who helped to *perpetrate* the genocide and mass displacement.[1] Such depressing dynamics are not going to be compensated by modifying micronutrients or household hygiene practices, though the technical sophistication of

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1. The RSF also played a double game, sometimes *facilitating* movement — for a price. See also Andersson and Keen (2019).

interventions might give the impression that politics has somehow been left conveniently in the dust.

Considering the world as a whole, Duffield writes compellingly about the 'permanent emergency' that is being nurtured by the extreme mobility of capital and by technological innovation. He notes that a growing hegemony of market-based approaches has effectively rendered huge populations around the world 'surplus to requirements' — either unemployed or living a very precarious life, with minimal social security being provided by the state or the international community. Part of the precarity produced by market-based approaches has come through automation and associated jobless growth.[2] Governing — or managing — this precarity (a precarity that increasingly afflicts 'the global North' as well as 'the global South') has involved increasingly sophisticated systems that rely on new technology. To a significant degree, this removes human decision making from the equation, often generating a misleading aura of objectivity in the process. Policy interventions focus increasingly on building 'resilience' and 'self-reliance', aiming to improve individual decision making among the poor, while sealing off the North from the South as much as possible.

Here, Duffield's analysis chimes usefully and alarmingly with Naomi Klein's (2014, 2017) analysis of complacency around climate change in particular, something that she sees as reinforced when relatively privileged groups (and those *producing* most of the greenhouse gases) try to seal themselves off from its consequences. Duffield's emphasis on the anger that is building up in the face of precarity and 'remote management' also resonates with Ruben Andersson's remarkable and vivid book *No Go World: How Fear is Redrawing our Maps and Infecting our Politics* (2019), for Andersson argues that in marking out large parts of the world as 'no-go zones', in trying to push risk away, and in outsourcing 'migration control' to abusive regimes and militias, Western policymakers are fuelling discontent and stoking the very abuses that bring risks closer (see also Andersson, 2014).

Yet some of the biggest and most important questions about the underlying causes of precarity and insecurity — as Duffield argues so persuasively — are being dangerously and systematically set aside. An increasingly important fault line has been between those lucky enough to be mobile and those who are stuck in their locality (with all the lack of bargaining power that this implies). In line with this, the costs of shocks — like the 2007–08 financial crisis — are loaded disproportionately onto the immobile. Such fault lines have proven important in fuelling anger and in stoking variations of populist nationalism.

Duffield goes on to argue that the existence of a 'permanent emergency' invites a kind of permanent humanitarian operation, and he notes that there has in fact been a substantial rise in those receiving medium-term and

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2. This is also hitting professional and middle-class jobs particularly with the rise of artificial intelligence.

long-term humanitarian assistance. Yet at the same time, Duffield suggests, the aid industry is going through a major structural transformation that severely inhibits its ability to analyse what is happening and to respond effectively.

When it comes to humanitarian assistance, technology based on satellites and mobile phones makes a high degree of automation possible, reflecting in part the privatization and commercialization of military technologies. Duffield says the visionaries of this high-tech world highlight 'an empowering partnership between commercial technoscience and the global precariat' (p. 157). At the same time, it would seem that many agencies within the global North do not feel the same responsibility to provide an overarching analysis as did the best agencies in the days when Duffield himself was Oxfam's country director for Sudan in the late 1980s (when I first met him in Khartoum). Duffield notes, 'the traditional model of humanitarian agency which is funded and based in the global North, and which collects, analyses, decides and delivers assistance to the South, "is now out of date"' (p. 157).

Of course, there were some imperial overtones in practices that could be seen as 'extractive' or as examples of 'top-down policymaking'. But Duffield shows how dangerous it is to turn away from proper consultations and from the in-depth analysis that such consultations make possible. In fact, Duffield is profoundly sceptical about the transformational potential of what Tom Scott-Smith calls 'humanitarian neophilia' — an overarching faith in technological innovation within the humanitarian sphere (p. 160; Scott-Smith, 2016). A major part of the problem, for Duffield, is the fashion for believing that good information — often delivered via smartphones — will help poor people to make 'good decisions' and 'build resilience' (p. 153). He calls this a 'purported digital decentralization of power' (p. 157).

