‘Rescuing’ food: Dumpster Diving as Political Activism

Carolin Hirsch
September, 2019

It is already dark, past 10 pm, and Dora, Emil and I are riding our bikes to the backyards of local supermarkets in a little town near Munich; more precisely: to the dumpsters in these backyards. It will not be the first time that I’m going to hang upside down in a dumpster, handing bell peppers, apples, and the like to my companions: we are going dumpster diving.

In Germany, 18 million tons of the industrially produced food get thrown away

yearly; 60 % of this amount is wasted by food producers and retailers according to a study by WWF from 2018. This fact makes food activists dive into dumpsters, trying to change the system of production, distribution and consumption through nonparticipation and redistribution (see Counihan/Siniscalchi 2014, p. 3;6). Although the Dumpster Divers are still participating in consumption in a non-monetary way, I want to follow Counihan/Sinischalchi here when I say that they are trying to change the system through nonparticipation. Through getting food out of dumpsters in the backyards and not buying it inside the supermarket they are at least partly disengaging with the conventional way of getting foodstuffs – they are not exchanging it against monetary value.

The term 'food activism' is uniting different political activist activities aimed at the food industry and towards denouncing different grievances from production until consumption. Dumpster Divers are political food activists who see the contemporary food industry and market mechanisms as contrary to their own values (see Pratt/Luetchford 2013, p. 2) and are challenging these through their actions. Dumpster Diving is a practice of recovering edible foodstuffs from supermarket dumpsters. Although I'm calling Dumpster Divers here political activists, not all people that are recovering edible foodstuffs can be considered this. During my research I also came across individuals that are motivated by economic considerations. Through the capitalist logic of overproduction food is becoming a commodity. If a commodity is not consumed, it loses its value and turns into an ex-commodity – waste that has to be discarded.

Image by Carolin Hirsch.

> *For Dumpster Divers, however, the content of dumpster bins is not valueless waste, it is wasted value. By challenging the logic of overproduction directly, they challenge the market dictate of the need to buy things (see also Barnard 2016, p. 91).*

Opening the bins, Emil, Dora and I are commenting: “empty” or “there is something.” The supermarket has two empty dumpster bins and three filled ones. After a first inspection we start diving. I met Dora and Emil online over Facebook. They are two twenty somethings, sharing an apartment and about to graduate from their Master studies soon. Both of them are not Dumpster Diving out of a financial need, but out of a passion for rescuing food that would go wasted otherwise. Dora and Emil are as well both active members of the local Foodsharing chapter, an association aiming at redistributing supernumerary food from local grocery stores, bakeries and Cafés through public shelfs in community centres and the like.

And thus we have never been dumpster diving as a group before, we seem like a well-rehearsed team from the start: dividing the labour, alternating the tasks of

getting items out from the top of the bins, packing them into our backpacks. Emil is helping me see with the light of his mobile phone so that I can find bell peppers and some ready-made food which are only one day over the best before date. Dora takes the items I hand out to her and packs them up. Opening the next dumpster, Emil only finds plastic rubbish, empty bottles and the like. We continue our ride to the next supermarket. At home, we unpack our loot, wash it, arrange it on the kitchen table, sharing the labour again while chatting about dumpster diving, about how we try to avoid wasting food in our individual lives and how the capitalist system is a system of having the real wealth not on displays in stores, but in the dumpsters in the backyards: A wasted wealth that is now our nutrition for the next few days. We also discuss other wasted resources of the production and distribution process of the food industry: human labour, water, seeds, plastics and other materials, electricity and the like.

Image by Carolin Hirsch.

We arrange our harvest on the table like a precious treasure; after each of us has taken a photograph of the table spread, I’m invited to having dinner with Dora and Emil: a dumpster diving feast. The circumstances add an extra flavour: Dora

tells me about a challenge she made with herself for three months: “don’t buy any food, only live on ‘rescued food’,” as she calls it. Throughout the evening, cycling around, digging into dumpsters and washing and arranging food items, eating some of them together afterwards, we recategorize food waste into nourishment while bonding over shared practice and a common outlook on the value of food.

Although the dumpster divers are opening the dumpsters at night and in secrecy, they are bringing wasted food into the open. Not all dumpsters are freely accessible. Some markets have shutoff devices on their dumpsters, but not every market is using these devices. The pictures of ‘rescued food’ are used for awareness-raising; posted on social media and shared among family and friends.

> *This visualization needs to be understood as an act of protest, of disagreeing with a system that produces and then discards excess.*

So far, the literature on political food activism has focused only on activist efforts that are in opposition to Dumpster Divers such as officially addressing the food industry or political institutions to reach their goals. These efforts focus on a capitalistic system of production and distribution, including the unfair working conditions for humans and living conditions for animals, the non-sustainable ways of production in agriculture and fishing, high prices for stable food at the world market and overproduction, all of which are opposing the values of the activists (Pratt/Luetchford 2013, p. 2). The Dumpster Divers, whom I was accompanying, were also critiquing these practices, but their activism is carried out in a legal grey zone since it is based on trespassing and theft, depending on the interpretation of the law. One case in Germany got very famous when two young women got caught Dumpster Diving in June 2018. They were sentenced to community service hours and paying a fee (Merkur.de, 28.02.2019). This case started a public debate whether recovering discarded food should be criminalized and about the legal situation. Efforts taken to legalize Dumpster Diving failed.

There are only a few studies on the illegal side of political food activism. In his ethnography “Freegans. Diving into the wealth of food waste in America” (2016),

Barnard analyses the Freeganism movement as a protest form against neoliberal capitalism. Although Dumpster Diving and rescuing food is a huge part of the Freeganism movement, it is also tackling other areas such as shelter, clothing and transportation. Through recovering, reusing and building goods on their own, Freegans are avoiding the need of purchasing goods in exchange for monetary value. Although the approach of Barnard's interlocutors in New York is addressing more areas of the activist's life and is also a more radical one, the practice of Dumpster Diving and recovering food from trash bins is what our interlocutors have in common.

The activist efforts of Barnard's Freegans and my Dumpster Divers are based on day-to-day (or, in my case, night-to-night) activities which are not aimed at directly challenging the political system, but subverting it. These types of food activists have incorporated political critique into their everyday life through 'rescuing food' for their private needs instead of voicing demands for institutional change on a public level. Dumpster Diving thus is a political practice that not only blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, or the personal body and the body politic, but also challenges our understanding of how we understand activism.

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Featured image by Patricia Valério (courtesy of Unsplash.com).

#Review: Queer Festivals

Clinton Glenn
September, 2019

Konstantinos Eleftheriadis's *Queer Festivals: Challenging Collective Identities in a Transnational Europe* is a much needed and welcome addition to a small but growing body of critical literature that examines the impact of queer theory and politics in a European context. Eleftheriadis's book examines how anti-identitarian politics informs collective movements as found in queer festivals in Western Europe, and in particular, addresses the question: "[h]ow is it possible for a collective identity to be anti-identitarian?" (15). Through the book's six

chapters, Eleftheriadis lays out a convincing case for how to approach social movements that refute gender and sexual binaries and do not engage with the state through rights-based advocacy, focusing instead on deconstructive, queer, and anti-capitalist forms of social activism. Much of the literature examining queer theory and queer praxis in Europe focuses on national level, often sidelining or only tacitly acknowledging how queerness transgresses boundaries: gendered, sexual, and national.

> *Eleftheriadis's examination of the transnational character of queer festivals hence stands as the book's strength.*

Queer Festivals is laid out in a very logical, direct manner and the author's thorough engagement with the significant theories is one of the text's strengths. This allows readers who are unfamiliar with the works of Butler and Foucault to quickly understand their theoretical positions and influence on contemporary queer activism. The only drawback is that the theoretical foundations for anti-identitarian politics are repeated in each chapter. For readers who are well-versed in queer theory, much of this scholarship will be familiar. However, I suspect that for the author's target audience, social movement theorists and sociologists based in Europe, the added emphasis will be welcome.

The book begins with an introduction to queer festivals, anti-identitarian politics, and the author's methods and approach to the subject, which is followed by a description of the emergence of queer festivals – from their origins in ACT UP/Queer Nation in the late 1980s/early 1990s in the United States to the more recent Queeruption festivals in the UK. This chapter is a particularly worthwhile contribution to contemporary scholarship on queer activism. Eleftheriadis's book represents one of a handful of scholarly texts that address queer activism outside of a North American context, and in particular on a transnational scale. Elsewhere in the book the author examines the influence of squatting culture on queer festival spaces, the ways that anti-identitarian politics influence the types of workshops, DIY (do-it-yourself) initiatives such as non-hierarchical forms of

organising, and collective vegan cooking practices, as well as the types of dress and styles that are present among participants.

> *The text illuminates one critical divergence in queer festivals that continues to haunt queer theory – its relative elitist nature.*

In particular, it shows how the field has become institutionalised in academia, in contrast to the anti-elitism of queer praxis, which focuses on engaging individuals on a personal, anti-hierarchical level. *Queer Festivals* frequently points out the real-world implications of such a divergence: for example, how the language of queer festivals is inaccessible to those who do not have the academic background or knowledge of key texts such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. The author also points to the *a priori* acceptance of queer theory as "the *ideological source*" of the queer movement and the inherent elitism that this entails. This is best illustrated in how queer theory's "authority is promoted through actors who are trained in it and disseminate it inside the festivals" (122), while those who have not had access to higher education or taken courses in queer theory remain marginalised.

> *This insight points to a significant gap in current scholarship – how queer theory, and in particular, specific intellectual figures and their scholarship, find their way into different activist groups in different geographical contexts.*

However, *Queer Festivals* only tacitly addresses the transnational movements of queer theory, though I do acknowledge that this was not the central theoretical question of the text. I was also left wondering about the central distinction that the author draws between queer theory in a North American context and its uptake in Europe. Eleftheriadis expands on how queer theory as a field developed in the United States, which then travelled to the UK, Scandinavia, and then elsewhere in Europe through processes of "transnational diffusion," as "a

series of discontinuities, retransformations, adaptations and challenges" (44). If there is such a distinction between American and European queer activism, it would have profited from further development. While Eleftheriadis links the emergence of queer political activism in the United States to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and acknowledges activism that it inspired in certain European contexts (for example, ACT UP Paris), his attempt to make a clear distinction of European queer festivals to global justice movements of the 2000s and anti-capitalist politics overlooks how similar forms of politics emerged in the United States during the same period, such as Occupy, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement, and similar anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist forms of political activism.

While the author argues that queer theory's emergence was through its "circulation" in academia, particularly in countries where queer theory was not being actively produced but synthesised and taught, his analysis would have benefited from further examination of how queer theory emerged in specific local contexts. For example, there is a growing body of literature coming out of Central and Eastern Europe that traces the problematic nature of queer theory as a form of social and academic capital. Eleftheriadis's text only briefly gestures to this body of work. The book would have also profited from a more thorough engagement with recent queer theory that challenges and problematises the anti-normative core of queer scholarship.

Despite these drawbacks, *Queer Festivals* is a highly engaging, well thought out and well-written piece of scholarship on queer transnationalism. For scholars such as myself who study the impact of queer theory outside of North American and Western European academic institutions, the questions posed by Eleftheriadis's book and his incisive observations are a valuable contribution to both queer scholarship and social movement studies.

Reference

Konstantinos Eleftheriadis. 2018. *Queer Festivals: Challenging Collective*

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Featured Image by rihaij (Courtesy of Pixabay)

#Review: Rules, Paper and Status

Veronica Ferreri
September, 2019

The arrival of a ‘refugee,’ ‘migrant,’ ‘asylym seeker,’ or the European ‘Other,’ is too familiar to us from political debates. The stage for this spectacle of ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’ is often the border — the shores of Southern Europe or the Mediterranean Sea. But what happens when we direct our gaze beyond this ‘immediate moment’? What do we know about the invisible lives of those who are derogatorily defined as *immigrato* (immigrant) and *extracomunitario* (non-EU citizens) in Italy?

In *Rules, Paper and Status: Migrants and Precarious Bureaucracy in Contemporary Italy*, Anna Tuckett examines the intricate relationship between migrants and legal-bureaucratic practices in Italy. By focusing on the sinewy and unstable ties between migrants and their legal status, she offers a rich analysis of legal and bureaucratic practices that shape migrants' economic and political opportunities as well as their social and cultural life in Italy. Tuckett centres her analysis on what she defines as the 'documentary regime,' namely "the nexus of documents, paperwork, and legal and bureaucratic processes that migrants must engage with in their efforts to become and stay 'legal,' to bring family members into the country, and to attain citizenship" (4).

> *Rules, Paper and Status illustrates how uncertainty and opacity are intrinsically part of the documentary regime.*

In doing so, it introduces to the reader the labyrinth of laws and bureaucratic practices that govern Italy's migratory regime by tracing its impact on the life of migrants. By following the trials and tribulations of migrants who navigate the Italian migratory apparatus, the ethnography provides a snapshot of how the tentacles of the documentary regime reach into migrants' everyday life. The book therefore insightfully illustrates how the ambiguous modalities used for governing migrants produce multiple and contradictory forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Rules, Paper and Status offers two main contributions that help us to make better sense of the migratory phenomenon in Italy. First, it shakes up the limitations of "the deterministic modes of subjectification and governmentality found in Foucauldian-influenced anthropological accounts" (18-19). It does so by zooming into the various forms of affect that the loss and retrieval of legal status can generate. Secondly, it shows that the categories of legal and illegal are unstable by demonstrating how the *continuum* between migrants' legality and illegality is at the heart of the Italian documentary regime.

