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## The temporality of humanitarianism: Provincializing everyday volunteer practices at European borders

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### Abstract

While recognizing that ‘volunteering for refugees’ is entangled in ethical and political power dimensions, this article will discuss how we can ethnographically explore the everyday humanitarian practices of volunteers as shaped in intrinsic ways by their mode of being in the world as ethically concerned human beings. Building on recent scholarship within the anthropology of humanitarianism in which local and everyday versions of humanitarian practice are foregrounded, we wish to further the understanding of everyday volunteer practices through establishing a lens of temporality. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews among small-scale volunteer networks and NGOs in Greece and in Northern Europe working in response to the refugee influx to Europe since 2015, we suggest three different modalities of volunteering among non-professionals, which we designate: *temporality of crisis*, which concentrates on the impulse to help as an immediate response to a critical moment in time, *temporality of care* expressing the asymmetrical presences in the field of volunteering and *temporality of reflexivity*, which highlights ambivalence and doubt as intrinsic to the volunteer practices. In this article, we aim for a provincializing of everyday humanitarian practices and explore humanitarianism ‘from the ground’ and in specific locations and times.

**Keywords:** provincializing humanitarianism, temporality, anthropology of humanitarianism, doing good, informal refugee relief, summer of welcome 2015, volunteering, European borders

## 1 Introduction

When refugees and migrants arrive in Europe, they meet not only border police interrogating them, medical personnel testing them, and asylum caseworkers interviewing them. They also meet a plethora of international and national NGOs, run by employers or volunteers, set up to assist with a range of tasks, such as conducting free legal help, providing clothes and food, and offering language courses. During 2015, a hitherto unseen level of civil society engagement and solidarity initiatives unfolded (Witkowski et al., 2019; UN,

2015). Some of these NGOs have existed for a long time, while others were set up rather spontaneously, partly as a response to the increase in migrants in need of basic commodities and assistance. The range of humanitarian organizations and volunteer networks for refugee relief in Europe today provides a different spectrum of responses than the otherwise inhospitable policies from European Nation States toward refugees and migrants.

Scholars have pointed to the fact that humanitarianism and doing good implicate a range of historically constituted, and less visible hierarchies and power relations between the helper/volunteer and the helped (Fassin, 2005; Dunn, 2017). Being able to provide help is a privileged position, which often victimizes the ones in need (Ticktin, 2016). This entanglement between doing good and power creates at one and the same time the figure of the benevolent benefactor and the suffering beneficiary. Scholars within the field of anthropology of humanitarianism have critically examined the imbalanced power dimensions inherent in humanitarian acts (Ticktin, 2015); humanitarian practice has been studied as a form of governance and critiqued for its lack of fighting societal inequalities (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2015; 2016). We commend such critiques of humanitarian logic and its practices. Simultaneously, increased scholarship has turned toward a deeper ethnographic approach exploring in depth the different ethical, emotional and moral sentiments involved in humanitarian practices (Itzhak, 2020; Scherz, 2014; Weiss, 2015; Mittermaier, 2014). This article resonates with the call for more empirical and theoretical exploration of the growing phenomenon of grassroots humanitarian activities (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019) and their everyday practices. Our concern is how humanitarianism unfolds in practice, empirically, ‘on the ground with all the human ambivalences and contradictions this entails’ (Weiss, 2015, p. 281). Notably, we seek to contribute to a growing interdisciplinary literature on grassroots’ forms of humanitarianism and the effort to decenter (Brkovic, 2017; McGee & Pelham, 2018) and provincialize humanitarianism (Weiss, 2015) by including *temporality* into the quotation. Recognizing that the ‘meaning of “politics of humanitarianism” cannot be determined a priori’ (Weiss, 2015, p. 289), we ethnographically investigate ‘grassroots’ forms of humanitarianism *in situ*, and importantly, we explore the temporal effects of humanitarianism from the perspectives of the volunteers. Increasingly, scholars have attended to the temporal dimension, rather than the spatial one, to understand migration as a phenomenon interwoven with other social processes, such as globalization, neoliberal politics, and de-colonization (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths et al., 2013; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Ramsay, 2020; Bandak & Janeja, 2018; Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018). Here we introduce the perspective of temporality as an analytical approach to explore humanitarianism as dynamic, shifting, and relational with ongoing sociopolitical processes as well as with the self-defining experiences of being a volunteer that takes place over time. Foregrounding temporality as an analytical lens can provide critical new knowledge about the socio-cultural dynamics of humanitarianism. Temporality is inherent in humanitarianism in that while ‘humanitarianism has morphed in the last decade, it is nevertheless still distinguished [...] by its particular focus on crisis and emergency. Humanitarianism has no long-term plan to address inequality’ (Ticktin, 2015, p. 82). Instead, care is provided in a temporal presence (Ticktin, 2015). The analytical perspective of temporality is relevant here in at least two ways; first, it refers to temporal phases through which grassroots actors undergo in their position as humanitarians (before, during and after volunteering), and second, it alerts to that the temporal aspect of the socio-political context of the situ-