Duffield does acknowledge that innovative and therapeutic products can make a positive difference. For example, during the 2010 Haiti earthquake social media and SMS messaging were mined in ways that helped to identify areas of need and areas of refuge. At the same time, tech-based initiatives may also pave the way for greater surveillance: for example, biometric registration of refugees has grown hugely and has 'seamlessly become a precondition of mobile banking, cash transfer programmes, aid entitlement and citizenship claims' (p. 164). And once biometric and behavioural data are harvested, there seems to be very little control on how they will be used — or the degree to which they will be put to use by security agencies (see, notably, Zuboff, 2019).

Close to the core of Duffield's argument is that promoting 'resilience' through new technology can never be a substitute for tackling the real political and economic roots of suffering and insecurity. As Duffield puts it, 'Be they climate change, insecurity, pollution, chronic poverty or entrenched interests, technoscience ducks underlying political and economic causes in favour of workarounds, fixes, adaptations and short-term wins' (p. 161; also see Ahmed, 2011). In fact, Duffield refers to 'a techno-pastoral aesthetic

[giving] that curious appearance of change, as in the success of medicalized interventions, while things remain essentially the same. Precarity and slums still exist, but it's now a wired precarity and a smart slum' (p. 173).

Duffield goes on to critique the World Bank's 2015 report *Mind, Society and Behaviour* — and in particular its emphasis on the need for 'cognitive' improvements that will prevent bad decisions by poor people, alongside its rejection of the idea that there needs to be a large-scale redistribution of resources. According to this way of thinking, Duffield notes, 'The enemy is now internal; it is human behaviour itself' (p.189). The favoured solution has been a standard package of improved hygiene and sanitation practices; increasing mothers' awareness of good infant feeding practices; vaccination; vitamin supplements; and the provision of specialized foods to malnourished children (see particularly Jaspars, 2018). In many ways, Duffield, alongside writers like Jaspars (ibid.) and Zoe Marriage (2006) in her insightful book on humanitarian responses, is exploring the pathologizing of aid recipients, a phenomenon that Barbara Harrell-Bond highlighted a long time ago in her classic 1986 study *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*.

SUPERFLUITY

Duffield refers to the rise of illiberal populism and cites Pankaj Mishra's (2017) *Age of Anger* approvingly. 'Instead of a rising tide of illiberalism, authoritarianism and populism *per se*', Duffield notes, 'these are the epiphenomena of a more fundamental change: a political rejection of the bankruptcy of progressive neoliberalism and the cosmopolitan values and universalism it espouses' (p. 190). He also notes that with surging inequality and strong barriers to movement, 'recalcitrance, anger, political push-back and international no-go areas have spread' (p. 191).

To me, Duffield's work also resonates with some older analyses of superfluity — in particular Hannah Arendt's (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt was herself extremely alert to the double-boost to authoritarian and even totalitarian politics that came when people became — and were made to feel — superfluous. To the extent that the victims are seen as 'superfluous', they may come to seem expendable (both to themselves and to others) and Arendt saw this as powerfully feeding persecutions. Moreover, to the extent that the potential perpetrators are seen (and see themselves) as 'superfluous', these people may wish to register their existence through some 'heroic' or highly visible violence. She noted that those who felt lonely, discarded or forgotten might want 'access to history even at the price of destruction' (ibid.: 332), a phrase that resonates disturbingly in today's politics.

As Duffield develops his critique of technological innovation in aid operations, he notes that the jobs of local aid workers have been one

significant casualty. Taking a small but significant example, Duffield notes that Plumpy Nut, a peanut paste with added nutrients, has reduced the need for professional staff and for 'expensive' feeding centres. More generally:

> The streamlining of access to off-grid services and support reduces immediate costs. Not least, it dispenses with the jobs and resources that were necessary to make a fixed-grid function … Locally recruited aid workers, by far the majority in any aid programme, are widely impacted by these technologies … Apart from data-input, post-humanitarianism creates few — if any — jobs on the ground'. (pp. 167–68; see also Jaspars, 2018)

BUNKERIZATION

In an extended and important discussion of 'bunkerization' in humanitarian work, Duffield points out that when aid workers are physically sealed off from some of the risks associated with wars and emergencies, they lose many of the opportunities for normal human interaction that have sometimes allowed aid workers to develop a good understanding of the societies with which they are dealing. Duffield notes that in the 1980s 'limited connectivity kept a residual autonomy at field level' (p. 60). NGO workers travelled relatively freely in Sudan, sometimes even corkscrewing down in light aircraft to minimize the threat of ground-to-air missiles. Moreover, 'Direct humanitarian action involved leveraging the NGO mobility differential to expose the complicity between the international community and the Sudanese government while widening humanitarian access' (p. 61). This was a project that I also pursued, with the help of Duffield and many other aid workers (Keen, 1994).