Tuckett captures the multiple layers that constitute the continuity between migrants' illegality and legality through an in-depth scrutiny of the bureaucratic

procedures required for completing legal applications such as residency visa and family reunification.

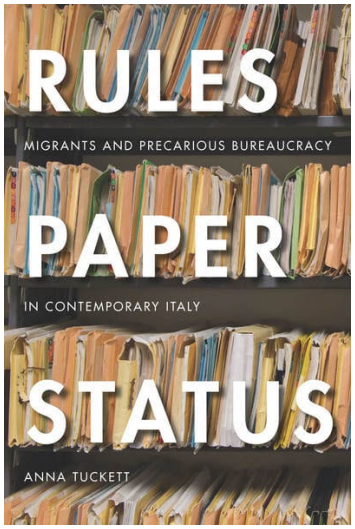
> *Taking us into this 'bureaucratic journey' and its hurdles, the book demonstrates how the process itself creates a legal limbo during which the migrant is neither legal nor illegal.*

Not only does the bureaucratic procedures produce a "temporary outcome" in which migrant's legal status is in suspension, but also the process itself is saturated with this blurring between the lines of legal and illegal, as the procedure itself can be 'made up' by semi-legal practices and authentically fake paper trails. Instead of exclusively centring the analysis on the state response to migratory phenomena, the book elucidates the significance of *il Sistema paese* (the system of the country), an expression used by migrants and citizens alike to describe the Italian state. It focuses on the symbiosis between migrants and citizens by looking at how they construct (and deal with) the Italian state, especially its paradoxes and inconsistencies.

Successful navigation of the documentation regime does not only hinge on access to money and social networks but also on a know-how of the unspoken rules governing the manipulation of the law. As the undecided character of the law is tamed by the practice of rule-bending, *Rules, Paper and Status* offers a portrait of Italian bureaucrats, migrants and social brokers' involvement in manipulating the official rules as the central logic to deal with the Italian state.

> *The tension between the law and its application demonstrates how migrants' legality is manufactured not exclusively by legal and bureaucratic procedures, but also by economic, cultural and social capital.*

Thus, the production of the legal status (i.e. legality and illegality) is partially dislocated from the legal and bureaucratic *milieu* as it traverses the social world inhabited by migrants in Italy.



This thorough scrutiny of migrants' encounters with the documentary regime lays bare the paradoxical effects produced by Italian bureaucracy's *modus operandi*. Tuckett observes how "the process of migrants' subject-making is [more] informal, accidental, and a product of their own encounters with bureaucratic institutions, in which they learn the best way to make the system work for them" (74). Importantly, it is through this process that migrants become cultural citizens as they employ the same practices and discourses as Italian citizens to deal with the corrupt and inefficient state. Nevertheless, this process of 'becoming included' as a cultural citizen is also an unfinished process. Indeed, as Tuckett demonstrates, the quintessence of cultural citizenship could also entail exclusion from legal citizenship.

Tuckett unearths the limitations of the 'documentary regime's' malleability as "the institutionalization of illegality, precarity, and exclusion within the immigration law [which] remained unchallenged." (69). These limitations limpidly emerge in the portrait of the so-called 1.5 and second generation. Their struggle echoes the tension between cultural and social belonging in Italy and the citizenship law that is based on *jus sanguinis* (right of blood). This intimate aspect of migrants' life is well recounted in *Rules, Paper and Status*: the racialised understanding of citizenship promulgated by the Italian law and cultivated by an increasing number of Italians.

> *Rules, Paper and Status provides a timely contribution to the study of migration, late capitalism and the anthropology of the state.*

Tuckett interprets the historical configuration of the documentary regime as an inherent feature of Italy 'as a nation-state' emphasising how the Italian state's modality of governing migration echoes state-citizens relations. Thus, the monograph shows how the legal and bureaucratic architecture governing

migration in Italy is ambiguous, undefined and distant from the global deportation regime described by De Genova and Peutz (2010). Yet, this work also introduces to the reader a new paradigm of the legal ambiguities described earlier by Reeves (2015) in her work on Russian labour migration regime in which the migrant is neither deportable nor legally recognised. Indeed, illegality is not necessarily translated into deportability and the boundary between legality and illegality is (almost always) renegotiable. This ambiguity endangers migrants' possibility to obtain legal citizenship and produces a precarious legal condition, which is also passed on to new generations.

Similarly to Miriam Ticktin's *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*, the book unpacks the thickness and longevity of anti-migration sentiments in Italy. The attention to the different layers that 'make up' the Italian state's treatment of migrants and its historical genealogy is crucial to capture the importance of cultural and social capital for the functioning of the legal apparatus. We learn how these layers are enmeshed with migrant's poverty. At the same time, we read how prevailing ideas about racialized citizenship confine migrants to a position of second class citizens.

By dissecting the different dimensions producing migrants' exclusion, Tuckett's *Rules, Paper and Status* provides a crucial contribution to theorizing about citizenship in European countries and the hegemonic discourse of integration. By excavating the past and tracing its reverberations into the present, Tuckett provides us a new lens through which we can better understand the current events occurring in Italy. They cannot be reduced to the 'recent' rise of populism.

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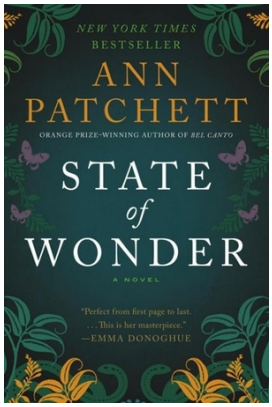
Featured image by Thomas Hawk (flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0)

#SummerBreak

Allegra
September, 2019

Allegra is going on holiday until mid-August. We'll gladly receive your suggestions and submissions from mid-August again (and we'll be cooking up a few changes to the site).

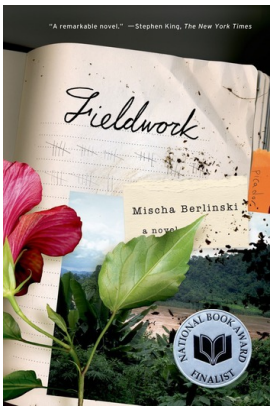
In the meantime, we wish you all a very mellow and restful summer break. While there are enough dark and serious things — political, social, academic, and environmental – to be worried about, we hope that you (and we) will be able to take a proper break and breathe, rather than trying to use our free time to finally finish *that* paper. So in the spirit of creative idleness and recharging our batteries, a few reading recommendations from us — a nice selection of novels (in no particular order) for summer reading that we recently enjoyed and that, even though they do resonate in one way or the other with our professional worlds, will hopefully contribute to making this an enjoyable #SummerBreak.



State of Wonder by Ann Patchett

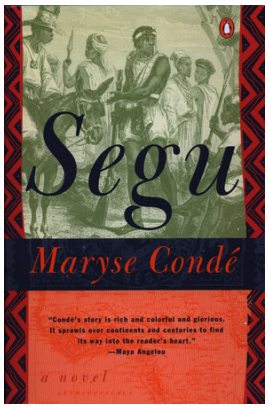
"Dr. Marina Singh, a research scientist with a pharmaceutical company, is sent to track down her former mentor, Dr. Annick Swenson, who seems to have all but disappeared in the Amazon while working on what is destined to be an extremely valuable new drug." (via Annpatchett.com)

Fieldwork by Mischa Berlin:



"When his girlfriend takes a job in Thailand, Mischa Berlinski goes along for the ride, planning to enjoy himself and work as little as possible. But one evening a

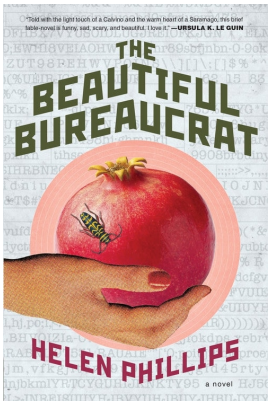
fellow expatriate tips him off to a story: a charismatic American anthropologist, Martiya van der Leun, has been found dead–a suicide–in the Thai prison where she was serving a life sentence for murder. Curious at first, Mischa is soon immersed in the details of her story. This brilliant, haunting novel expands into a mystery set among the Thai hill tribes, whose way of life became a battleground for the missionaries and the scientists living among them." (via Macmillan.com)



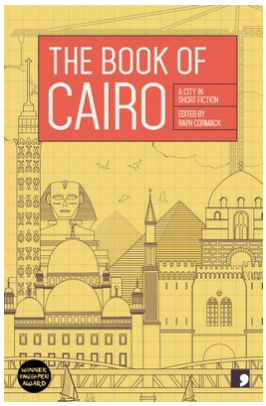
Segu by Maryse Condé

"The year is 1797, and the kingdom of Segu is flourishing, fed by the wealth of its noblemen and the power of its warriors. But even the soothsayers can only hint at the changes to come, for the battle of the soul of Africa has begun. From the east comes a new religion, Islam, and from the West, the slave trade." (via Penguinrandomhousebooks.com)

The Beautiful Bureaucrat by Helen Phillips



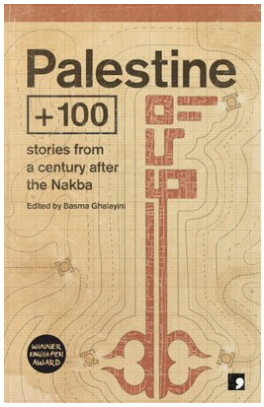
“In a windowless building in a remote part of town, Josephine inputs an endless string of numbers into something known only as The Database. As the days inch by and the files stack up, Josephine feels increasingly anxious in her surroundings.” (via Helencphillips.com)



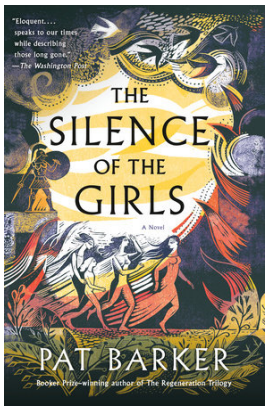
The Book of Cairo, ed. By Ralph Cormack, feat. Hassan Abdel Mawgoud, Eman Abdelrahim, Nael Eltoukhy, Areej Gamal, Hatem Hafez, Hend Ja‘far, Nahla Karam, Mohamed Kheir, Ahmed Naji & Mohamed Salah al-Azab

“Ten new voices offer tentative glimpses into Cairene life, at a time when writing directly about Egypt’s greatest challenges is often too dangerous. With intimate views of life, tinged with satire, surrealism, and humour, these stories guide us through the slums and suburbs, bars and backstreets of a city haunted by an unspoken past.” (via Commapress.co.uk)

Palestine +100, ed. by Basma Ghalayini, feat. Talal Abu Shawish, Tasnim Abutabikh, Selma Dabbagh, Emad El-Din Aysha, Samir El-Youssef, Saleem Haddad, Anwar Hamed, Majd Kayyal, Mazen Maarouf, Abdalmuti Maqboul, Ahmed Masoud & Rawan Yaghi



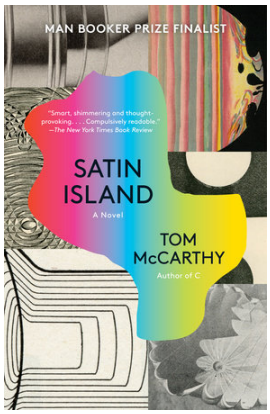
"Covering a range of approaches – from SF noir, to nightmarish dystopia, to high-tech farce – these stories use the blank canvas of the future to reimagine the Palestinian experience today. Along the way, we encounter drone swarms, digital uprisings, time-bending VR, peace treaties that span parallel universes, and even a Palestinian superhero, in probably the first anthology of science fiction from Palestine ever." (via Commapress.co.uk)



The Silence of the Girls by Pat Barker

"Here is the story of the *Iliad* as we've never heard it before: in the words of Briseis, Trojan queen and captive of Achilles." (via Penguinrandomhousebooks.com)

