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Voluntary Work

“Voluntary work” is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of human activity, including animal and environmental protection, social and medical care, and refugee relief. The adjective “voluntary” refers to the non-compulsory and unpaid character of work. Nevertheless, in practice voluntary work may entail some financial compensation for the volunteer involved. Whereas the distinction between the terms “*bénévole*” and “*volontaire*” in French is more informative, as the first explicitly indicates the lack of payment while the second refers to paid work, in English as in other languages such a distinction does not exist. This blurring of the categories echoes the moral content of the volunteer as a disinterested subject and the epitome of a modern citizen working for the good. The moral values of the gift and altruism lie at the heart of civic volunteerism and the volunteer as a moral subjectivity (Rozakou 2016). Such an analysis of voluntary work helps us to grasp the compatibility between volunteerism and neoliberalism, which, at first glance, seems antithetical to the principle of morality. In fact, zones that stand outside the logic of market exchange and individual self-interest and areas of social interaction that are

grounded in disinterestedness and giving are both compatible with and essential to the formation of responsible neoliberal citizens (Muehlebach 2012).

Voluntary work is a key element of humanitarianism, not only because volunteers form a significant labor force, but also because of the moral character associated with this specific kind of labor. The distinction between benevolence and interest is also relevant to critiques of humanitarianism that have brought to the fore discrepancies between expatriate and national humanitarian staff. While the mobile international expatriate personnel is perceived as selfless, the national and locally recruited staff are seen to be potentially corrupt and selfish (Redfield 2012) or merely as paid employees (Fassin 2007). Didier Fassin (2007) further highlights this distinction as part of the inherent contradiction in humanitarianism, specifically the inequality between those who disinterestedly risk their lives, and as such deserve the utmost protection of their humanitarian organization (international volunteers), and those who are only accorded limited protection (national personnel).

Much literature on humanitarianism focuses on Western liberal humanitarianism and the workings of large-scale traditional humanitarian organizations. However, recent ethnographies of grassroots humanitarianism(s) illuminate a different facet of voluntary work and one that directly challenges the *modus operandi* of established humanitarian organizations. Two such examples draw upon the recent so-called “refugee crisis” that has taken place since 2015 in Europe and the broad and diverse informal humanitarian responses to it that are composed largely by independent and untrained volunteers. It is no coincidence that researchers have felt the need to come up with new terms to describe this landscape. Based on her fieldwork at the makeshift camp at Calais in France, Elisa Sandri (2018) coins the term “volunteer humanitarianism” to describe an informal body of volunteers who provide humanitarian aid, and at the same time overtly challenge and oppose the border regime. In the setting of this volunteer humanitarianism, humanitarianism and activism are inseparable. In a similar vein, Katerina Rozakou (2017) notes that largely informal grassroots groups made up of volunteers consciously differentiate themselves and their work from large-scale humanitarian organizations. These groups emphasize egalitarian, non-professionalized, and horizontal relationships in contrast to the vertical provision of aid administered by humanitarian organizations and professional humanitarians.

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Vulnerability

Vulnerability in humanitarian emergencies is the result of class, gender, age, ethnic, racial, able-bodied, and religious inequalities and hierarchies that prevent the individual from satisfying basic needs, accessing resources, and exercising their rights (Bankoff 2001). Humanitarian crises, such as armed conflicts or disasters, can either exacerbate pre-existing structural vulnerabilities (e.g. economic inequalities, social roles, and cultural stereotypes) or create new ones (e.g. injuries, diseases, losses, displacements, poverty, violence, and exclusion). For example, owing to unequal gender relations in a family and society, women may lose their social status because of the death of their husband, be subjected to sexual violence, have no access to basic hygiene during pregnancy, be burdened by carrying small children, have restrictions on clothing when fleeing, become victims of human trafficking, or have limited legal status and rights to claim benefits (Ní Aoláin 2011). People may also lack necessary survival skills during rescue operations, such as being able to read government announcements or swim during floods. In these circumstances, vulnerability becomes an obstacle for human agency, and this can reinforce conservative attitudes, as well as control of and discrimination against certain social groups.

The concept of vulnerability has received particular attention in the study of disasters. This has enabled understanding of “why disasters in the developing world [a]re so much worse than in the developed world” (Faas 2016: 15).