Yet these modes of working have changed significantly. Duffield, having made several trips to southern Sudan both before and during the second civil war (and after eight years away from Sudan), returned to the south in 2008, some three years before South Sudan became independent. He recalls:

> What was surprising and unexpected was the widespread withdrawal of donors, UN agencies and the larger international NGOs into visibly fortified aid compounds. The daily routine associated with the compounds was wreathed with security protocols. The situation was extraordinary because international aid workers had enjoyed greater freedom of circulation during the war than, as it then was, three years into the peace. (p. 94)

Duffield found that there was a heavy reliance on security-approved missions that minimized time spent outside the aid compound; in these circumstances, interaction with aid beneficiaries had 'lost all spontaneity' (p. 98). At the same time, there was a growing tendency to work through local NGOs and local aid staff — not least so as to minimize international exposure to risk. This was often referred to as 'remote management'. Meanwhile, NGOs often came to see themselves as the 'implementing partners' of Western donor governments — a more de-politicized (or differently politicized) space than in the 1980s. With aid agencies more worried about security

(including being sued for poor duty of care), it also becomes easier for governments to control the movements of aid workers.

Duffield gives a vivid account of the increased focus on aid worker security. For example, he quotes one rather queasy security directive: 'In certain countries, the advice will be to stop when your vehicle runs somebody over on the road; in another setting, the advice will be certainly not to stop until the next police post' (p. 108). In one training exercise, aid workers were asked if, on arriving at their duty station, they would check the area around their office or try food from local vendors; in each case, a 'yes' meant those undertaking the training were unable to proceed to the next level. More generally, Duffield suggests that 'international aid workers … are trained not only to scan the horizon constantly, but to accept defensive living and endless risk assessment as good for themselves, their wellbeing and their work' (p. 102). Meanwhile, aid workers have increasingly been encouraged to look after their personal well-being through careful attention to their own needs and thought processes. This may mean relaxation, exercise, meditation and 'positive thinking'; part of the trick (ominously, in light of Duffield's wider analysis) is accepting that some things cannot be changed.

Critical reflection, meanwhile, has not been encouraged by technological advances. A key point in Duffield's book is that machines are not only replacing human labour but also, in many respects, *human reason* and *human agency* more generally, so that 'we seem to have readily transferred to machines the ability to think on our behalf, in a fit of absent-mindedness' (p. 11). Duffield elaborates:

> We have moved from an age that valued reason and human agency to a world where their stock has depreciated. Indeed, our society celebrates their transfer and absorption into automatic devices and smart technologies. The resulting existential remoteness from the world is all the easier to accept because, by common consent, the world is more complex, uncertain and dangerous than it used to be. (p. 178)

From the point of view of those who want to shape behaviour, the harvesting of data is increasingly focused 'on the potentialities of individuals as derived from the inductive statistical analysis of their past behaviour' (p. 9). In fact, Duffield observes that the rational individualism of *homo economicus* is in the process of being replaced by the ignorance of *homo inscius* (ignorant man), a figure who is so devoid of thinking power that he or she '*requires* the signals and nudges of an enfolding interactive environment' (emphasis in the original, p. 21). As Duffield puts it, 'since the 1990s there has been an associated growth in physical and existential "remoteness" from the world that is being compensated by the digital recoupment of distance' (p. 7).

ACADEMIA Duffield has spent much of his life in academia, a realm that one might hope would be exempt from any demise or delegation of thinking. But is it? Duffield begins his account of academic engagement by noting that in the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when the media was showing a good level of independence in the Vietnam War, academics were relatively

free from today's institutionalized risk aversion (see also Andersson, 2019). Moreover, Duffield remembers that 'Reflecting the academic autonomy of the time, ROAPE [the *Review of African Political Economy*] was created to counter the conventional wisdom (today more firmly entrenched than ever) that chronic poverty is an individual behavioural problem that can be reduced by more effective market interaction and penetration' (p. 45). Meanwhile students were benefiting from grant-assisted and debt-free education, encouraging a degree of autonomy that was conducive to critical thought. In 1974, Duffield himself went to Sudan at the age of 24 to do PhD research, and he sums up the sense of freedom in academia at the time:

> Apart from the advice of supervisors and experienced researchers, unlike today, there were no mandatory methodology courses, upgrade requirements, risk-assessment procedures or ethical committees to satisfy. Access to the outside world had yet to be corrugated by bureaucratic barriers, insurance needs, anxiety-inducing security requirements or ethical uncertainties. The advice from my supervisor was to take gifts and make friends. A box of fragrant soap, cartons of cigarettes, photocopies of historic texts written in the vernacular, and a Polaroid instant camera constituted my attempt. During the 1970s, apart from bureaucratic delays, getting a visa and security clearance for internal travel within Sudan was a routine exercise. (p. 47)

The sense of remoteness on arrival in Maiurno, Sudan, was memorable: 'Lying awake that first night, listening to the crickets, I felt as if I had travelled to the end of the world. There were no telephones' (pp. 47–48). Reading this account, one wonders where today one is to find this kind of silence. Most importantly, the type of research that Duffield conducted — and clearly his own personality too — allowed the development of strong ties with many of those he was talking with:

> Fluent in Hausa and working alone, it was all about building relationships over time. Respectful of people's wishes and confidences, as much time was spent explaining my world as asking about theirs .… some acquaintances became friends, and some friends turned into confidants. Either directly or through their now adult children, these friendships endure to this day .… Maybe these ties of friendship are what it was all about. (pp. 52–53)

In more recent years, Duffield made a trip to catch up with his 'surviving friends'. But his description of his earlier research has the air of an elegy for a lost age. Duffield notes that area studies and language-based academic approaches have today become dangerously devalued. '[F]or the practitioner, useful information has to be immediately comparable, non-specific, flexible and capable of being acted upon' (p. 88). On top of these trends, key topics have tended to go missing. In particular, Duffield discerns a distinct decline in academic interest in capitalism during the 1980s and 1990s — just at the moment when 'globalization, deregulation and privatization were fashioning the networked, computer-based and personalized new economy that we now enjoy' (p. 17).

Duffield's discussions of academia are among the many insightful elements that the book provides, and critical self-analysis by academics is urgently required, in my view. Today, academics find themselves occupy-

ing what has rather aptly been called an 'anxiety machine' (Morrish, 2019), fuelled in part by growing student numbers, by an increasing focus on 'student satisfaction', and by pressures to publish in the right outlets. Adding to this stressful mix has been the necessity of struggling with various computer-based systems. Sometimes it seems as though a dazzling array of innovative (and ostensibly 'time-saving') technical improvements is relentlessly and incrementally making life more difficult while taking up more and more time! In fact, Duffield's description of aid beneficiaries prototyping technological innovations reminds me in many ways of academic life today (and no doubt resonates with many other professions too): he notes that while communities were once encouraged to become self-managing, what we now have are communities of 'users' permanently enrolled in the continuous prototyping of the very technologies that govern them. What we find in academia is a world of hyper-connectivity and emails bleeping while you write, a world where academics are pressured to submit to lecture recording and where these recordings can then be positioned as part of a wider commercialization of their labour as well as a useful way of providing services to students even in the absence of the lecturer (including, perhaps, if the lecturer is on strike). That in itself is a dramatic illustration of Duffield's argument about the precarity that technology can bring.

Add to this the relentless increase in reporting requirements and various kinds of surveillance and it becomes increasingly hard to think, while the precarity and short-term nature of many academic jobs greatly compounds these problems. It certainly seems hard to think or write critically or openly about academia itself. How else are we to explain the proliferation of 'anonymous academics' in the pages of *The Guardian*, for example?