Satin Island by Tom McCarthy



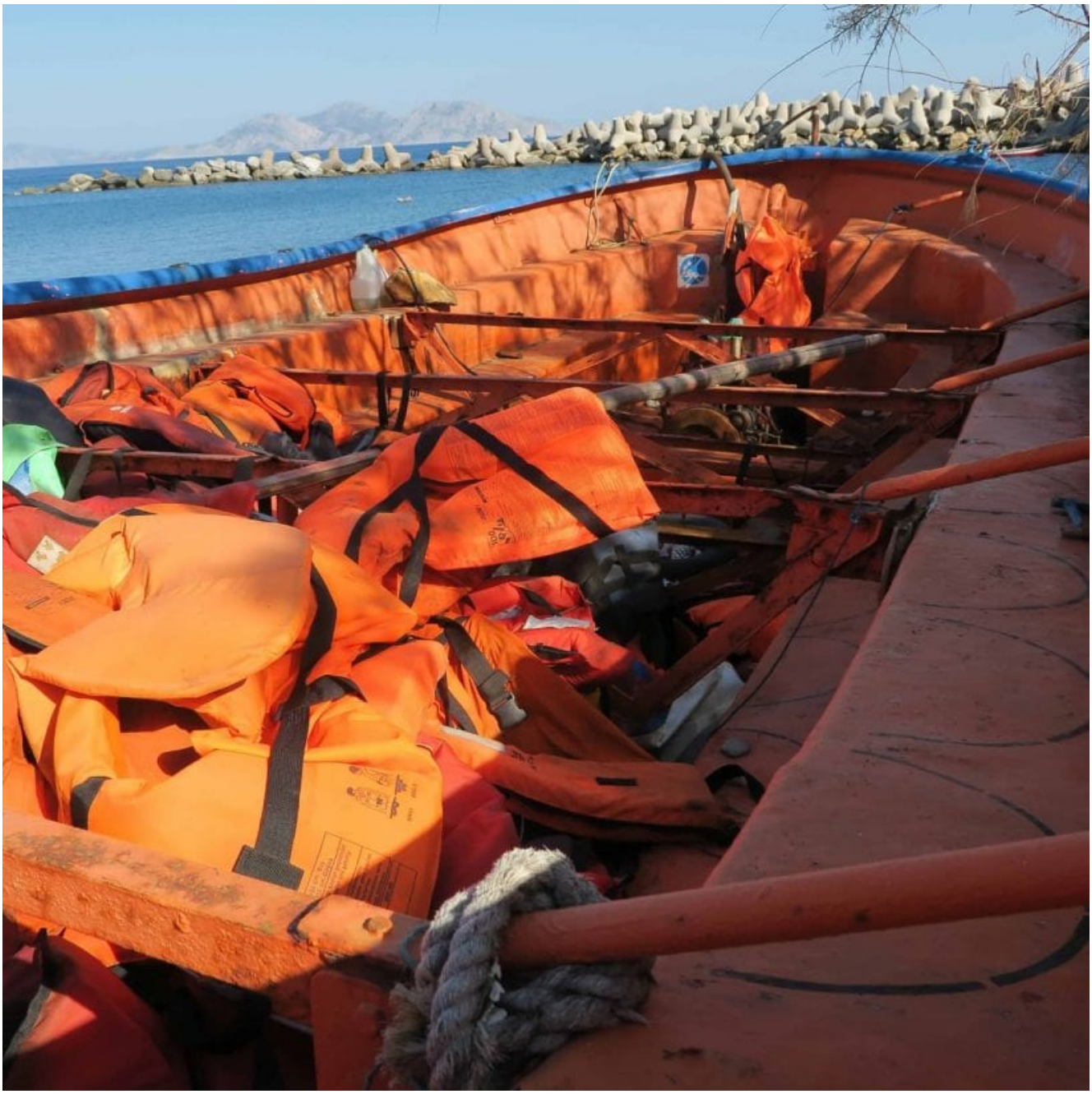
"U., a "corporate anthropologist," is tasked with preparing the Great Report, an all-encompassing ethnographic document that sums up our era. Yet at every turn, he feels himself overwhelmed by the ubiquity of data." (via Penguinrandomhousebooks.com)

Featured Image by Allegra

#Review: Out of "love" and

“solidarity”

Anna Kyriazi
September, 2019



O*ut of “love” and “solidarity”,* an ethnography written in Greek, is Katerina Rozakou’s insightful study of two volunteer organizations that helped refugees in Athens in the early 2000s. Since the book is not yet available in English and given

the importance of Greece at the center of the refugee and migration debacle, I highlight here some of its major contributions.

At the core *Out of "love" and "solidarity"* lies a distinction between two versions of volunteerism: humanitarian and militant as defined by the primary aims and motivations that underlie them, i.e. "love" and "solidarity," respectively. Rozakou arrives at this distinction through an extensive fieldwork with two volunteer organizations, the Hellenic Red Cross and the Voluntary Work Athens.

In the Introduction, Rozakou uses a chance encounter between some members of the two organizations that sets the tone of the discussion that follows: despite the polite and amicable atmosphere, it was obvious that they 'belonged to different worlds' (15). Presented with admirable insight, the rest of the study is dedicated to a systematic analysis of not only fundamental differences but also similarities between these two approaches to volunteerism.

> *With impressive clarity, throughout the book, Rozakou manages to make sense of what must have been fragmented if not unruly data.*

The book begins by an overview of the concept of the 'volunteer,' constructed as a model citizen working for the 'common good,' and the particular way in which it developed in Greece in the context of Europeanization and modernization. While the image of a volunteer as a moral citizen emerged in various places, its absence in Greece was identified as a problem. It was considered to reflect the 'unfortunate' fact of the country's incomplete modernisation. Rozakou positions

herself against this view, by pointing to the existence of militant volunteerism, which, as she shows, does not conform to the conventional ideas of volunteerism but follows a different logic.

Rozakou then relates her work to scholarship on 'gift' and other proximate concepts, most notably 'hospitality' (filoxenia), which 'lies in the heart of the self-representation of the Greek state' (28). From this discussion we learn, among other things, that the general uneasiness to accept gifts in Greece is thought to be rooted in the dominance of the values of autonomy and freedom, and that, moreover, the unilateral generosity, which Greek communities have long shown to foreigners serves to buttress and recognise the host's social value (27).

> *In this context, 'hospitality' is used to demarcate the boundaries between the foreign and the familiar, constituting, ultimately, a means of controlling the "other" (28).*

Zooming closer into the two organizations, in Rozakou's analysis the Hellenic Red Cross emerges as a place of motherly care and of deference to authority. The organization's mission of humanitarian volunteerism is to help the fellow human; it is nominally apolitical and based on the notions of 'selflessness,' 'compassion,' 'sacrifice,' and 'service' (83). Its predominantly female volunteers who turn with 'love' towards those 'in need.' Their activity takes place in the context of strictly hierarchical relationships, constituted on the one hand within the Hellenic Red Cross (i.e. between older and newer volunteers, professional members, leadership), and on the other hand between refugees and volunteers, as takers and givers of the 'gift,' respectively.

Militant volunteerism, in turn, is epitomized by the Voluntary Work Athens. Situated on the political left, this organization is programmatically opposed to any bureaucratic and hierarchical structure and instead strives to create equal and vertical relationships between volunteers and refugees (which is why participants are labelled as 'activists' rather than 'volunteers'). The central notion guiding their engagement is 'solidarity': the idea that the ultimate purpose of assisting

the marginalized should be to empower and emancipate them. Instead of gifts or handouts, the purpose of voluntary work or activism should be to build relationships among locals and refugees as equals. The revulsion from any type of hierarchy in this organization was evident in the ad-hocism and spontaneity that at times verged into chaos, as Rozakou so aptly describes (131).

Rozakou delves into the work of the two organizations and describes their practices in detail including activities such as a soup-kitchen organized by the Hellenic Red Cross and a failed attempt to clean up an occupied building by members of the Voluntary Work Athens together with residents. Especially intriguing is Rozakou's description of a visit to a refugee camp. She shows how Hellenic Red Cross volunteers contributed to the proper functioning of the camp, an enclosed site of care as well as control (201). This stands in stark contrast to the activities of Voluntary Work Athens on the streets of the Greek capital, where activists attempted to approach refugees in parks, squares and old buildings, i.e. in "their" own space (213).

As a comment on the antagonism between different solidarity initiatives and humanitarian organisations directed towards refugees, the book ends with a discussion of the emergence of 'solidarity' as a focal point of discourse and practice in the wake of the refugee 'crisis' in Greece. This approach envisioned first and foremost the creation of an equal society in the spirit of militant voluntarism, as opposed to humanitarianism which contributed to and even assumed a leading role in 'managing' the crisis (242).

> *This demonstrates the contemporary relevance of research that was conducted more than a decade ago.*

Out of "love" and "solidarity" is an excellent and timely piece of research. It would have profited from a more systematic analysis of gender, however. Gender is discussed in detail in relation to the Hellenic Red Cross volunteers who are predominantly female and whose approach to refugees and clients is driven by 'love' and a sense of 'duty.' Yet, it remains unclear whether this gender aspect is a

definitional characteristic of humanitarian volunteerism.

In my view, what is most original and fascinating about Rozakou's work is the way she receptively identifies and interprets the dilemmas, complexities, and contradictions of volunteerism encountered by her informants and herself:

> *The disappointment and bewilderment caused by the fact that refugees sometimes reject the 'help' they receive (be it a carpet or foodstuff).*

The tension between the sincere altruism of Hellenic Red Cross volunteers and their desire for public recognition and attainment of social status. The constant self-reflection and self-doubt of the Voluntary Work Athens activists, who, fully aware of the power-asymmetry inherent in the 'gift' and strove to avoid it, yet relapsed into 'paternalistic relations of old-style philanthropy' (236) as the only means to decrease the social distance between themselves and the refugees.

In summary, there is much to praise about this book. It is an erudite study that combines theoretical depth and analytical rigour with a rich empirical material, written in an engaging style. It is highly relevant not only for social anthropologists, but also for sociologists and political scientists who wish to deepen their understanding of volunteerism and civil society. Equally importantly, given that it is written in Greek, in a sophisticated yet accessible style, *Out of "love" and "solidarity"* can be recommended to a broader public, including volunteers and activists.

The author is responsible for the translations. An English-language summary of the book can be found here.

Rozakou Katerina. 2018. *Out of "love" and "solidarity": Voluntary work with refugees in early 21st century Greece*. Athens: Alexandreia (in Greek)

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No Country for Anthropologists?

Daniele Cantini
September, 2019

The conference *No Country for Anthropologists? Ethnographic Research in the Contemporary Middle East*, which we co-organized and hosted at the University of Zurich in November 2018, addressed major concerns of all researchers working nowadays in this region. In many Arab countries the popular uprisings of 2011, with their reverberations across the entire region, were followed by an authoritarian backlash. As a result of this, research activities came under the

increased scrutiny of politically repressive governments.

> *Political polarization and military conflicts in numerous countries created new obstacles to conducting ethnographic fieldwork. The tragic case of the Italian PhD-candidate Giulio Regeni, who was brutally murdered in Egypt in 2016, remains in everybody's thoughts.*

The issues at stake concern researchers working for universities situated both in the Middle East and elsewhere. Many face strong pressures to avoid sensitive topics and often almost insurmountable obstacles when it comes to obtaining research permits. In spite of these difficulties, the knowledge provided by ethnography, resulting from the immersion of researchers in different social contexts and a dialogic process of producing knowledge with local interlocutors, seems more needed than ever before. Ethnography opens up perspectives on the region that go beyond geopolitical speculations, statistical data, or decontextualized testimonies of the victims of repression and conflict.

The difficulties anthropologists face nowadays are hardly new, as Daniele Cantini recalled at the beginning of the conference, referring to Evans-Pritchard's reluctance to undertake fieldwork in Arab countries given the constant risk of being perceived as a spy.[1] After Arab countries gained independence from direct colonial rule, the role of anthropologists became even more questionable in many places. In 1971, the Algerian government went as far as banishing the discipline, then labeled as a colonial relic, in favor of sociology as a tool for social engineering.[2] Furthermore, conflicts in the region in which Western powers were heavily involved fueled further defiance towards anthropologists from these countries. Nevertheless, there were also periods of opening. The 1990s and the 2000s were times in which it was relatively easy to do research in many Arab countries—most notably in Egypt, which became an important hub for anthropologists working on the region. The first two years following the Egyptian revolution, from 2011 to 2013, constituted a climax for many anthropologists in Egypt, offering unprecedented freedom to conduct research on sensitive issues

such as poverty and political structures. Against this background, the backlash after the military seized power again in 2013 appears even more brutal. Since then, similar authoritarian tendencies have gained momentum in other countries of the region, as for instance in Turkey. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, civil war has made fieldwork an almost impossible endeavor.

As a result, a number of academic discussions of fieldwork conditions in the Middle East have taken place in recent years. The conference *No Country for Anthropologists?* followed this trend. For three days, it gathered researchers working with ethnography from Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, the United States, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Pakistan and Turkey, offering a venue for lively discussions about the difficulties met while doing research in volatile contexts and the possible means to overcome them. A detailed report on the talks held at the conference has been published in the *Bulletin* of the *Swiss Society for the Middle East and Islamic Cultures*. Therefore, we do not intend to give a full account of these three days, but rather wish to share some of the reflections that resulted from our discussions during and after the conference. The diversity of the speakers—in terms of their institutional affiliations, seniority, objects of interest and theoretical orientations—allows us to articulate four core dilemmas for ethnographic work in the contemporary Middle East: What should we do when access to fieldwork locations becomes impossible? How can we maintain the autonomy of anthropology when facing the frequently stifling discourses on the Middle East dominating official politics and the media? How should we deal with physical threats on fieldwork sites? And lastly, how can we elaborate and cultivate a shared language with our interlocutors in the field?

Four Dilemmas for Ethnography in the

Contemporary Middle East

> *A first dilemma we face is writing about countries or regions to which anthropologists have almost no access to anymore.*

Getting barred from places and being forbidden to meet interlocutors is obviously a serious problem for anthropologists. Yet how can we continue documenting the situation of people living in countries to which we have no direct contact to anymore?

Marina de Regt recounted how she attempted to keep contact with her interlocutors in the besieged city of Al-Hodeida during the war in Yemen. Relying on networks and background knowledge accrued during previous research projects, she was able to record local testimonies of the ongoing violence and situate them in a wider context. The necessity of describing the Yemeni situation from the point of view of the inhabitants seems beyond question. This is precisely the context-based knowledge that ethnography is particularly good at producing. The problem at stake equally concerns researchers carrying the nationality of the countries they study, as Ratiba Hadj-Moussa explained with reference to Algeria, where the politically agitated regions in the south have become more and more difficult to access. As security apparatuses and surveillance started to constitute a danger both for herself and her interlocutors, Hadj-Moussa resorted to using the telephone, Skype, Youtube, and Facebook in order to keep contact with her interlocutors, obtain insights into the current situation, and keep her observations and reflections going. “Fieldwork in ruins does not imply the ruin of the field”, as she put it. At the same time, the sheer impossibility to conduct fieldwork in such a scenario raises questions touching on the core of our discipline. This led Hadj-Moussa to ask whether—in such cases—we should speak of “ethnographies in the process of disappearing.”