ation to which the humanitarian acts are a response is not static, but change over time, for example as a 'crisis' becomes less critical or move elsewhere, due to changing policies and political responses. The approach of temporality in the study of humanitarianism, we believe, casts critical light on the need for the continued decentering and provincializing humanitarianism and their expressions. Based on interviews and fieldwork conducted in Greece and Northern Europe (Germany and Sweden) 2018–2019, our ethnographic focus is on the afterthoughts and reflections of grassroots volunteers for smaller organizations and informal networks that were established as a response to the increased number of migrants arriving in Europe in 2015.

To analyze the temporal phases and the changing sociopolitical contexts of volunteering, we present three modalities of humanitarianism (cf. Dunn, 2017) based on a joint analysis of our fieldwork material; modalities which take form over time and sometimes co-exist. In the first modality, temporality of crisis: The impulse to help, humanitarianism presents itself as a *politics of commitment*. It bears resemblance to the impulse of philanthropy; 'the selfless giving away of wealth that arouses strong emotions and brings people to tears [and which] contrasts formalized practices of regulated and legislated giving' (Bornstein, 2009, p. 630). This modality conveys the process through which volunteers are driven by an urgency to act out of compassion which generate a commitment we can consider as political, as well as a transformation of 'distance suffering' for the volunteers. The second modality, temporality of care: Asymmetrical presences in the field, express that humanitarianism in the field in practice presents itself as an asymmetric relation between humans situated in different socio-economic, temporal, and legal positions. The third modality, temporality of reflexivity: Ambivalence and doubt, takes place as an afterthought and is a modality unfolding when the volunteers are no longer directly engaged with voluntary work. Here, humanitarianism is situated within an ambivalence where volunteers move reflexively between a doubt and hope of what their contribution have entailed.

Firstly, we will shortly review some of the existing critique of humanitarianism before we discuss our methods. We then discuss a selection of empirical cases, based on fieldwork conducted among volunteers in Lesbos and in the Northern European borderlands (Germany and Sweden), exploring the practices of volunteers through the lens of temporality.

## 2 The politics of humanitarianism

As depicted by Feldman, humanitarianism can be 'several things at once': an arena of legal regulation, a discursive field where images of suffering prevail, and a form of practice (Feldman, 2012, p. 156). While humanitarianism is generally presented as 'doing good,' researchers (e.g. Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2006; 2014; Malkki, 2015; Feldman, 2012) have described how the moral project of NGOs humanitarianism frequently is unwittingly co-opted or come to collaborate with the same power structures that NGOs are set out to critique, circumvent or present a remedy against. Humanitarianism includes a set of relations with deep-seated inequality of power and capacity between the giver and the receiver (Barnett, 2011; Bornstein, 2009; Bornstein & Redfield, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Feldman, 2008; Redfield, 2013; Wilkinson, 2017; Barnett, 2016, p. 14). The idea of humanitarianism as a regime of care has been critiqued in-depth (e.g. Ticktin, 2014) and research has focused on the ambiguities and limitations of humanitarianism at different scales, including that

humanitarianism is part of governmentality and security policy at the EU and nation-state level (Agier, 2010). Much of this work has looked at the historical conditions (i.e. imperialism and the imagination of a global community) and wider structures which make humanitarianism, as an alleviation of the suffering of Others, possible, and the ways in which humanitarian actors facilitate or obstruct the continuation of these structures.