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Post-humanitarianism is one of those books that one does not particularly feel inclined to critique: it is so fresh and so interesting that it seems much more productive to explain what it says than to pick holes in the analysis. That said, I will try to indicate briefly some directions in which the analysis might be taken. For one thing, while Duffield does not particularly favour the word 'shame' in the book, I would myself be inclined to put his analysis squarely within a framework that foregrounds the concept of shame. A large part of what Duffield is describing in *Post-humanitarianism* is the process of removing shame from people who have power and placing it either onto the shoulders of people who don't or onto machines (which — so far! — cannot be shamed). This would seem to have extremely damaging effects at both ends of the human spectrum. For those in power, it appears to be reinforcing a sense of shamelessness, impunity and complacency to which many policymakers are already highly susceptible. At the same time, this peculiar distribution of shame stands to redouble already-

severe levels of shame among those who are struggling economically (while increasingly connected by the media to images of a better life). As Duffield notes, today's calls for 'resilience' sit all too comfortably with neoliberalism's habitual insistence that success comes to those who work hard (so that hardship is implicitly the fault of the individual). We might add that when right-wing populist politicians enter the scene, they typically offer to lift the general burden of shame through promising to restore national or racial pride, through attacking or blaming outgroups (often immigrants or minorities) and even through displays of personal immorality or cruelty that may carry the perversely appealing message that 'I am no better than you are!' (e.g. Haslett, 2016; Hochschild, 2016). The system for relocating responsibility that Duffield dissects looks set to fuel some of these damaging underlying dynamics.

Alongside Duffield's emphasis on what is new, perhaps some of the continuities in the global humanitarian system may also be worth stressing. Certainly, Jaspars' (2018) account of the recent humanitarian aid to Darfur strongly recalls earlier dynamics such as the extreme political and military manipulation of famine that peaked in 1988 (Keen, 1994). Like recent humanitarian crises in Darfur, that crisis was accompanied and facilitated by a high degree of international silence about its causes — causes that (as later in Darfur) centred to a large extent on government-sponsored raids on victim groups. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Sudan government was desperate to access the oil under land occupied by victims of human-made famine, and the subordination of aid to government agendas — to the extent of positioning aid on the edge of the zone the government wished to depopulate — was notable. Then, as now, threatening to turn off the flow of international aid was a powerful way of inducing silences on human rights abuses (though Oxfam, under Duffield's leadership, played a key role in getting important information to the wider world). Although there is much that *is* new in today's humanitarian world, Jaspars' (2018) account of Darfur in recent years suggests, in many ways, a case of *plus ça change*. In describing the manipulation of aid, for example, she notes that '[a]lthough WFP [the World Food Programme] has attempted to negotiate access to rebel-held areas, and has sometimes gained access to parts of rural North Darfur, it has not challenged the government's denials when security is given as the justification' (ibid.: 145). She adds that '[t]he actual effect of reducing food aid has been to help government counter-insurgency strategies and policies to empty the camps and bring IDP leaders over to the government side' (ibid.: 152). To a significant extent, this extreme political manipulation of crisis has been obscured by high-tech and sophisticated-seeming relief operations. But, as Duffield knows first-hand, it also precedes such innovations.

Significantly, today's concerns around promoting dependency also have a long pedigree. They were expressed by international aid officials trying to justify the insufficiency of relief in Sudan in 1988. And those concerns emerged once more in Sierra Leone in the early to mid-1990s, a crisis that

I wrote about in *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Keen, 2005). Several UN missions recommended inadequate emergency food in Sierra Leone on the basis that the violence was about to come to an end. Yet, in many respects, the emergency was deepening and the violence stubbornly refused to end. The role of government forces in promoting violence — and in blocking relief — was systematically downplayed within the international humanitarian system, so that underlying causes were (once again) being neglected in favour of a (patchy) attempt to address the symptoms. This patchiness was underlined when the size of the ration was progressively cut from 1992 to 1995 as aid agencies stressed the need to move from 'relief' to 'development' and to reduce — you guessed it — 'a dependency syndrome'. Yet, where people were avoiding farming or other activities, it was nearly always because of fears for their safety. Generally unable to farm, displaced people nevertheless received only supplementary rations, prompting some local aid workers to ask what exactly was being supplemented.

Bearing in mind these various continuities, it might be reasonable to ask whether the most fundamental problem with the humanitarian system is that technology has radically transformed matters or whether it has simply failed to transform them, so that the age-old problems of stigmatizing the poor and of aid being subordinated to politics and warfare remain largely unaddressed by all the countless improvements in technology that are often heralded as pushing aid in the 21st century. Where Duffield's book is probably most important is in alerting us to the way that technically sophisticated micro-solutions have been misleadingly put forward as remedying problems with very deep political and economic roots, and in showing us how fashions for generalizable and measurable solutions, for 'remote management' and for 'bunkerization', have in many ways deepened the misunderstandings and mutual suspicion between those who occupy relatively privileged positions within an increasingly automated humanitarian system and the more or less 'superfluous' people that capitalism and globalization are relentlessly creating across the globe.

