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Political Asylum and Enlightened False Consciousness: The Challenges of Human Rights Advocacy in Israel

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Re-Imagining Rights

Presenter: Ilil Benjamin, Johns Hopkins University

Title: Political Asylum and Enlightened False Consciousness: The Challenges of Human Rights Advocacy in Israel

Abstract:

Since 2007, nearly 60,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Israel, primarily from Sudan and Eritrea, and been granted temporary stay visas by the Israeli Ministry of Interior while their asylum cases were being adjudicated.

Mindful of the ministry's hostility to asylum seekers and its 99.9% rejection rate of applicants to date, many asylum seekers have come to doubt that their personal histories of poverty or violence would persuade Israeli asylum officers to permit them to stay. Based on ethnographic research in an asylum advocacy NGO in Tel Aviv, I examine the exclusions of Israel's asylum system as seen by aid workers who try to help asylum seekers reframe their stories to fit the requirements of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention.

As I show, these aid workers find numerous embellishments among their beneficiaries' stories, crafted in their desperation to appeal to asylum officers. I suggest that aid workers and asylum seekers both are caught between two conflicting epistemologies of credibility: on the one hand is an experience of asylum seeking that challenges the global asylum regime's presumed distinctions between refugees and economic migrants and between problem zones and quiet zones; on the other hand is a governmental asylum bureaucracy which, despite its neutral mandate, assumes asylum seekers' dishonesty and openly seeks to stem non-Jewish immigration.

I argue that by shifting their criticism from the asylum seeker to the asylum regime itself, aid workers are sometimes able to salvage a key component of the humanitarian repertoire — the deserving beneficiary.

About the presenter:

Dr. Ilil Benjamin is a lecturer in sociology at Johns Hopkins University. She completed her PhD at Cornell University in 2016.