Scholars have called attention to how humanitarian practices are shaped by the spectacle of the event (Boltanski, 1999), the inevitable hierarchy of lives within the humanitarian terrain (Feldman & Ticktin, 2010, p. 15), and the dual nature of 'the ideal of universality' and 'the practice of difference' at the heart of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2012). The latter discussion maintains that the universality of humanity brings along a concern with preserving lives and relieving suffering while the enactment of humanitarian principles simultaneously reproduces exclusive categories of lives (Redfield, 2013; Weizman, 2011), a process Pallister-Wilkins (2017) has called 'humanitarian borderwork'. The practice of categorization ('refugee' or 'migrant') brings along differential access to humanitarian relief and a differential politics (i.e. Feldman, 2012; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). Humanitarianism is not a value-neutral field: it is a practice 'based on the relations and hierarchies of power utilized for the governance of populations' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, p. 59). The manifestations of humanitarianism are wide-ranging: it carries a vast number of different meanings and ideological assumptions (Wilkinson, 2017). These scholars have demonstrated the hegemonic status of humanitarian politics, its culturally laden ethics, and its depoliticizing forms of humanitarian operation and governance. Yet, we agree with Weiss (2015, p. 277) in her dissatisfaction with how 'some of these accounts present the political and ethical effects of humanitarian governance as outcomes of an inherent structural problem of humanitarian logic, suggesting that certain political manifestations (the maltreatment of refugees, militarized interventions, arbitrary and unjust distinction between worthy and unworthy victims, and the creation of "states of exception") are the inevitable outcome of this ethical tradition.' As she argues, the form of critique is more philosophical than anthropological, and similar to her experience (Weiss, 2015), it does not settle well with our fieldwork experience. Weiss (2015) calls thus for 'the provincializing of empathy and humanitarianism,' building on Chakrabarty's move to provincializing Europe (2007), the anthropology of ethics (Lambek, 2010) and of the good (Robbins, 2013). Such a strategy of provincializing empathy insists on an empirically driven study of humanitarianism. Weiss (2015, p. 277) calls for a simultaneous challenge of the humanitarian hegemony and universalizing claims on the one hand and maintaining on the other the 'potency of this framework for those who have been socialized into this ethical tradition.' In this article we build on her and other scholars' effort to provincialize humanitarianism through ethnographic approaches, and the call for understanding how humanitarianism operates 'to incite social consciousness and with its potential to serve as an encouragement to care for people in social terms' (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 65).

Much research on humanitarianism is based on studies of humanitarianism linked to intergovernmental organizations (Wilkinson, 2017), although research has also focused on local based aid organizations. These local kinds of humanitarianism have been designated in various ways. For instance, the notions 'solidarity humanitarianism' or 'volunteer humanitarianism' (Sandri, 2018) describe an informal body of volunteers providing humanitarian aid—an alternative to the 'humanitarian machine' as offered by larger in-

stitutional established aid organizations. Fechter and Schwittay (2019, p. 1770) speak of ‘citizen aid’ as defining ‘a diverse and shifting set of mutual support practices funded by private, as opposed to public, means,’ while others operate with the concept ‘vernacular humanitarianisms’ referring to ‘local, grassroots forms of helping others that are less visible and less dominant than the international ones’ (Brkovic, 2017, p. 6). Richey (2018, p. 626) suggests the notion of ‘everyday humanitarianism’ to capture the multi-faceted versions of humanitarianisms flourishing in an increasingly marketized and mediatized context of ‘do-gooding’ from celebrity interventions to corporations performing ethical and social responsibility. Everyday humanitarianism thus refers to ‘an expanded series of practices of the everyday lives of citizens that purport to make a difference outside the traditional boundaries of humanitarian activity’ (ibid., p. 627).

In this article we discuss humanitarianism as pursued by volunteers in grassroots organizations and networks founded during or shortly ahead of the summer of 2015 in response to the refugee influx to Europe. They engaged in activities that were humanitarian: providing food, clothes, advice, and language classes and youth and children’s entertainment in an effort to cater for present, urgent needs. These were not supervised or funded by international aid organizations or governments but were based on unpaid volunteers and financed by public donations. Taking the calls for ethnographic explorations of small-scale humanitarianisms, in plural, situated and local versions, we further the scholarship of de-centering humanitarianism by focusing on the temporal effects of its different but related modalities.

### 3 An ethnographic approach to humanitarianism

The article is based on different fieldworks; the first took part of an interdisciplinary research network, *The Helping Hands Research Network on the Everyday Border Work of European Citizens*, in which both authors contributed. The second fieldwork formed part of a collective research project on *Diginauts: Migrants’ digital practices in/of the European border regime* co-led by Sandberg, and the third was an individual fieldwork conducted by Bendixsen on volunteers in the organization A Drop in the Ocean at Lesbos.

