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"Sociality and Transformations of the Gift: Voluntary Work with Refugees at the Turn of the Century"

Introduction

During volunteer training seminars, volunteers are often taken aback when they hear that they must not offer nor receive any kind of gift during voluntary work.

"Not even a drawing from a child", as one of the specialists, a social worker, stresses. "And not even during holidays, like Christmas," she adds only to produce greater reactions from the audience. The middle class, middle-aged women undergoing training to become Red Cross volunteers find her comments shocking. How can gift giving be wrong? Especially during holidays, a time of customary gift exchange and the material expression of 'love?' And how can gift giving or receiving from children be considered problematic? Don't kids symbolize 'pure humanity?' Aren't they a particular species subjected to different gift exchange rules? Of course children may be 'spoilt' if given too many presents and they may even get used to 'demanding' but it's hard to picture them as consciously taking advantage of people's generosity or of becoming 'manipulative' – a danger associated with material offers to beneficiaries.

Volunteers, still under shock, try to trace ruptures in the gift taboo. Are there any exceptions to these rules? When could they offer something 'personal,' something 'new' to the people they come to serve? They refer to an 'impulse to offer' which, apparently, needs to be suppressed. Volunteers can only make offers as representatives of the organization, they are informed, and never individually.

At the end of their training seminars volunteers-to-be are asked to comment on the following statements:

1. The beneficiary offers you a symbolic gift –ex. flowers, hand-made gifts. You only accept it if it doesn't cost a lot.

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2. The beneficiary asks you to provide him/her with material goods –ex. clothes, bus tickets, glasses etc. You do your best to find them for him/her, through your friends and acquaintances.

3. The volunteer may, in special occasions, offer money.

4. The volunteer may give his/her phone number to a beneficiary.

These statements define different ways of relatedness which may be compatible or incompatible to the contemporary orthodoxy of volunteering. All of them are false, according to the rules of volunteering; that is, according to the rules that define relationships between the volunteer and the beneficiary. No gift is accepted. No individual offer is made. Gifts in the form of money, hand-made presents, low-cost gifts and objects are forbidden. The word 'gift' itself is actually seldom mentioned. Contrary to 'gifts' what volunteers 'offer' –and 'offer' is a dominant notion– is something intangible, non-measurable and natural. They give a bit of themselves; an undefined and corporeal substance. An emotion: 'love,' which however needs to be transformed to 'service' through educational procedures and expert supervision. Various seminars aim to initiate volunteers to the correct modes of sociality with the beneficiaries. It is the social worker, as an expert, who mediates in the relationship between the volunteer and the beneficiary. Volunteers often ask for his/her advice when troubled or uncertain about how to behave or relate with them.

Today I will explore what I will call 'the gift taboo,' that is the prohibition of giving and receiving in the relationships between volunteers and the people they address –in my case, refugees. One aspect of this gift taboo is the contrast between 'charity' and 'volunteering' that I often came across during my research on voluntary associations assisting refugees in Greece. This project focuses on the early 2000s, a period –as we shall see- of increasing discourses on volunteering. I thus study this interest in newspapers, workshops, conferences, laws, material from volunteer training seminars etc. My research focuses on two organizations and their volunteers; in particular I investigate how volunteers working with refugees conceptualize their practices and their relationships with the people they 'approach' or 'assist' or 'serve' (all these are the concepts they use). The two associations under study have great differences in terms of ideology, organizational

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characteristics, and the profile of the people who participate. However in both cases the gift taboo and the distinction between charity and volunteering is central – at least in the official discourses of the associations. Volunteers in both associations are trained and informed on the prohibition of giving. However the terms under which this gift taboo is formed, differ significantly. The post-interpretations –of the gift, of sociality with the refugees– that volunteers themselves make are inscribed in alternative visions of society.

In my paper I will not delve into more details on the specific case-studies, but I will rather frame the broader parameters of the gift taboo. Focusing on the relationships between volunteers and refugees, I suggest that volunteering, more than an 'offer' of material goods or services, is conceived as the gift of sociality. Contemporary volunteering emphasizes relatedness and its transformative prospect both for the volunteer and the refugee involved.

I do not argue that this is a novelty. However this emphasis on relationships and its combination with the gift taboo further reinforces the content that sociality acquires. What does this mean for the formation of sociality? What kinds of subjects are produced through this transformative process? And which are the dangers of the gift?