Indeed, how can researchers experience sufficient “implication”[3] if they conduct fieldwork at a distance? Here, we refer to the kind of implication that forces us to rethink our research questions and our categories of analysis in order to adjust

ourselves to the preoccupations of our interlocutors and the issues they are concerned with in their lives. Missing immersion could easily make us disregard the social context of the data we gather and lose perspective on the issues that we are studying. This risk becomes even more acute the longer we are absent from the place of inquiry.

> *A second dilemma we face, is dealing with topics that are at the core of intense geopolitical gambles or of heated debates on the national scene.*

How can anthropologists address the topics in question in a way that leaves enough autonomy for a distinctive anthropological take on a situation? In the current academic environment, researchers are under pressure to adjust their inquiry topics to policy objectives and to media debates. This problem is particularly striking when it comes to the Middle East, a region which easily elicits inflammatory debates in Europe.

Emanuel Schaeublin observed for instance that debates on Islamic charitable institutions in Palestine have come to be dominated by security concerns and allegations that they serve as conduits for "terrorist funding." An ethnographic perspective on the issue makes it possible to situate the work of these institutions in people's lived practice of Islamic giving and to show how pious generosity is part of everyday interactions between neighbors and relatives. Conducting research on Turkish mosques in Switzerland, Dominik Müller illustrated how Swiss media debates on the role of mosques in politically mobilizing Turks in the diaspora affected his relation to his interlocutors, and the vision they had of him as a non-Turkish researcher interested in their ways of practicing Islam. In Turkey itself, Leyla Neyzi, Hande Sarikuzu, Erol Saglam, and Mustafa Akcinar faced a variety of problems at different levels of the research process related to the suppressed role of minorities in the country's narrative and the authoritarian turn of the government. As a result of political shifts, Shirin Zubair was compelled to leave Pakistan for some time and faced important career setbacks after attempting to teach gender theory in Lahore.

In such cases, the alternative either entails finding alternative venues for discussing the topic at stake from a different perspective or using these debates as a heuristic device to better understand certain situations and contexts. However, when the situation worsens and leads to violent confrontations, these ways of proceeding may not be a sufficient guarantee for the safety of researchers and of their interlocutors.

A third dilemma we face is how to behave in moments of intense polarization.

When conflicts turn violent, trying to keep oneself apart from the fighting is not always easy during fieldwork. Circulating back and forth between adversaries for research purposes often becomes impossible. Furthermore, when words become weapons, there is no place for a neutral stance and refusing to take a side can appear as treachery, cowardice or criminal indifference.[4] Appeals within anthropology for "engagement" do not necessarily solve the issue either. Which side should one choose, and on which basis? Further, what consequences does this decision have for the analysis?

While conducting research on the independence movement in South Yemen during 2014 and 2015, Anne-Linda Amira Augustin witnessed the political turmoil of a country on the verge of war. In this situation, she felt compelled to go "to those [she] could trust" and to join the political movement she was studying as an activist.[5] This example is significative in our eyes, as it shows how violent events compel us to rely on existing networks to insure our safety and how this influences our take on the conflict. As for Younes Saramifar, his research focuses on Shia militias fighting in different parts of the Middle East. He conducted research on them as an ethnographer embedded in their military structures, occasionally observing open fighting. However, as Aymon Kreil asked when discussing his paper, in face of the sheer brutality and confusion of war, trying to infuse the violence and chaos of combats with meaning can appear as a specific kind of misrepresentation, especially if taking side signifies granting a sense of value to war.

Such choices are not self-evident and should not be seen as such. Even cases in which deciding what side to take may seem easy at first sight due to the shared set of values between "liberal-minded" researchers and their interlocutors, can be intricate. With regard to Egypt for instance, both the Egyptian political scientist Rabab El-Mahdi and Egyptian political activist Philip Rizk denounced the misappraisals provoked by identifying the liberal youth as the main actor of politics following the 2011 uprising, a tendency to which many researches were prone due to the master narrative of liberal democracy expanding to the world in different waves and to personal affinities alike.[6] Further, as Nida Kirmani noted during her presentation at the conference *Pillars of Rule: The Writ of Nation-States and Dynasties in South Asia and the Middle East*, also held in Zurich a few months later, the meaning of political causes can differ according to national contexts: denunciations of Islamophobia, for instance, which belong to the progressive agenda in Trump's United States, are part of the ethnonationalist discourse in Pakistan, pushing for Indian Muslims to join the country.[7] Thus, the question remains open of how to position ourselves politically and analytically with a view to narratives and themes that take on very different kinds of political significance in different contexts. This situation appears to erode the common ground needed for an ethical and realistic kind of engaged anthropology.

> *A fourth dilemma we face is the possibility to elaborate a common language with our interlocutors.*

There are strong trends pushing for the development of collaborative anthropology, a way of doing inquiries in which our interlocutors, including local academic scholars and faculties, participate in all steps of the research process.[8] In her keynote address to the conference, Jessica Winegar emphasized the necessity of transcending the borders of the discipline by including a larger plurality of voices within it. In a similar vein, Shirin Naef argued for an anthropology dialoguing with debates going on within the Islamic tradition when studying bioethics in Iran, in line with recent arguments by Johan Rasanayagam.[9] These dialogues, which were mostly carried out with scholars of

law, jurisprudence, theology and medicine, have largely shaped her sociological and anthropological enquiries and perspectives. However, as Naef reminded us, this endeavor also presents difficulties and challenges, such as misunderstandings and misrecognition, which are important to acknowledge in order to overcome them.

Emilie Lund Mortensen argues for instance that her encounter with the Jordanian secret police, and the fear this encounter induced in her, increased her ability to enter into dialogue with her interlocutors. Working with Syrian refugees who feel that they are under constant surveillance and move through the city as invisibly as possible, Lund Mortensen's direct experience of the secret police created a space of shared knowledge with her interlocutors. Lamia Moghnieh explained that the vocabulary of trauma, which came to define the experience of war in Lebanon in the eyes of external observers and NGO personnel, obscures moments of resistance or practical assessments of situations which are at the core of what she terms as "living-in-violence."[10] Her insight compels us to reconsider the meaning of empathy, which tends to focus solely on suffering.[11]

Understanding different sources of strength and resilience that our interlocutors tap into should equally be part of the endeavor. Moreover, the kind of intimacy necessary for collaboration can sometimes be difficult to bear psychologically, as Erol Saglam argued for the case of his fieldwork among Rumeyka-speakers in Northern Anatolia. Their language is a dialect of Greek but many of its speakers are strong supporters of chauvinistic trends of Turkish nationalism. Suspicion prevailed first towards him, as the practice of the local Greek dialect is stigmatized by its speakers themselves. Saglam's problems during fieldwork remind of issues of "cultural intimacy" which anthropologists often face when trying to address topics about which their interlocutors reluctantly discuss with strangers.[12] In Saglam's case, ethnography on the topic he chose meant to become intimate with people whose prospects about society were often diametrically opposite to his own. Eventually, leading back to the issue of polarization, Erol Saglam, Hande Sarikuzu and Anne-Linda Amira Augustin all raised the question of how to analytically deal with rumors relying on a violent

othering of political adversaries which was shared by all their interlocutors and which made these stories credible in their eyes. Indeed, rumors help to learn about people in conflict and their "social imagination of violence," as Sarikuzu phrased it, even if they are not a reliable source for corroborating factual evidence.

These difficulties highlight a core dimension of ethnographic research, the need to answer sometimes contradicting demands from university and from one's own interlocutors. On one hand, we have to contribute through fieldwork to academic debates addressing questions in a jargon that is often far from the preoccupation and language of our interlocutors. On the other hand, once on site, we get entangled into networks of personal relations, which have other requisites, such as friendship or hospitality. This situation inevitably leads to "embarrassment,"[13] an uncomfortable position where researchers are torn between conflicting selves.[14] It is worth recalling that most of the time unethical or dangerous behavior by researchers arises from embarrassment. There is no plan B for failed fieldwork, as its success is one of the main elements on which anthropologists build their careers and by which they assess each other's work. However, on a more positive note, embarrassment is also productive, as it is precisely what allows us to translate contexts and convey knowledge. How to maintain this tension throughout the dialogical process of ethnographic research in a way that does not do harm to any of the participants is perhaps the most important challenge.

Prospects for Anthropology in the Middle East

Bricolage is always part of ethnography and the neat research protocols in textbooks and research projects by definition never work as we are dealing with non-reproducible historical situations and not with laboratory experiments. This supposes a great deal of incertitude and the necessity of adapting methods to places and encounters.

The conference's aim was not to provide ready-made solutions for ethnography in the Middle East. In any case, Jeffrey Sluka reminds us that "danger is not a purely 'technical' problem and is never totally manageable."[15] Thus, David Shankland offered a rather grim portrayal of research prospects in the region. It seems that the willingness of British universities to deal with risky situations is diminishing, particularly when research involves undergraduate and graduate students working under the responsibility of their universities and their research supervisors. In response to pressures, Mehrdad Arabestani, who is based in Iran, emphasizes the possibility of "disidentification" from official discourses as a skill to conduct research, by which he means the strategical use of the ambivalence of official slogans and of the—occasionally contradictory—objectives set to researchers by state agencies. Nafay Choudhury explained how he tried to manage the deteriorating security conditions in Kabul by never announcing the times of his visits to the money exchangers who he was studying and by avoiding a regular and predictable rhythm of moving through the city in order to evade abduction attempts. Noah Arjomand on the other hand recounted howhe was mixing profiles of different interlocutors when writing about Turkish and Syrian media workers, in order to avoid endangering them by making them too easy to identify.

Despite all these issues, ethnographic implication in the field remains indispensable for our work. Indeed, we never met someone who learned a language with audio methods. At a certain moment, you need to be compelled to practice the language, you need to be unsettled in your speaking habits, you have to experience yourself as someone else, be it pleasant or not, as another person, who is also part of the fieldwork. The good thing about ethnography is that it is flexible. The problems it raises are often indicative of wider political shifts in the world. Researchers unfortunately need to adapt to the violence accompanying these transformations, while striving to create the best possible conditions for ethnography in spite of the odds. [16] Reflecting on the conditions of doing fieldwork enables researchers to go beyond their individual cases, and to make historical and geographical continuities (and discontinuities, of course) visible in

the work of anthropology more generally. Particularly when we need to make unsettling choices, being able to articulate them among peers seems to be far from anecdotical, and rather close to how anthropological knowledge is made.

References

[1] Edward Evans-Pritchard, "Some Reminiscences and Reflections on Fieldwork," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 4, no. 1 (1973). Suspicions that ethnographers could be spies are recurrent in research in Middle Eastern countries. This is only partly explained by political tensions. For a more detailed discussion of Evans-Pritchard's reluctance to do ethnography in Arab countries, see Paul Dresch, "Wilderness of Mirrors: Truth and Vulnerability in Middle Eastern Fieldwork," in *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*, ed. Paul Dresch, Wendy James, and David Parkin (Oxford; New York: Berghahn, 2000), 113-14.

[2] Mohamed Madoui, "Les sciences sociales en Algérie: Regards sur les usages de la sociologie," *Sociologies pratiques*, no. 15 (2007); Kamel Chachoua, "La sociologie en Algérie: Histoire d'une discipline sans histoire," in *Les Sciences sociales en voyage: L'Afrique du Nord et le Moyen-Orient vus d'Europe, d'Amérique et de l'intérieur*, ed. Eberhard Kienle (Paris: Karthala, 2010), 141-42.

[3] Michel Agier, "Ce qui rend les terrains sensibles… et l'anthropologie inquiète," in *Terrains sensibles: Expériences actuelles de l'anthropologie*, ed. Florence Bouillon, Marion Fresia, and Virginie Tallio (Paris: EHESS, 2005), 178-80.

[4] Abderrahmane Moussaoui, "Du danger et du terrain en Algérie," *Ethnologie française* 31, no. 1 (2001); Kimberly Theidon, "Terror's Talk: Fieldwork and War," *Dialectical Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (2001).

[5] See also Anne-Linda Amira Augustin, "Rumours, Fears and Solidarity in Fieldwork in Times of Political Turmoil on the Verge of War in Southern Yemen," *Contemporary Social Science* 13, no. 3-4 (2018): 7-8.

[6] Rabab El-Mahdi, "Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising," *Jadaliyya* (2011),; Philip Rizk, "2011 Is Not 1968: An Open Letter to an Onlooker on the Day of Rage," *Mada Masr* (2014).

[7] On the same topic, see also Rochelle Terman, "Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 2 (2015).

[8] For a possible framework that will help collaborative research between anthropologists in Iran, see for example Shahnaz R. Nadjmabadi, "Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology: Past and Present Perspectives" (London: Berghahn Books, 2009). Nadjmabadi also provides us with a history of Iranian anthropology and its development to date.