Today, the relevance of Duffield's argument has only been underlined by the coronavirus crisis, which reinforces our fear of each other and gives a further huge boost to 'remote' working via technologies like Zoom and Skype. The coronavirus crisis also offers a frightening window on the growing and dangerous power of today's 'modellers' — of those who claim to predict the future based on the accumulation of data (often not made public) about past behaviour. As the coronavirus began to take hold in the UK, David Halpern, an adviser at the government's Behavioural Insights Team (or 'nudge' unit), told the BBC's Mark Easton: 'there's going to be a point, assuming the epidemic flows and grows as we think it probably will do, where you'll want to cocoon, you'll want to protect those risk groups so that they basically don't catch the disease, and by the time they, you know, come out of their cocooning, herd immunity's been achieved in the rest of

the population'.[3] At the same time, the UK's chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance was noting that 'Communities will become immune to it [the coronavirus] and that's going to be an important part of controlling this longer term. About 60 per cent is the sort of figure you need to get herd immunity'. Vallance said further: 'Our aim is to try to reduce the peak, broaden the peak, not suppress it completely; also, because the vast majority of people get a mild illness, to build up some kind of herd immunity so more people are immune to this disease and we reduce the transmission, at the same time we protect those who are most vulnerable to it' (Parker et al., 2020). Part of the rationale was to 'protect the NHS' from a possible resurgence of the virus in the winter. Another was that behavioural 'experts' felt the public — somehow blind to escalating dangers and implicitly morphing into Duffield's *homo inscius* — would not tolerate strong 'social distancing' for long. Yet that level of infection would imply hundreds of thousands of deaths and would have made Britain a pariah among those nations aiming at a more thorough suppression of the virus. Only a major public outcry and an influential paper from Imperial College (see Ferguson et al., 2020) appear to have put this reckless 'herd immunity' idea belatedly to bed in the UK, while a *laissez faire* approach has retained a degree of official support in The Netherlands, in Sweden and in the United States. Importantly, the models and thinking behind the 'herd immunity' idea have never been properly spelled out or made public, revealing an underlying arrogance among those who claimed to have access to the relevant numbers and computer modelling. Underlining the timeliness of Duffield's book, it is almost as if the catchphrase from the popular BBC comedy show *Little Britain* 'Computer says no' has now morphed into the more sinister 'Computer says die'.

In corona times, moreover, we are seeing a particularly heavy emphasis on individual responsibility alongside a refusal — all too often — to acknowledge that health systems have been damagingly neglected and underfunded. While a traditional view would be that the government — and in the UK the National Health Service (NHS) — has a responsibility to look after the health of its citizens, we are increasingly being told that the responsibility of the *individual* is to look after the NHS. Thus UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock emphasized, 'Our goal is to protect life from this virus, our strategy is to protect the most vulnerable and protect the NHS through contain, delay, research and mitigate … We must all work together and play our own part in protecting ourselves and each other, as well as our NHS, from this disease' (Hancock cited in Johnson, 2020). Of course, this is very far from pure foolishness: national health systems (including in the UK) are indeed under huge strain, and 'social distancing' is key to preventing their collapse. But the stark reversal of proclaimed protection responsibilities is notable nonetheless. It speaks to the further elevation of individual

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3. https://twitter.com/faisalislam/status/1238097745971421184

responsibility — and its close cousin, individual shame — in a world where social responsibilities have over a long period (and in line with Duffield's argument) been grievously neglected.

In every political and humanitarian crisis, I have found, the working definition of the enemy tends to shift in interesting and dangerous ways — and the process tends to be politically convenient for powerful players (Keen, 2012). With the coronavirus, we have seen a racializing of 'the enemy' (not least from Trump) alongside a relentless individualizing of responsibility. While individual responsibility is indeed vital to public health today, both elements of this process have potentially very sinister implications when it comes to the social distribution of shame and blame. In this strange new world, it is the individual who must look after his or her health service while implicitly bearing principal responsibility for his or her own illness. Duffield helps us to see how this upside-down world has been brought into existence, with the delegation of thought to machines now playing a key role in the process. In this system of covert modelling and de-responsibilization, there is still one readily identifiable culprit — and that culprit, increasingly, is *us*.

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