

Barbara's ethics of antagonism

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Barbara Harrell-Bond's approach stemmed from her core belief that we are all adults, all equal, all responsible.

Being affable was not one of Barbara Harrell-Bond's qualities. Irascible, impatient and demanding, she alienated and inspired people in equal numbers with what at times seemed to be a one-person quest to advocate for refugees. She had no time for niceties, for there was never enough time; Barbara lived her life urgently, and demanded the same from those with whom she worked.

I was a twenty-year-old aspiring anthropologist, one of many who passed through her living room in Cairo, and she had set me to work investigating Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees in the city. Some would no doubt question whether it was a good idea to have twenty-year-old students running around doing fieldwork. Not Barbara. It was the work that mattered, and there was a terrifying, liberating equality in what she demanded from everyone, students and refugees, collaborators and opponents.

After she died, I remembered all the rooms in which I had known Barbara. The country varies but the cast of characters does not. There is a young law student reading a case file intently, an earnest anthropologist entering the room, a refugee reciting a story, and a young man or woman whom Barbara has employed to help out around the house. There are people who want to offer help, people looking for help, and people looking for a mentor, a martyr or a saviour. What stands out to me, looking back at that room, is Barbara's relentless insistence on treating everyone as an equal. She wanted to help the refugees, of course, but she also set them to work, just like she set all of us to work. She treated us all as adults, and she did not wear kid gloves.

The last time I saw her, in Oxford, her living room was once again full of the usual cast of characters, although her eyesight was failing and the eternal cigarette had been replaced, unsatisfactorily, with an electronic

vape pen. I had come from South Sudan, and I was exhausted. Barbara grilled me on the situation in the country and then set me to work, thrusting a case file into my hand. For the next three days, my 'holiday' in Oxford was devoted to working on the case of a Ugandan asylum seeker appealing against a Home Office decision. His story was full of inconsistencies and Barbara, frustrated, asked him to come to her flat. As we listened to his story, and I asked questions, trying to iron out the irregularities, Barbara became exasperated. She had no time to deal with his hesitations and uncertainties; she had to deal urgently with his case, and had to get it right. I know many people who thought Barbara's tone was inappropriate: people who thought refugees should be treated as victims or as if they were from another planet. Not Barbara.

She was as wreathed in contradictions as she was in cigarette smoke. She demanded independence from those around her but surrounded herself with acolytes. She relentlessly criticised those who claimed to help refugees, indeed she often criticised the very idea of help, but her enduring question, posed in that unforgettable drawl, was: *who is going to help them?* In these contradictions there is an ethics. What Barbara has left us is not simply a body of work, or a set of memories, but something more exemplary: a way of being in the world that actively tries to answer the question that Barbara poses in one of her essays: can humanitarian work be humane?¹

Barbara was always alive to the inhumanity of the humanitarian industry. In article after article, and encounter after encounter, she pilloried UNHCR, and the way that NGOs worked in refugee camps: the delusion and the defensiveness, the flow charts and the counts. Why, I remember Barbara asking time and again, can't people count themselves? Why can't people



distribute aid for themselves? (They do so anyway the moment the aid workers' backs are turned.) What underlined all Barbara's critiques, ultimately, was an awareness of how asymmetric power relations disempowered refugees and created frameworks of dependency in which the agency of the refugees were ignored.

It always felt to me that Barbara's work and life stemmed from the same ethical conviction: that everyone is responsible for themselves. It is that demand for moral seriousness, which she asked of herself as much as she asked of others, that led to her critiques of the humanitarian industry. She was one of the first to realise the problems caused by the fact that NGOs are responsible to donors, rather than to refugees, and one of the first to critique the strange, unaccountable forms of control one finds in refugee camps, where UNHCR assumes de facto sovereignty without any popular mandate. For Barbara, sovereignty could not be imposed, or created elsewhere; it had to come from people seizing control of their own existence.

I often think that for Barbara the solution, if one could be imagined, was an end to 'refugees': not an end to war – she was a hard-headed realist – nor an end to people being displaced but an end to the term 'refugee' insofar as it functions to suspend political rights and infantilise people. Refugees do not, Barbara insisted, go through a miraculous reverse maturation when they leave their country of origin, suddenly becoming children, unable to care for themselves. Rather, people are always adults, always capable of counting themselves, of organising their own distributions of aid. If they fail, or they are late to work, or just confused, then Barbara felt within her rights to be angry. No exceptions. We are all adults, and there is no time for niceties.

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1. Harrell-Bond B (2002) 'Can Humanitarian Work With Refugees Be Humane?', *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, 5185
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