[9] Drawing his inspiration from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas on the ethics of the Other, Rasanayagam argues for an anthropological knowledge founded on an ongoing conversation in a non-objectifying way with an Islamic tradition that observers should not endeavour to grasp as a whole. See, Johan Rasanayagam, "Anthropology in Conversation with an Islamic Tradition: Emmanuel Levinas and the Practice of Critique," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24, no. 1 (2018).

[10] Lamia Moghnieh, "'The Violence We Live In': Reading and Experiencing Violence in the Field," *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017).

[11] The concern with suffering arguably occupies a crucial position in recent anthropology and Western humanitarianism—on which, see Joel Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013), and Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). At the same time, recent ethnography on practices of giving in Egypt document how Islamic discourse is able to sustain an ethics of giving and mutuality that ascribes more importance to justice and duty than to empathy with those who suffer—see Amira Mittermaier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

[12] Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York etc.: Routledge, 1997).

[13] Erving Goffman, "Embarrassment and Social Organization," *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 3 (1956): 269-71.

[14] On the same topic, see also Christian Ghasarian, "Les désarrois de l'ethnographe," *L'Homme* 37, no. 143 (1997): 192-93; Dionigi Albera, "Terrains minés," *Ethnologie française* 31, no. 1 (2001). For an excellent ethnographic example of this tension, see Emilio Spadola, "Forgive Me Friend: Mohammed and Ibrahim," *Anthropological Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (2011): 737–756.

[15] Jeffrey Sluka, "Participant Observation in Violent Contexts," *Human Organisation* 49, no. 2 (1990): 124.

[16] Megan Steffen, "Doing Fieldwork after Henrietta Schmerler: On Sexual Violence and Blame in Anthropology," *American Anthropologist Website* (2017).

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An Anthropology of Nothing in Particular

Michael Ulfstjerne
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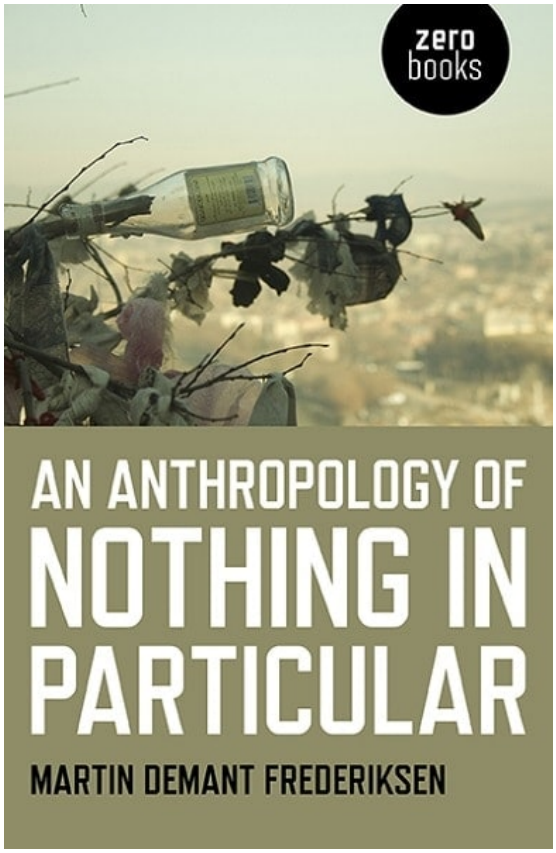
Do the efforts to avoid meaningful action among young Nihilists in an undisclosed location make sense in a time where everything seems to be saturated with purpose? Does the task of writing a book about them? And,

> *how might anthropology that is otherwise concerned with the business of sense making be employed to study nothing, in particular?*



While I read Frederiksen's book with great interest the task of writing a review of a book about nothing came across as a devious one. Either way I would end up offending someone: trying to make sense of the young nihilists would surely annoy them; among colleagues I would put myself in a tricky spot: either by recognizing the book's rather unconventional form as sound and thus become complicit in undermining the revered format of the monograph. Conversely, should I not find it genuinely pointless I could end up upsetting Frederiksen himself of whose work I'm otherwise a great admirer. Due to my own longstanding interest in the dark side of optimism, the empty and absent, I decided to proceed, albeit with a precursory disclaimer of having to sieve my thoughts into parts that try to make sense of it and parts that don't.

In the book we tag along with the author as he enters – or rather – as he is abducted into the lives of a small group of declared Nihilists in a capital somewhere. "Geography is pointless" (10), one of the protagonists realizes, which may point us to why placenames are absent throughout the book. Still, from the reoccurring theme of vodka, mentioning of Orthodox Christmas, angry priest-led mobs in the high spirit of anti-anti discrimination, and interlocutors' cultural references we are likely to be somewhere in Eastern Europe.We are introduced to a heterogeneous group of characters though we gain a more intimate portrait of one in particular, Oz, whose apartment provides the backdrop for much of the talk, booze binging, chain smoking, haphazard ponderings on art, films, popular music, literature, and the occasional fistfight.

The book is thoroughly unstructured and despite its limited pages (110),

comprises 10 brief chapters, and an impressive number of subheads (49): ‘yes we can’t!’, ‘diy pet cremation’, ‘Hakuna’s gone fishing’, ‘wallpaper frenzy’, ‘the later-day dude’, ‘whiskey starts writing’, and ‘imagine being a sober Gitte Nielsen’, just to mention a few. The exact genre to which the book itself belongs is rather difficult to pin down as it weaves in and out of humorously dark ethnographic vignettes, philosophical aphorisms, fiction, auto-ethnography, and more conventional engagements with the anthropological literature on youth, agency, purpose, and *post*-whatever.

While much is said and done on social movements, everyday forms of creativity and acts of resistance in the face of power and abrupt political transitions this literature tends to overshadow the perspectives of those genuinely disengaged and disinterested whose voices play a much less prominent role.

> *Following scholars such as Simon Chritchley and Deborah Durham, Frederiksen’s book takes important steps to make up for this analytical blind spot asking how nothing, Nihilism and meaninglessness, exist as components of social life?*

Why, he asks, turning Lauren Berlant of her head, do some people *not* aspire towards ‘conventional good-life fantasies’ (92)? From the ethnographic encounter with the young nihilists, we shift from ‘cruel optimism’ to its less aspirational sibling, ‘joyous pessimism’ who is not so much prone to ‘thread water’ or drown but to breathe under it (91). In a similar way, Bourdieu’s *illusio* finds its conceptual counterpoint in a social world of dis-*illusio* i.e. actively refraining from ascribing meaning into one’s life and actions. Yet rather than positing the young groups’ inertia as the antidote to the contemporary over-saturation of meaning and purpose there is no real closure and with the deliberate omission of context the reader needs to make up her own mind.

While the nihilist stance inevitably presents a counter current to the undisclosed society’s position that nihilism and youths’ disengagement is a ‘major societal disease’ (45), we are pretty much left in the dark as to how *nothing* is financed?

There seem to be no lack of drinks, cigarettes, tracks, films, or private spaces. And while food seems further down the line of consumption priorities this comes across as a matter of choice indicating some degree of privilege.

> *The particularity of nothing in this regard seems premised on a particular vantage point that may have benefitted from a different, or maybe simply a more varied range of ethnographic selection.*

"Nobody likes nothing" (4), the author states paraphrasing Stanley Donwood's *slowly downward*. That may be true. Still, the scope of nothing runs deep in the book as we are introduced to a motley crew of philosophical, political, literary and artistic roots seamlessly mixing tracks from Duran Duran, Pet Shop Boys, and Morrissey [through a conspicuous absence of his lyrics (21)] with insights from the group of young Nihilists along with Nietzsche, the Dude, Dostoevsky, Seinfeld, Sartre, Tarkovsky, Beckett, and with the brief but pleasant appearance of the author's own kids. The author makes no claims as to the universality of the kind of nothingness that is experienced by the book's protagonists. Instead, steps are taken to trace nihilism into its non-emancipatory form with the main concern of taking issue with the "modern ontology of purposefulness" (Hage in Frederiksen 2018, 74).

This brings us to a central merit of the book, that is its quixotic crusade against form and coherence in anthropological analysis. Although most of what happens (or that which doesn't happen) takes place within the city, we never really stay in the same place for long and largely remain on the surface of things. To some measure, the lack of context aids to debase the currency of "thick description" while the scenes, protagonists, and atmospheres, nevertheless, stay with the reader. Framed as a crossbreed between experimental ethnographic fiction and the anthropological monograph, Frederiksen joins recent attempts to rethink the genre of conventional ethnography through 'collaborative forms of imagination', which I find to be the book's most compelling contribution (3). Particularly the 'fictocritical' writings of Michael Taussig come to mind or that of Kathleen

Stewart whose work carves out a eerie space for the incoherent, the vague, or the "things that don't just *add up*, but takes on life of their own" (Stewart 2008, 72). This is an ingenious lateral move. Evidently, the book 'gravitates towards nothing'. Yet Frederiksen's gradual attunement into a world of nothing demands resolve and this occasionally results in relapse into making deep sense out of nothing and observable affection for squeaky-clean surfaces. Particularly memorable is "I heart Eucalyptus" where we hear of the author's obsessive cleaning of windowpanes with vast supplies of a Eucalyptus-infused disinfectant. The uncanny kinship between the struggle to fight off fungus and anthropology's habitual bent towards cleaning out the raw in the name of analytical clarity is hazy and not compromised by much explanation.

> *Some critics will surely find the book shallow as they scout the pages for context, argument, or clarity. What about race, gender or class? Isn't this particular kind of nothing simply a bourgeois luxury afforded those with privilege?*

Why did Oz *friend-unfriend-friend* the author? What does anthropology stand to gain from this radical method of collaborative imagination or ethnographic fiction? And what is lost? Undoubtedly the book raises more questions that it answers but in the spirit of Alice (the one in the hole) it is an intriguing detour. If nothing else, it's a book to love or hate. Or both.

Should I ever be given the chance to add to the book's already impressive line up of songs, Basinsky's Disintegration Loops (1982, 2002) would make for a valuable B-side. The "Loops" came out of Basinsky's efforts to digitize a small series of magnetic tape recordings extracted from an easy listening station in the early 80s. His attempts to salvage the recordings had the opposite effect with each rotation around the tape head only taring further on the already worn recordings. More than simply being an audio version of *death by preservation*, Basinsky's recordings attest to how entanglements create new beginnings. Allegedly stunned by these new soundscapes of ruin and disintegration Basinsky allowed the loops

to continue to the point of almost total dissolution. As the rifts and absences become more prominent the figure and ground trade places and we gravitate towards nothing.

In Frederiksen's 'anthropology about nothing' there is a comforting letting go, a succumbing to the fungus, an amassing of things that do *not* add up. The book both humours and mesmerizes, amongst other things, by way of its immersive fiction as *Whiskey* writes, *dolphins* perform, and the hero of Oz rides away into lavender sunsets – with a clean shave, organic grape juice diets, a tan. Or something.

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Featured image by Michael Ulfstjerne.

Introduction: Muslim Humanitarianism

Till Mostowlansky
September, 2019

Muslims around the world partake in comparable practices of aid, welfare and care that have received a wide range of different labels depending on place, time and observer. In the case of emergency relief such practices are sometimes subsumed under “humanitarianism”, if NGOs with long-term perspectives come

into the picture “development” appeals as label, and smaller-scale initiatives with minimal institutional embedding are often referred to as “philanthropy” and “charity”.

> *Yet none of these labels are neutral: they have histories, imply political and ideological positioning and are linked to colonialism, Cold War and geo-politics as much as to the language of administration in mainstream international organizations.*

For instance, the fact that “Islamic charity” has frequently invoked (largely unfounded) allegations of funds for militants in a post-9/11 world serves as a not so subtle reminder that such labels are deeply political (Benthall 2016).

In May 2019, the authors of this thematic thread met for a workshop in Geneva, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, to explore the challenges around practices of aid, welfare and care in Muslim settings. As the organizer of said workshop, I put forward the idea of Muslim humanitarianism as a central point of discussion; not as a means to refer to Muslims’ roles in activities related to a singular, everyday understanding of “humanitarianism” as short-term relief in times of war and disaster. But instead with the intention of stirring debate. For this reason, I suggested a notion of humanitarianism that reaches further back in history (Fassin 2012), casts a deliberately wide net and builds on Calhoun’s (2008: 76) observation that “humanitarianism took root in the modern world not as a response to war or ’emergencies’ but as part of an effort to remake the world so that it better served the interests of humanity.”

Such an approach, I argue, reflects that research on the broader field of humanitarianism, development, philanthropy and charity stands at a turning point. For decades – fuelled by categories that emerged from colonial and Cold War discourses – many scholars carefully distinguished between humanitarian institutions providing short-term aid, development agencies fostering economic and social modernization, and charitable and philanthropic endeavours encompassing smaller, individual and often religiously inspired aspirations.

Sometimes this aptly reflected actors' self-perceptions and emic categories, particularly within large-scale international organizations. However, a growing number of studies on various forms of aid, welfare and care around the world has shown that the boundaries between such pre-conceived categories are blurry, often dissolve in practice and are sometimes openly contested (e.g. Bornstein 2012**,** Benthall 2015, Brkovic 2017, De Lauri 2016, Mittermaier 2019, Redfield 2013).

To make sense of and pay tribute to this juncture in research I propose to think about Muslim humanitarianism, drawing on Scott (2004), as a "problem-space" – a conceptual-ideological ensemble which is defined by an object that comes with specific questions. Accordingly, this thematic thread discusses the historical and contemporary depth of Muslim humanitarianism in the sense of "an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological political stakes) hangs" (Scott 2004: 4). The reconfiguration of such a "context of disputes" requires new angles with questions that "bite" and revive the object.