*The Helping Hands Research Network* explored different ways of doing informal volunteer work supporting refugees coming to Europe, with special emphasis on arrivals to Northern European countries in 2015.<sup>1</sup> The field workshops were conducted in a selection of Northern European countries and pursued a combination of methodological strategies, including group based in-depth interviews, walking tours, group discussions and museum visits and provided an innovative space for knowledge-sharing, in which network members were gatekeepers of their ongoing field sites (Sandberg, 2020; Sandberg & Andersen, 2020a; 2020b). Between May 2017 and October 2018, the research network visited more than 20 initiatives for refugee support in five European cities, Copenhagen, Nijmegen, Glasgow, Hamburg, and Flensburg. To support these insights, we include fieldwork material from the Diginauts project that focused on informal refugee reception in the bor-

<sup>1</sup> *The Helping Hands Research Network on the Everyday Border Work of European Citizens* gathered 12 researchers (ethnologists, anthropologists, human geographers, borders and migration scholars, and political scientists), from six different countries, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland. It was funded by the Danish Research Council for Independent Research 2017–2019 (DFF/6107-00111).

derlands of Northern Europe. Field research was conducted among solidarity workers in Flensburg and Malmö, in 2018 and 2019 to explore the role of volunteer solidarity workers assisting refugees on their journeys to Europe (Mollerup & Sandberg, forthcoming). In-depth, retrospective interviews were held with in total 14 solidarity workers whom we asked to reflect back on their work to help irregularized migrants.<sup>2</sup>

Bendixsen's individual fieldwork was conducted with volunteers in the organization A Drop in the Ocean at Lesbos, summer 2018. A Drop in the Ocean is a nongovernmental organization that is not faith based and attracts volunteers from all over the global north, including Norway, USA, Canada, NZ, Australia, UK, and Germany, to different locations in Greece. At Lesbos, volunteers with Drop in the Ocean participated in activities like Boat spotting, Open Café, English classes, and Mini Drops (a place for women and children). Depending on the season around 4 to 15 volunteers worked with A Drop in the Ocean. For three weeks, Bendixsen participated in the voluntary work of A Drop in the Ocean as a fieldworker, joining in the voluntary activities and sitting in on their discussions and conversations.<sup>3</sup> She also conducted interviews with 15 volunteers in the organization toward the end of their period. These were 11 women and four men, with ages varying from 22 to 55 years. Some were students, or in between studies, and those in full time employment were a social worker, schoolteachers, a coordinator in TV production, and one was trained as a journalist. None had any experience in international humanitarian aid.

Exploring the multi-directional and different forms of volunteering with refugees within Europe, at Lesbos and in Northern Europe, enable us to avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Researching humanitarianism ongoing at the same time at different locations in Europe, makes it possible to cast light on that not only space matters in how humanitarianism unfolds, but also its temporal aspects. Providing a de-centered perspective, we simultaneously seek to avoid a nativist understanding, in the sense of spelling out a specific 'Nordic' or 'Greek' variant of humanitarianism. Instead, we stress the diverse responses to the refugee crisis across Europe, and across time, while recognizing their different local contexts or environments. The national governments had different strategies of migration management and different responses to the volunteers, aspects which we will only briefly address. Bringing our diverse yet relatable fieldworks together enables an in-depth understanding of the practices of everyday humanitarianism during and after the European (refugee) crisis 2015. Whereas the Northern European and Southern European contexts are very different, each set of research material constitutes central entrances into scrutinizing the European border regime, including the mechanisms and effects of the EU's migration management policies at a specific time that posed challenges for migrants, as well for as local, national, and supranational governments. Greece and the islands together with her fellow Southern European countries like Spain and Italy

<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork in the Öresund Region was conducted during autumn 2019 together with Nina Grønlykke Mollerup as part of the interdisciplinary research project: *DIGINAUTS: Migrants' Digital Practices in/of the European Border Regime* funded by the VELUX Foundations 2018–2020 (project ID: 00016995).