The volunteer as a modern European citizen

In the beginning of the 21st century Athens was a city undergoing rapid changes. More than ever the country officially claimed its participation to 'modernized' European states and European integration was an essential part of the political agenda. This was an era of economic growth; a prosperous period for the middle classes; a time when Greece was preparing to welcome the Olympic Games "back home"; when the new currency, the euro, was introduced to the market; an era of neoliberalization reforms in public administration, education, health and social welfare; finally, a period when modernization and Europeanization were keywords in the central political arena. Volunteering was then promoted as an ideal of civil participation and disinterestedness that required enhancement. It is precisely in this historical and political context that 'volunteering' and 'civil society' became key symbols encapsulating various civilizing visions of Greek society.

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Anthropologists studying the construction of volunteering have related it to the neoliberalization of social care and the formation of a new 'responsible citizen' in different contexts: from the USA, to Italy, Chile, Japan and China. Studies draw upon Michel Foucault and bring to the fore –correctly, in my opinion– the formation of the volunteer as a new moral citizen, a responsible subject oriented toward the common good. Contrary to dominant approaches of neoliberalism as antithetical to the principle of morality, ethnographies speak of moral authoritarianism at the core of neoliberal reform. Zones that stand outside of the logic of market exchange and individual self-interest and areas of social interaction which are grounded on disinterestedness and giving are not only compatible, but essential in the formation of this neoliberal subject. Others even refer to a new "volunteer subjectivity" that establishes a novel relationship between the state and the citizen.

During the same period, states in diverse places of the world established distinct legal frameworks that aimed to regularize volunteering and voluntary associations. These regulations reflect the growing official interest on volunteering, its enhancement and the moral connotations of its construction. Greek policies followed this pattern but were fragmentary and remained incomplete.

Obviously, volunteering in Greece was not a completely new phenomenon as a rich body of historical works illustrates. However, at the period examined, it acquired a systematic and generalized character, as well as new political significance. Volunteering –or, rather, its underdevelopment– became an 'issue' and the 'volunteer' a political subjectivity that symbolized Greek modernity. Voluntary associations –either created at the time or supported by subsidies from the Greek state and the EU or pre-existing this 'discovery' of volunteering–, their promotion and normalization, became the object of policies. Such forms of public sociality were laboratories where the moral production of the citizen took place. The institutionalization and professionalization of volunteering entailed the crafting of the volunteer as the new European and Greek citizen. The volunteer emerged as the epitome of the modern citizen, a disinterested subject working for the common good.

There were suddenly multiple initiatives: volunteering expos; workshops; media coverage of voluntary groups and their activities etc. Besides its institutionalization,

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volunteering was defined by its growing professionalization and its production in terms of 'service.' Pedagogical procedures, specialists and scholars attempting to evaluate its growth, state and EU policies, subsidiary flaws, legal and bureaucratic frameworks etc. form a complex web of interrelated processes and agents. Volunteering is governed by rules and conventions embedded in clerical jobs; it entails the supervision of experts; it includes educational processes and degrees of specialization. The methods and principles of volunteering were systematized and depicted in 'volunteer training seminars' run by voluntary associations and state agents.

Historiography has delved into the study of charitable activities of 18th, 19th and 20th century, and how they aimed at transforming the poor according to dominant (at the time) social models (of childhood, domestic life etc.). At the era of prosperity, when this paper is situated, immigrants and refugees were more and more the subjects of voluntary work. Living at the margins of Greek society, facing severe obstacles in terms of institutional and legal visibility (most remained undocumented), they were the 'recipients' of the voluntary work of the middle classes. Greece was then increasingly becoming the threshold to Europe for people from the Middle East and Africa. Although xenophobia and racism occupied public discussions, organized physical violence towards immigrants and refugees was still limited. Since the end of the 20th century, several formal and informal groups were formulated with direct (if not exclusive) aim to *support* these populations.

Volunteering and charity: the gift taboo

In mid-19th century Greece, people who participated in emergent forms of social intervention towards the poor, called their practice 'charity.' In the beginning of the 21st century charity was a politically dangerous and, frequently, a discredited concept. How can we analytically conceptualize activities that we tend to analyze in terms of charity, when the people involved decide to name them in another way? How and why has 'social solidarity' emerged as an alternative of generous offer and –mostly as I argue today- relatedness? How important is it to historicize both notions? And how easy is it to relieve ourselves from their normative status and political appeal? A way out of this labyrinth is to explore how their meaning changes in time and what kinds of relationships they depict. What are the visions of society entailed in these concepts?