> *The eight contributions to this thematic thread seek to achieve this goal by critically investigating the very possibility of thinking with the category of Muslim humanitarianism.*

They do so, for instance, on a very fundamental level by scrutinizing the vocabulary of humanitarianism (Jonathan Benthall) or by establishing a critical angle on existing approaches to the legacy of theology and Muslim religiosity (Filippo Osella). They participate in the larger endeavour of *decentring* humanitarianism that has defined the field in recent years, but also avoid creating unnecessary modes of *disconnection* between Muslim humanitarians and mainstream humanitarianism. For instance, in her critical take on studies on Saudi humanitarianism Nora Derbal argues against strategies of exoticization and demonization and instead proposes pursuing more detailed and fine-grained research about this still relatively unknown topic. In her contribution on the

Egyptian Red Crescent Esther Moeller shows how the alleged "margins" of humanitarianism can have a strong impact on processes in perceived "centres" (here the International Committee of the Red Cross). And in his article on the purist and the developmentalist ethos of zakat Christopher Taylor points to "an inherent civil-political dimension" of Islamic almsgiving.

> *As the authors of this thematic thread – some explicitly, some implicitly – emphasize, the broader endeavour of decentring humanitarianism is always a tightrope walk between universalizing and particularizing aspirations.*

Radhika Gupta notes in her contribution that the installation of a "postcolonial civic" through Shi'i organizations in Mumbai goes hand in hand with the marking of communal space and access. In her study of healthcare provided by an NGO in northern Pakistan Emma Varley observes how universal aspirations diffuse into particularising processes of sectarian exclusion in practice. In conclusion, however, she makes the important point that such processes of exclusion are not limited to this particular NGO – or Muslim humanitarianism at large, one might add – but that they are a central feature of humanitarianism around the globe.

There is ample evidence that humanitarian organizations in the Global North have neither managed to free themselves from their particularity, and the specificity of the contexts of which there are part, nor have they been able to escape their own history of political theology. In fact, Agrama (2014) argues that Western humanitarians have over time created their "own version of Christianity" to which they constantly relate themselves. In response, the contributions to this thematic thread deal with an adapted version of this question and ask how Muslim humanitarians are creating "their own version" of Islam. In Basit Iqbal's entry this becomes perhaps most apparent through his analysis of a Power Point Presentation of an organization caring for Syrian refugees in Jordan that offers an explicit theorization of humanitarianism. Such formulations, or "mirror images" as Julie Billaud calls them in the thread's afterword, hold the potential of shattering the myth of a unified humanitarian government that has its

genealogical roots in “Christianity” or “the West”.

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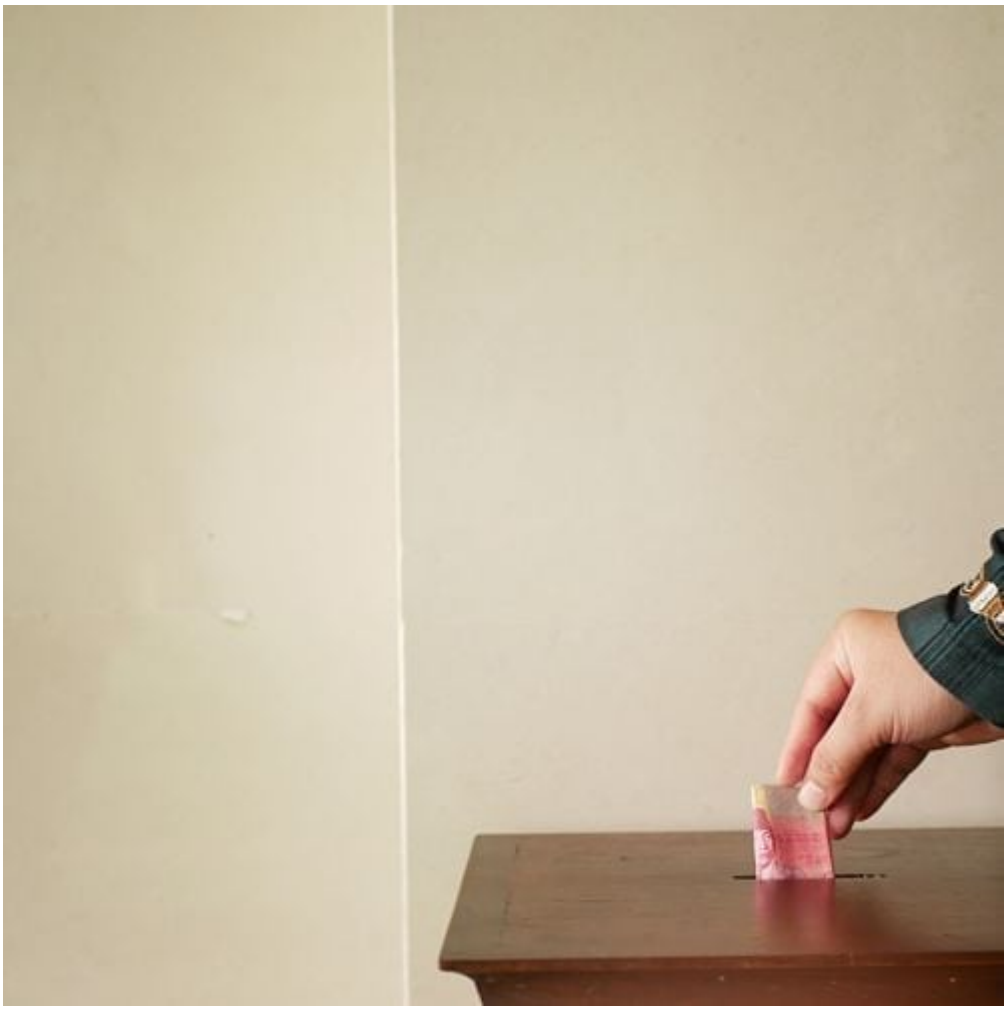
A note on humanitarian terminology

Jonathan Benthall
September, 2019



This article reviews the lexical field associated with "charity," "philanthropy," "humanitarianism" and similar terms in English, and concludes with a brief account of comparable terms in the Islamic and Arabic traditions.

> *The lexical field associated with charity, philanthropy, humanitarianism and their congeners in English and associated languages has been subjected to some analyses which ought to be common ground for the comparative study of these traditions and practices.*

Since the sixteenth century, European almsgiving has been overlaid with the religious connotations of "charity" in the sense of the highest Christian virtue, spiritual love. This was one of the words used to translate into English, via the Latin *caritas*, the Greek New Testament word *agapē* – as in the famous passage

from 1 Corinthians 13 that extols it: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of Angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal” (King James Bible or Authorized Version). In modern translations, “charity” is always replaced by “love,” which the first English translators may have used sparingly because of its sexual connotations. At about the same time in England, “charity” began to acquire a restrictive legal definition as a result of a decision by Parliament in 1601 to regulate the system of private funds devoted to good causes. “Charity,” over four centuries since, retains a Christian aura – to the extent that some Christian apologists are happy to conflate the two senses of the word. But the legal definition allows for some surprising activities to be deemed to be charitable – often resulting in exemption from certain state taxes – such as, in the United Kingdom, promoting “the efficiency of the armed forces of the Crown.”

A distinction is often made in European languages between charity and philanthropy. *Philanthrōpia*, for the ancient Greeks, was “love of the principle of humanity.” Sir Francis Bacon revived the term in his essay “Of Goodness, and Goodness of Nature” (1612), which begins: “I Take Goodness in this sence, the affecting of the weal of Men, which is that the Grecians call *Philanthropia*; and the *Word Humanity* (as it is used) is a little too light to express it.” Later, in the century of the Enlightenment and the Rights of Man, this concept was fused with the idea of public benefactions – no doubt with the aim of establishing a philosophical basis for “charity” in humanism, shorn of religious connotations. However, even in the United States, where the concept of philanthropy was especially important to the thought of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers, it never replaced “charity.” It came, however, to be associated in particular with the munificence of the rich, monumental benefactions, and patronage of high culture. All attempts so far to study our topic comparatively have dispensed with the charity/philanthropy distinction at an analytical level, one good reason being that it has no parallels in major non-European languages such as Arabic or Hindi. (It is, however, legitimate and necessary to indicate how these and similar concepts are used in specific ethnographic or historical contexts.)

> *Aid and welfare workers frequently insist on dissociating themselves from charity, but this may be interpreted as a result of cultural conditioning or déformation professionnelle unless the recipients of their assistance have legally enforceable rights.*

The most neutral term available for cross-cultural analysis is probably "good works," though this too has some Christian connotations (*kala erga*, Matthew 5:16).

The word *humanitarianism* is more complex in its connotations as *charity*. "Humanitarianism" is sometimes taken to encompass all forms of philanthropic and altruistic action. In everyday usage today it can mean no more than "compassionate" (e.g. "The British government decided to release General Pinochet on humanitarian grounds"). The earliest humanitarians were those at the beginning of the nineteenth century who either believed that Jesus was only human rather than divine, or else supported the "religion of humanity" promoted by Auguste Comte and others. But it can be defined more narrowly as an ideological movement traceable to the late nineteenth century (Davies 2012). The word "humanitarian" was often used derisively, to connote an excess of sentimentality (as was also "philanthropic"). But in the twentieth century, "humanitarianism" came to represent the aspirations of the industrialized world to relieve suffering in societies facing acute crisis.

An even tighter definition is reserved for the rules, known as "international humanitarian law," intended to limit the effects of armed conflict. Among aid professionals, "humanitarian" action usually implies response to short-term emergencies, as opposed to "development," which aims at long-term improvements to life chances – a concept that has stimulated its own extensive body of research by social scientists. An academic bifurcation has grown up that runs in parallel with the operational and budgetary arrangements laid down by aid donors, though there is no sound reason for the two practical approaches not to be more integrated.

The term “humanitarian space” has gained some currency: this refers primarily to safe zones and corridors, and by extension to the scope for action, based on impartial and independent principles, to bring relief to affected populations. More contentiously, the principle of “humanitarian intervention” (the use of military force in response to grave violations of the laws of humanity) has been partially accepted by lawyers in Western states and has been strengthened by the endorsement of Responsibility to Protect by the UN World Summit in 2005. But application of the concept has been widely criticized as inconsistent and opportunistic.

Rony Brauman, a former president of Médecins Sans Frontières, has averred that there is a philosophy of humanitarianism: “To the question ‘What is man?’, humanitarian philosophy replies simply ‘He is not made to suffer’.” (The disparity between this view and Buddhist teaching is an indication of the difficulty of arriving at a cross-culturally applicable definition.) Peter Redfield has argued that the tradition of Western humanitarianism since the nineteenth century includes a striving towards a better world which is perhaps more than merely charitable. Brauman has also remarked, however, that if the Auschwitz camps were to be constructed today, they would be described as a “humanitarian crisis.” Alex de Waal was the first social scientist to note, in 1989, the exchange of personnel between NGOs and state-funded agencies which he called the Humanitarian International. Didier Fassin, Michael Barnett and others have more recently sparked off speculative debate on the nature of “humanitarian governance.”

For the study of humanitarianism in the Arab and Islamic world, Jasmine Moussa’s essay (2014) is authoritative. Arabic lacks an equivalent to the English *-ism* suffix that denotes an ideology, so that *al-insāniya* can mean “humanity,” “humanitarian,” “humanitarianism,” and “humanism,” and the word came late into common usage through translation. This should not be taken to imply any lack of words in Arabic through which the historical evolution of a strong tradition of benevolence and compassion can be traced. *Karam* and *jūd* (generosity) have been identified with pre-Islamic Arab tribal values. Apart from *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf*, defined in all introductions to our subject, there are the ancient terms *an-*

najda and *al-is`af* (help or rescue) as well as *ighātha* and *musā`ada* (among others) with overlapping meanings. *Khayir* means someone who favors the public good and social reform, while *muhsin* means someone who provides *ihsān* or good deeds. *Birr* and *mabarra* are close in meaning to "good works."

> *In both the languages discussed above, the lexical field varies in time and space.*

Moreover we must take account of interactions with other languages and cultures. In India, for example, as notably argued by Erica Bornstein, a different lexical field centered on *dharma* (duty), *seva* (service) and *dān* (giving) interacts with European and Islamic traditions.

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The paragraphs above on "charity" and "philanthropy" are based on the author's article "Charity," in Didier Fassin, ed., *A Companion to Moral Anthropology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 359–375.

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Theorizing Humanitarianism for an Islamic Counterpublic #MUHUM

Basit Iqbal
September, 2019

Closely attending to Muslim theorizations provides an opportunity for social scientists to stop asking such questions as 'what is so Islamic about Islamic humanitarianism?' or 'do Muslim humanitarians really work for humanity?'—not least because such questions are methodological traps.

Over the course of my fieldwork in Jordan I spent many hours with Zayed Hammad, the director of the Jam'iyyat al-Kitab wa-l-Sunna (The Association of the Book and the Prophetic Practice). The organization itself, established in 1993 as a cultural association, has a history that reflects key developments in the Islamic Revival. Shaykh Zayed long distinguished its activism from other wings of Salafism in the country (Wagemakers 2016). But then came the Syrian crisis (*al-azmeh al-suri*), as it is widely referred to, and he expanded the scope of his organization toward a humanitarian mission. The magnitude of the displacements resulting from Syrian regime brutality and the consequent militarization and splintering of the opposition factions is well known. According to UN numbers there are about 666,000 Syrians formally registered as refugees in Jordan (UNHCR 2019), though the total number of displaced Syrians in the country was often described to me as over a million.