<sup>3</sup> Bendixsen informed all the volunteers that she was there as an anthropologist, and she also informed people she met regularly as a volunteer about her role as a researcher. All the volunteers agreed to be interviewed before leaving the island and she had several discussions with many of them during her fieldwork. She interviewed the initiator and head of the organization in Oslo. The coordinator of Drop in the Ocean had been informed in advance that she was an anthropologist doing fieldwork on what it meant to be volunteering in Drop in the Ocean.

had a much longer experience with arriving refugees across the Mediterranean than the Northern European countries, spanning back to the beginning of 2000. The governmental responses in Greece versus in the Northern European countries are very different. In Germany, for instance, volunteers were clearly mobilized by the overall approach of 'Wir schaffen das' ('we will make it') by German chancellor Angela Merkel, whereas volunteer initiatives in Sweden experienced a political shift toward a more restrictive approach to refugees and immigration (Frykman & Mäkela, 2019; Pries, 2019). Further, although there are also local volunteers in the Greek context (Cabot, 2013; Rozakou, 2016), the ethnographic case here deals with the phenomenon of international volunteers; a phenomenon which has critically been designated 'voluntourism' (Wearing & McGehee, 2012). Lesbos in particular attracted a high number of international volunteers from 2015 onwards (Rozakou, 2016). In the Northern European borderlands, the 2015 refugee arrivals constituted a short, intense time span lasting from the late summer/early autumn 2015 and until the installment of EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016 and the 'closure' of the 'Balkan corridor.' The rise in the volunteer phenomenon were here organized and sustained by local volunteers and local communities and not from people arriving from afar like in the Mediterranean context.

Rather than establishing a comparative design, we converse between our different field materials through the lens of temporality. Temporality also plays a factor in the methodological approach, in that we as ethnographers observed and communicated temporary enactments and perceptions shaped by 'our own movement in time with those with whom we work' (Han, 2011, p. 26). Ethnography thus takes form in time and as a relationship to time (Janeja & Bandak, 2018, p. 22, see also Fabian, 2004), not only through ethnographic waiting (for something to happen), but also because we enter and exit the field at particular temporalities. Our research field was characterized by ongoing events, life phases and changing circumstances, the character of which transformed over time, although as fieldworkers we only observed some temporal instances of the longer story. Additionally, our ethnographic research took place in a particular moment of the European border regime which keeps changing still. Our material covers a specific period, which more or less corresponds to the peak of volunteer activities, and after the compassion fatigue set in and the criminalization of search and rescue NGOs operating in the Mediterranean increased. This is the limitation of our approach, yet with the privilege of being able to converse with research participants also after the events, learning from their reflections in the aftermath when the spectacle has gone, enables also retrospective ethnography insights (see also Sandberg, 2020).

In the following, we will provide some illustrative fieldwork insights, presenting three differently constituted but related modalities of humanitarianism; the political modality, the social relation modality and the reflexivity modality. Together these modalities form part of our argument of highlighting the temporality of humanitarianism when approaching the study of volunteers' practices. These different modalities should simultaneously be understood as developed from within a specific socio-historical conditions and structures of power, such as postcolonialism (see Fassin, 2012).

#### 4 Temporality of crisis: The impulse to help

The extraordinary period, which was later dubbed the ‘long summer of welcome’ (Karakalyali & Kleist, 2015) incited a vast number of people to volunteer in the emergent reception of refugees arriving to Europe. Our interlocutors frequently emphasized that they had never pursued voluntary work or been engaged with refugees or migrants in the past. Facebook groups, such as ‘Refugees Welcome Flensburg’, ‘Refugee Welcome Malmö’ and ‘Information point for Lesbos Volunteers’ functioned as important social networks and information nodes.<sup>4</sup> Focus during the intense months of 2015 were less on inducing political change and rather on the question of everyday needs, providing nutrition, clothes, shelter, and children’s needs.

Among all our research participants it was a common way of reasoning that they had initiated their volunteering as a response to social media, television news, reportages on the radio, or friends who had reported about the ‘refugee crisis.’ For instance, almost all the volunteers participating in Bendixsen’s research had come to Lesbos because they had seen the situation in the refugee Moria camp on television or social media. Some had friends who had volunteered for refugees. Others talked about the shame they felt of how their nation state treated refugees and thus sought to act differently.

Our research participants’, both at Lesbos and in Northern Europe, direct and immediate response and engagement toward the refugee situation, must be seen in light of the mediatized images of migrants arriving in Europe. Frequent depictions of large caravans of refugees walking along European highways were part of the mediatization of ‘the refugee crisis overwhelming Europe.’ In particular, the picture of Alan Kurdi (born Alan Shurdi), a three-year-old Kurdish Syrian boy washed up, drowned, on the beach in Bodum Turkey in 2015, went viral and became a symbol of the violence inherent in the European border regime. Research has found that for young volunteers in Norway and the UK the image(s) established the crisis as something taking place in their environment, invigorating them to step in and offer instant aid (Prøitz, 2018). The image of Alan Kurdi made it possible to translate the complex refugee crisis into something comprehensive, conducive to incite affective resonance and direct public reaction (*ibid.*). Much research has suggested that in the representations of refugees, ‘compassion depends on visuals’ (Höijer, 2004, p. 520; Boltanski, 1999; Mortensen & Trenz, 2016). Social media dynamics of moral spectatorship remain in this sense grounded in a form of humanitarian politics that support demands for global justice and the establishment of a global order of responsibility beyond states.