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The transition from charity to humanitarian aid; or from charity to social solidarity; or the new orthodoxy in development and the differentiation between development and charity, echo questions related to the symbolic character of the gift. NGOs internationally struggle to distinguish what they do to charity and to the power relationships that by definition it generates. In the middle of the 1970s, NGOs start emphasizing 'empowerment' and 'participation' vs the offer of material goods. This signals the transformation of the gift offered. Emphasis is transferred from material offers to the 'empowerment' of local communities through 'advice' and 'information.' The key slogan is 'help the poor help themselves' and the final gift offered is the gift of self-reliance. However, although the gift is no longer material, this does not mean that it is not a gift. Though under a new name, it is an offer in a new form.

According to a rich body of historiography on charity in 19th century Greece, charitable practices transformed the recipients of aid, the poor, according to the dominant model of domesticity and prevailing ideas about childhood. At the same time, charitable subjects were also transformed. Particularly benevolent women who were –by then– confined in the domestic space, had the chance to become active subjects in the public sphere.

21st century volunteering had also a dual aim: the production of the volunteer as an active citizen of a modernized and Europeanized society, and the production of the beneficiary as an active subject integrated to society. According to the principles of a regulated sociality, volunteering is transformed into 'service' and the recipient into the 'beneficiary.' The keywords of this relationship are 'support,' 'empowerment,' 'mobilization' and 'consulting.' These notions are grounded on the equality of the two parts in the relationship – the volunteer and the person 'served.' At the same time, they are contrasted to relationships of patronage and dependence that are considered typical in charity. Emphasis is given on enhancing self-reliance, self-care, and thus on producing active agents of their own will, as if the subjects of support are devoid of these qualities.

Sociality in the setting of volunteering has thus a potent transformative element. The gift seems to pose a threat to these plans. Personalized exchange is accused of creating forms of relationships that are incompatible to the institutionalized and professionalized version of volunteering.

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The gift taboo follows a culturally defined classification: material offers are considered the most inappropriate and money is definitely the most polluted. Money, belonging in the sphere of market exchange and interest cannot enter areas of sociality that, by definition, stand beyond that. Whereas charity in its archetypical form tries to reach the ideal of the 'free gift' as much as possible (that is, the gift that is offered without any expectation of a counter-gift), contemporary volunteering denounces any connection with the gift –particularly individual gift and material offer. What is offered is time, an immaterial and abstract thing. However, what is offered is more than time, it is the time that the volunteer spends with various beneficiaries –refugees, orphans, ill and old people– and the company he/she makes to them. In fact, what is offered is the relationship itself. The moral superiority of immaterial offer and of the gift of sociality is contrasted to one-way offers of material goods, even of services. In organized and professional charity, time was also a key part of the offer. However, rather than the time one spends in activities that will benefit the other (as in charity), what is now stressed is the time spent *with* the other.

Gifts are potentially dangerous, because they draw the vicious circle of reciprocity: an unreciprocated gift is –by definition– thought to generate inequality and place the giver in a hierarchically higher position. The receiver, unable to reciprocate is trapped in an inferior position. According to contemporary volunteering, one-way offers create relationships of 'dependence' and impede the autonomy of the people 'served.'

The gift taboo thus resonates a particular reading of one-way offers and of the inequalities that stem from it. Breaking the gift taboo is related to another interpretation of the gift: the key role that the gift plays in relationship-formation. Objects coming from an impersonal field, such as the market, are transformed and come to express the identity of the self; they are personified. Thus the gift is closely related to sociality and the personal character of interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, the free gift 'makes no friends' (here I am referring to an anthropological article that explores non-reciprocated gift and revisits the relevant anthropological discussion with particular reference to India); the free gift does not lead to the formation of social relationships. It is the obligation to return the gift and the prospect of reciprocity that leads to relationship formation.

This last comment is only a door to the violation of the gift taboo that I also noticed during my research. This however is a different story: the persistence of the gift and the

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impulse to give and receive in sociality; the subversion of regularized sociality that contemporary volunteering embraces; the point of view of the volunteers themselves; and of their 'beneficiaries.'