The Jam'iyyat al-Kitab wa-l-Sunna is one of the Jordanian Islamic charities most active across the domains of refugee support (cash support, shelter provision, educational programs…). In 2013, for instance, they distributed USD 50 million of aid to 350,000 refugees (over 45,000 families) (Ababsa 2015). Although it had scaled back its activities as of my last interviews in February 2019, due mostly to donor fatigue (a common story across all kinds of relief programs in Jordan—in Lebanon and Turkey as well), they continue to pay for cancer treatments and host orphans, teach Quran and distribute food. I always met Shaykh Zayed in his office, where I would ask him questions over tea (usually just for me, because he would be fasting), punctuated by phone calls, often from individuals asking if there was any aid available, which he would direct to one branch or another of the organization—or, most frequently, would reply that they should quietly come to the office and receive 20 JOD (40$) for immediate expenses without telling anyone where they got it.

In our very first meeting (February 2018), when I described my research topic as being the relationship between religion and humanitarianism, Shaykh Zayed immediately forwarded to me something he had already prepared on the topic, which he said would answer my questions. It is a PowerPoint presentation of

nearly thirty slides, some more detailed than others, titled “The Work of Islamic Charitable Organizations in the Light of Islamic Shari‘a and International Humanitarian Law” (*‘amal munazzamat al-khayriyya al-islamiyya ‘ala daw’ al-shari‘at al-islamiyya wa-l-qanun al-duwali al-insani*). The presentation begins with Quran 21:107: “And We have not sent you (O Muhammad) except as a mercy to the worlds.” The presentation glosses ‘world’ in a few ways: the twentieth-century Egyptian scholar Muhammad al-Sha‘rawi cites the classical definition of the “world” (*‘alam*) to which the Prophet brought mercy as being “everything other than God”, namely the realms of angels, jinn, humans, even animals, plants, and minerals; the twentieth-century Syrian scholar Ratib al-Nabulsi comments that the Prophet was sent as a mercy to the faithful and to infidels and to hypocrites, to all the children of humanity, men, women, children, and to birds and animals alike.

Subsequent slides enumerate authorities and roots of humanitarian principles (*mabadi’ insaniya*): first the *fitra*, the divinely established human nature; then the various religions (*adyan*); then national and international laws; and finally principles of utility or public benefit. The next slide lists ethical principles for humanitarian work (humanity; sanctity; responsibility and legitimacy; dignity). The presentation proceeds like this, establishing the conceptual space of humanitarianism, before shifting into a comparative mode: one slide has two columns, the first defining international humanitarian law and the second defining international humanitarian law *in Islam*. There is little substantive difference between the two columns; each is directed toward human protection and the maintenance of human dignity, but they invoke different archives (international treaties/conventions and shari‘a, respectively). The next slides abandon this explicitly comparative effort, instead offering Islamic reasons for specific humanitarian principles and then discussing the purpose and types of charitable action.

The comparative mode returns later, but curiously the vector of the comparison has shifted: it now first lists the terms of charity in Islam, then gives their conceptual equivalent in ‘the West’ (in English translation), and then provides an

Arabic translation of that concept. What I find interesting is not only that the direction of the comparison has changed (from an Islamic term to a Western one, rather than the other way around) but also that there are three columns, not two, and that some of these translations end up more awkward than others in passing from a regime of virtues (e.g. *al-rifq bi-l-hayawan*: kindness to animals) to a regime of rights ('protection and promotion of animal rights'). The Islamic practice of 'enjoining good and forbidding evil' (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*), for instance, is rendered into English as 'civic action', and then into Arabic again as *al-mumarisa al-muwatiniyya*. And this is explicitly conducted as a translation between "Islam" and "the West" (the international humanitarian apparatus is explicitly figured as Western).

> *What makes Muslim humanitarian practice distinct, Shaykh Zayed concluded in conversation when we discussed this presentation, is that it affirms the primordial nature (fitra) of humanity.*

And because the principles and practices of Muslim humanitarianism accord with this nature, being also a means of upholding personal and collective duties to God, it urges (*haththa*) humanity, that is, it develops the capacity of humanity. Other types of humanitarianism are also based in this human nature (*fitra*), he clarified, but disproportionately focus on beneficiaries or benefactors, or exploit beneficiaries along the way, or are driven by enthusiasm and not a kind of moral seriousness. Islamic activists also fall into these pitfalls, he admitted. But they can take recourse to the tradition of Islamic moral reasoning, in order to avoid them.

Amira Mittermaier (2019) has recently described Islamic practices of giving in postrevolutionary Cairo as exhibiting a "nonhumanitarian ethics". Such practices bypass the humanitarian fetish for spectacular suffering, she writes, for such people are moved to act by a divinely-imposed obligation (not simply by compassion for a generic suffering Other). Nor is the scene of such charity determined by the asymmetrical relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, for God is a mediating third party who makes the relation between 'benefactor'

and ‘beneficiary’ reversible (in that the ‘beneficiary’ is the one who occasions the practice/possibility of the ‘benefactor’s’ piety in the first place). While Shaykh Zayed’s presentation takes such an ethics for granted, it also engages the secular grammar of humanitarian practices while attempting to re-locate/re-ground Muslim humanitarian work. I would thus suggest that we understand his effort as addressing (or itself interpellating/articulating) an Islamic counterpublic within the space of that humanitarian world—thinking counterpublic not, with Nancy Fraser, as a kind of subaltern opposition to bourgeois discourse, but rather with Charles Hirschkind (2006) as a set of discursive practices which structure the rationalities, sensibilities, and aims of the Islamic reform movement.

This post has begun elaborating the theorization of ‘humanitarianism’ of the director of one charitable organization in Jordan. I am not suggesting that it provides a model for Muslim humanitarianism writ large. But we should consider this theorization seriously, both for what it does for Shaykh Zayed and for what it does for the anthropology of humanitarianism. For Shaykh Zayed, the PowerPoint has a pedagogical purpose, directed as it is toward teaching Muslim humanitarians (including Islamist activists, *islamiyun*) the form and function of charitable practice in confronting conditions of desperation and dispossession. For social scientists, however, it should also solicit a different kind of reflection. Islamic charitable organizations like this one are providing massive amounts of aid to refugees and others, in Jordan and well beyond (e.g. Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009), especially given the funding shortfalls for which international aid programs are notorious. All too often, the academic literature on such groups either reflects the normative secularity of humanitarian policy (and so is anxious that these groups are at once too religious and too political, according to the conditions of legibility set by the secular grammar of the international humanitarian industry: Ager & Ager 2011), or rushes to fold such groups under the important anthropological critique that humanitarianism produces spaces of exception, divides ‘humanity’ into a hierarchy of benefactors and beneficiaries, and takes disasters, epidemics, or conflicts as occasions for practicing a new type of government (Ticktin 2014). What is lost in both these critical moves is

consideration of precisely how such groups articulate their claims.

The theorization of humanitarianism offered by Shaykh Zayed provides an opportunity for social scientists to stop asking such questions as 'what is so Islamic about Islamic humanitarianism?' or 'do Muslim humanitarians really work for humanity?'—not least because such questions are methodological traps. One of the insights of the anthropology of secularism has been that if anthropologists approach contemporary Muslim practices with a view to separating what is properly secular from what is properly religious, then they have already committed themselves to a secularist analysis. (Muslims themselves, of course, regularly ask the question of what is properly Islamic, but in doing so they are engaging their own discursive tradition with their own authoritative criteria, which are not shared with the social scientist—who presumably is not seeking to intervene into that tradition.) And one of the insights of the anthropology of Islam has been that identifiably secular logics (here, e.g., rendering *al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf* as 'civic action'; invoking the concept of 'humanity') can rearticulate Muslim forms of life, without these somehow becoming less Islamic for the anthropologist. Contemporary Muslim humanitarianism is certainly marked by neoliberalism and globalization: we live in a single, interconnected world, as Talal Asad repeatedly reminds us.

> *But the acts of translation practiced by Shaykh Zayed in theorizing "in the light of shari'a and international law" should suggest certain methods of comparison and indifference, antagonism and engagement, which the anthropologist might also adopt in considering the form and function of Muslim humanitarianism today.*

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Reflections on a Theory of Zakat

Christopher Taylor
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This inquiry into the role of "obligatory almsgiving" (zakat) within Muslim humanitarianism presents a theorization of two modes of Islamic charity: the purity ethos and the developmentalist ethos. Relying on ethnographic data from north India and others' scholarship, I present this theory of zakat as a provocation to western categories of philanthropy, charity, humanitarianism.

Islamic scriptures teach that charity is best given in secret. Mohammad exhorted almsgivers: "Give from your right hand so the left will not know," a popular saying that was repeated to me numerous times in my one and a half years of field research in Lucknow, India. Yet one steamy midsummer day I found myself sitting among a dozen Muslim almsgivers in an outbuilding of a mosque in a bazaar of the old city neighborhoods of Lucknow, observing alms that were not so secret. These men were donors to an Islamic charity organization, and they watched as

wares purchased with their alms – sewing machines, rickshaws, street-vendor carts – were distributed to needy unemployed Muslims.

These gifts of Islamic charity were far from hidden. They were given in public; alms-takers' names were called, they were photographed along with donors, and the event was written up in the local news and even broadcast on the Internet. This is a far cry from the "left hand not knowing." Yet scholars of Islamic law and ordinary Muslims alike in India are lauding such new Islamic charities for reviving the ritual of obligatory almsgiving (*zakat*) to address Muslim poverty, even when they depart from older practices. One reason for the broad support for new modes of Islamic almsgiving is that Islamic charity organizations benefitted from this visibility. This charity grew each year in size, and the increased revenues in turn flowed to increasing numbers of beneficiaries of alms. Muslims as far as the U.S. have donated online, for example in lieu of the traditional Eid al-Adha ritual of sacrifice and charity paying the cost of a goat to feed the poor in Lucknow.

Arriving in north India to study Muslim civil society and charitable practices in 2012, I was caught by surprise at the intensity with which numerous concerned citizens like this new Islamic charity were raising their voices and seeking to revive almsgiving and make it better organized on behalf of the Muslim community. I needed a typology to better understand this mode of organizing zakat and how it represented a historical shift.

> *This theorization of zakat is useful in understanding new forms of Muslim public ethics in north India, as the ritual of zakat (historically given in modest secrecy) undergoes a transformation to newly public social institutions and more widespread practice.*

Zakat, as Islam's ritual of crowd-sourced fundraising, is fast replacing landed endowments (*waqf*) as the institutional financing for Muslim charitable institutions. This shift echoes a broader trend in philanthropy towards the "big power of small change" instead of a reliance on elite patrons, although my own study remains sensitive to the specifics of north Indian practices and of Islam's

extensive jurisprudence on zakat.

This article, drawing on fieldwork in an Islamic seminary and five charity organizations, presents a theorization of two modes of zakat. What I term the "purity ethos" and the "developmentalist ethos" of Islamic charity are each deeply rooted in Islamic scripture and apparent in everyday Muslim practice. Islamic scriptures represent almsgiving as a purificatory ritual focused on the *donor*. Other anthropologists have observed traditional Islamic charity practices that accord with this purity ethos, described alternately as "financial worship" (Benthall 1999) and piety-in-action (Deeb 2006: 168-212), emphasizing charity as a virtue and its centrality to Muslim spirituality. The ritual efficacy of zakat, in this view, is mostly focused on the purification effected upon the donor, as their soul and their wealth are purified. The recipient, by contrast, is largely occluded in this imaginary of alms as "giving to God" (Mittermaier 2014, 2019).

The second mode of zakat is a "developmentalist ethos." As we saw in the opening vignette of more public zakat, reformers of zakat are invoking different sets of Islamic scriptures and moral concerns that re-orient the focus of zakat-giving away from donors' purity to make *recipients* more visible.

> *These developmentalist Muslims in Lucknow are inquiring about the life of the gift after it is given: Will recipients utilize charity effectively, such as to generate their own income? Or will it foster dependency and begging? Shouldn't zakat have an impact, rather than be given just anywhere?*

In recent decades, Islamic charities have begun to spring up in greater numbers throughout the world. Many new Islamic charities have organizational missions focused on longer-term development goals, not only immediate charitable needs. Unlike the schools, orphanages, and hospitals that Muslim elites in an earlier generation endowed, these new Islamic charities do not provide continuous services themselves as much as targeted financial development for Muslim families. Their view is to develop and empower beneficiaries to become breadwinners themselves.

In my broader work, “new Islamic charities” are those welfare associations financed through public fundraising for zakat and other Islamic religious donations, supplanting the endowment (*waqf*) organizations that have been popular in India and other Muslim societies since the medieval era. New Islamic charities became platforms for public advocacy to raise other Muslims’ rates of almsgiving, as they revive zakat but also seek to re-invent it as a more *public zakat*, as we saw in the opening vignette. But the revival and reform of zakat in Lucknow was focused not only on increasing Islamic philanthropy but on channeling it more *effectively* to the perceived growing crisis of so-called “Muslim backwardness” in India. They also were motivated by factors internal to Islamic tradition. Reformers in the new Islamic charities directly referenced themselves as continuation of the waves of Islamic reformism through India’s history. Some Lucknow Muslims envision zakat not only as an *individual* obligation upon donors, but also as a “system” (*nizam*) of welfare economics internally organized for just redistribution according to Islamic principles.

While parallel to other traditions of philanthropy, zakat begs a unique analysis. It is the third ritual pillar obligatory in Muslim practice. Islamic almsgiving is not mere charity. Nor does the “love” or “voluntarism” inherent in western ideas of philanthropy capture its full meaning. Many scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have relied on a translation of zakat as “alms-tax” to reflect this sense of obligation. Islamic jurisprudence on zakat emphasizes it both as a religio-legal obligation and (if institutionalized at scale) an engine for the circulation of wealth in society, a circulation of wealth which produces social order and a just economy.

On the other hand, Muslims in my research in Lucknow also understand that Muslims should give out of feelings of generosity and voluntarily exceed the obligated amount of zakat. Even though obligated, zakat involved high degrees of personal choice. Many Muslim donors spoke of the zakat obligation as a choice they must make – but also a choice they *wanted* to make, out of gratitude for having wealth while others lived in poverty. In this sense, zakat was a form of voluntarism. A Muslim must decide where, when, and to whom to give (or, frankly, whether to follow Islamic law at all). In short, zakat – like charity – is a

virtue, habituated through personal choices and actions, even as it is perceived as done only because it is obligatory. Common Islamic teachings on charity interweave these seemingly contradictory imperatives of individual voluntarism and legal obligation (e.g. Nadwi 2000).

> *Overall, these dueling themes comprise what I call a "paradox of obligated voluntarism." This paradox of obligated voluntarism is a useful way to understand the distinct nature of the ritual and social institution of zakat.*

My work analyzes how the "obligated voluntarism" of zakat aids our understanding of Lucknow Muslims' efforts to build social solidarity and public ethics from notions of Islamic welfare. As voluntarism similar to other public engagements, service work, philanthropy, or humanitarianism, zakat giving and distribution can have an inherent civil-political dimension.

Gifts always have a dual nature, as Marcel Mauss observed; gift-giving is both self-interested and selfless. Certain dualities of zakat that I discussed are familiar to us, but also raise very different questions than arise in other philanthropy traditions: the duality inherent in the "paradox of obligated voluntarism" and the two modes of the purity ethos and the developmentalist ethos. I present this theory of zakat as a provocation to western categories of philanthropy, charity, humanitarianism. This is a model built up from ethnography in India, so it represents local practices primarily. But I find it useful more as a theory built *from* zakat, using ethnography on almsgiving in order to unsettle our western categories of service and giving, especially those based on assumptions of secular humanitarianism that ignore its religious genealogies, for example in "Christianity's missionary project" (Asad 2003: 62; Barnett & Stein 2012). Rather than claiming to abstract what zakat is generally speaking, I offer this as a model for re-examining our assumptions, as a model of zakat that introduces these Indian practices and Islamic notions as a critique for all of us working on "humanitarianism." This new theorization helps us understand that – in this case – a ritual obligation can bring citizens *into* the public sphere as voluntarism does,

while coloring their public behavior with spiritual discourses previously left private. This entrance into the public sphere has serious economic and political implications.

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Saudi Arabia, Humanitarian Aid and Knowledge Production: What do we really know?

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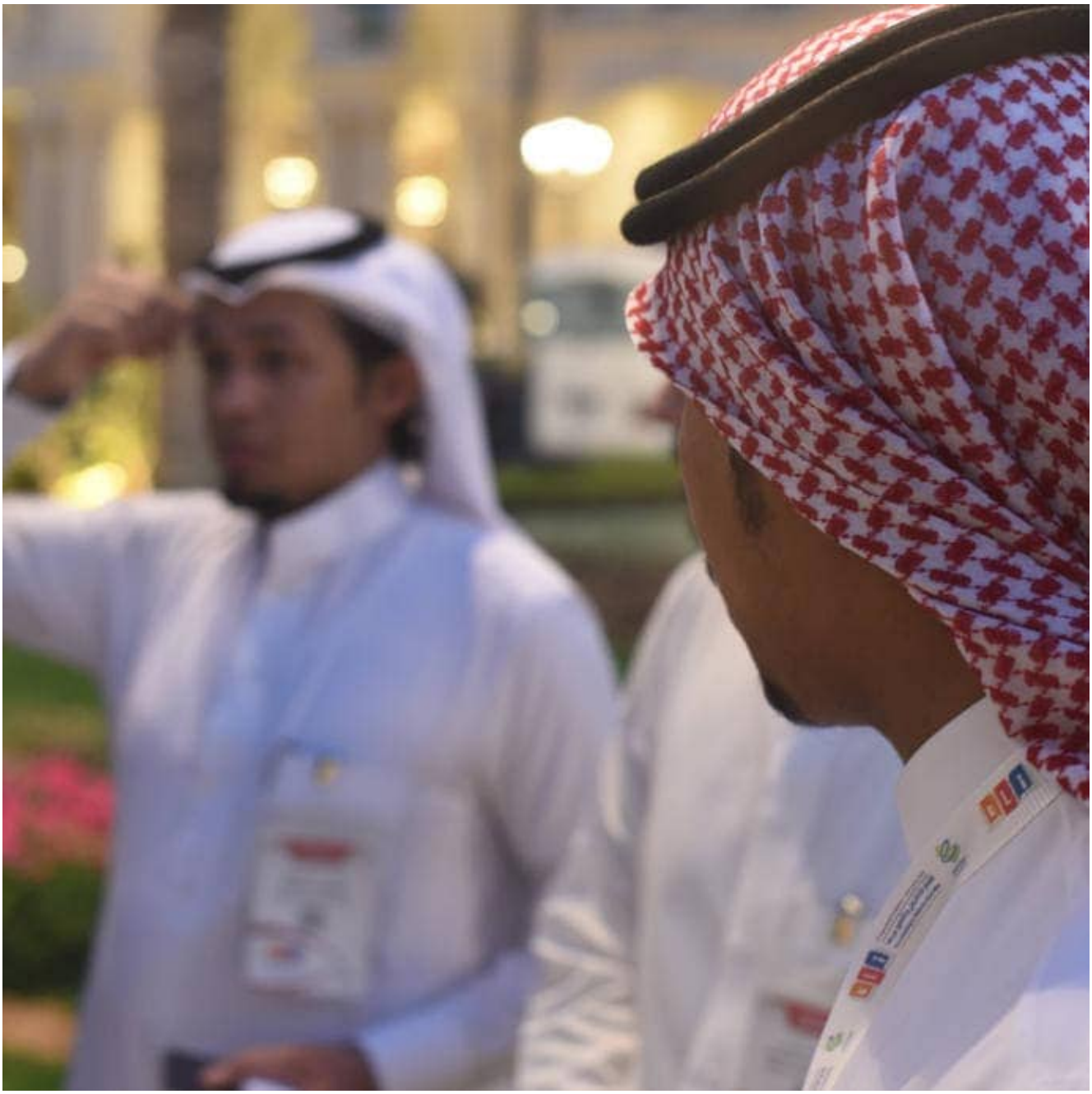

Saudi Arabia has one of the largest humanitarian aid budgets in the world. It counts as an ‘emerging’ donor of substantial influence in one of the world’s most sever regions of crisis. At the same time, Saudi humanitarianism is commonly associated with religious indoctrination and the spread of an intolerant and misogynist version of Islam. The demonization of Saudi humanitarianism builds on an essentializing portrayal of a Saudi “Other” whose quest for cultural and political hegemony poses a threat. Few countries in the world continue to evoke

associations of an exotic Other to the same extent as Saudi Arabia. Despite its place in the midst of globalization, deeply embedded in global economic, cultural and human flows, this modern state continues to be pictured as a "veiled kingdom", associated with the desert, the bedouin, and women hidden from the gaze of "The West".

Through the juxtaposition of the literature on Saudi overseas aid with local aid approaches in Saudi Arabia, I suggest that we should reconsider our understanding of Saudi humanitarianism. Rather than picturing Saudi humanitarian aid abroad as a comprehensive enterprise, driven by a monolithic state, I argue that Saudi humanitarianism is a contested field in which numerous actors compete and produce rather diverse results on the ground. For various methodological reasons, research on Saudi humanitarianism tends to focus either on overseas aid or on domestic aid practices, thus replicating an artificial demarcation which the Saudi state enforced in the wake of 9/11 and accusations that charitable funds support Islamist terrorists around the world. Yet, the concept of humanitarianism and the history of its associations in Saudi Arabia has been an organic one that does not easily follow clear divisions into a domestic and an overseas model.

What constitutes humanitarianism in the Saudi context?

In the Saudi context – as in the wider Arab and Islamic world (Moussa 2014, Benthall 2003) – humanitarianism includes at least three phenomena, which socio-cultural and political traditions of the Global North tend to picture as separate fields of engagement: emergency aid and relief, development assistance and charity. My research on charity in Saudi Arabia documents the diversity of local approaches that range from traditional almsgiving and food banks to sophisticated training programs, medical facilities and rehabilitation centers (Derbal 2014). Organizations like King Khaled Foundation in Riyadh and Majid

Bin Abd al-Aziz Foundation in Jeddah aim to change the country's contemporary philanthropic landscape, dismissing traditional notions of giving for their perceived lack of impact and efficiency, in favor of "sustainable development", "capacity building" and "empowerment" (Matic & Al-Faisal 2012). Social entrepreneurship models have spread to Saudi Arabia through global initiatives like the highly popular Ashoka fellowship and INJAZ, which promote volunteerism and best practice solutions.

> *Rather than assuming a universal definition of humanitarianism, we should trace when and under which conditions these diverse activities have come to be represented in the language of humanitarianism.*

I would argue that these shifts in representation point to important moments and shifts in (domestic) power constellations and (global) politics. The study of charitable practices in Saudi Arabia highlights the global place of the kingdom. It points to the receptiveness of Saudi society to global discourses and to the people from around the globe, who contribute to Saudi charity as consultants, invited speakers, role models, workers and volunteers. We can assume that the same is true for Saudi overseas aid, which is most often implemented in areas of crisis by non-Saudis, local partners and mediating organizations, whose agency in the everyday humanitarian encounter tends to be largely overlooked in the literature on Saudi overseas aid.

A multitude of actors rather than "the Saudis"

For decades, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has presented itself as a generous donor of international aid, headed by a unanimous royal family. The wish to produce (and control) one equally unanimous, comprehensive and coordinated vision of aid is reflected in the establishment of the King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid (KSRelief), the central coordinating authority for overseas aid from Saudi Arabia established in 2015. Yet in reality, Saudi humanitarianism

is offered and coordinated through a multitude of actors (El Taraboulsi 2017). Efforts include bilateral and multilateral aid through regional and international bodies, public campaigns, foundations by individual royals, and other private donors. The line between public and private, state and individual engagement is frequently blurred.

Although the royal family often manages to prevent internal dissent to leak to the public, fractions among members of the Al Saʿud persist and disagreement among top royals occasionally becomes visible. Rumors suggest that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman seized power in July 2017 in a palace coup, ousting his cousin Mohammad bin Nayef, until then dedicated heir to the throne and Minister of Interior. An extraordinary public power play occurred in November 2017, when King Salman decreed the arrest of eleven senior princes, four ministers and dozens of other government officials, who became prisoners at the five-star Ritz Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. One of the hotel prisoners was the billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who is one of the most visible Saudi humanitarian actors and founder of Alwaleed Philanthropies. Prince Alwaleed's father, Talal bin Abd al-Aziz, was the president of the Arab Gulf Program for Development (Ag-Fund). His "Free Princes" movement was one of the strongest proponents of a constitutional monarchy in the history of Saudi Arabia. In short, rather than assuming that Saudi humanitarianism reflects one national vision, we can imagine that competing royals translate their differences onto the humanitarian field.

Moving beyond the Saudi "Other" and religious extremism

When does building a school serve capacity building and empowerment and when does it serve indoctrination? Building schools, wells and mosques count among the most publicized achievements of Saud humanitarianism. The mosque serves many communities in need as an important meeting space that offers hope in times of hardship but also fosters networks of self-help (Benthall 2012). Wells

satisfy essential human needs but might also be interpreted to allow for ablution before Islamic prayer. Only a close look at a school's curricula, teaching practices and personnel, as well as the wider activities that take place at the particular site allow to assess the impact on its pupils.

> *The study of charitable practices in Saudi Arabia highlights flexibility in interpretation and the adaptability of religious doctrine in contrast to ideals proclaimed in the self-presentations of donors and agencies.*

My own research shows how religious regulations stipulated, for instance, in the Quran regarding the legitimate beneficiaries of alms (Quran 9:60) have been reinterpreted by religious authorities in Saudi Arabia through religious edicts (fatwas) that allow organizations to spend zakat on medical services for rural communities. Yet, so far very little empirically-driven research has turned to the actual situation on the ground.

Gaining trust and access to sites of humanitarian practice is often challenging, yet imperative to understand the diversity and complexity of the humanitarian field. In the course of my research on domestic charitable practice in Saudi Arabia I encountered a broad range of different visions of community engagement, gathered under the umbrella of charity. Humanitarianism has offered a niche for my interlocutors in Jeddah and Riyadh, who sought to make a positive change. However, what constitutes "positive change" is a highly contested topic in today's Saudi Arabia.

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