Trough their decision to leave home and come to Lesbos for some weeks, the volunteers’ subject position shifted from being one of a passive receiver of information, or being a spectator of ‘the refugee crisis,’ to committing actively to change the situation of people in Moria camp. Again, with Boltanski, this can be considered as a politics of commitment: changing their position from being situated at home to being in the middle of the acts of volunteering. Volunteers at Lesbos were called upon toward a ‘horizon of action,’ some in front of their television set in their homes, others through social media, by images and stories of refugees. Television reportages from refugee camps in Europe had sensitized many of the volunteers who had in consequence felt called to compassion and to act. Their

<sup>4</sup> Fieldwork in Flensburg was conducted in 2018 in cooperation with Dorte J. Andersen and Line Steen Bygballe Jensen.

awareness of distance suffering at home, derived from different sources, had induced them to humanitarian practices. For them becoming committed to act and seeking the 'distant suffering Other' implied leaving their homes. The move from the television screen, and social media, to engage with people on the ground is what Boltanski calls 'the political moment par excellence' (Boltanski, 1999, p. 31), and indicates how the images through social media and television affected them sufficiently 'to become committed and take it up as their case' (ibid., p. 31). As Boltanski argues: 'when confronted with suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action. Commitment is commitment to action, the intention to act and orientation toward a horizon of action' (ibid., p. xv).

## 5 Temporality of care: Asymmetrical presences in the field

When the volunteers arrived at Lesbos in 2018, they reached a laboratory of organization of humanitarianism; before 2015 only a few NGOs existed at the island, and the reception of refugee boats was done by locals, a few international individuals and refugees working side by side. By 2018 almost 160 smaller and larger, national and international NGOs existed at the island. Already in the 2000s, application processes had been slow and the refugee status was rarely attributed in Greece (Cabot, 2013); by 2015 the magnitude of challenges in accommodating migrants and refugees was clear and engaged actors at various levels, including at the Greek state's and EU supranational level, with vast European intervention. The prime Minister stated in October 2015 that Lesbos should be announced the 'European capital of solidarity' (Rozakou, 2016), and some few months later the population of the island was altered not only by migrants and refugees, but international volunteers and aid workers, who arrived from mainland Greece and abroad to support them. Tourists in the Greek island started humanitarian activities during their vacation, such as distributing water and food (Rozakou, 2016). Autumn 2015 continued material donations to Lesbos was so great that collectivities asked publicly to halt the transfers in order for them to first sort and distribute the arrived pile (ibid.).

It is this phase of the 'refugee crisis' in which the volunteers Bendixsen interviewed, arrived at Lesbos: an island crowded by volunteers, now less acknowledged for its beaches than images of orange life vests, and at a moment where the local population appeared reluctant toward both refugees and volunteers due to a situation which seemed unending and without a hope for structural and economic change. The volunteers in Drop in an Ocean addressed assistance to migrants living in Moria Camp. Intended for 2500 people, more than 9000 people lived now cramped there and in the annexed area Olive Growth. The period in which Bendixsen pursued fieldwork, few boats arrived at the part of the island the volunteers were 'boat spotting,' making volunteers express regret that they would not welcome refugees arriving in the night on small dangerous boats. Instead, activities were to charter to already (long) arrived refugees and other migrants who were tired of waiting, living under terrible sanitary conditions and frequently expressed hopelessness. The socio-economic context in this case is crucial: the reception structures had been malfunctioning for a long time, people, both locals and migrants, were exhausted and had lost hope that reception facilities would improve. This temporal dimension of the refugee situation at Lesbos had an impact on the social relations that unfolded between the volunteers and the migrants and refugees they were there to 'help.' Some of the volunteers expressed a sense

of shame for the fact that they could, and would, leave the island, while the refugees were stuck. The different temporal dimension of the Moria population and the volunteers shaped their encounters; while the volunteers were on the island for a limited amount of time, the refugees did not know when their waiting would end, as their movements dependent upon Greek and EU authorities' decision making. Some opposed the organization's priorities, yet others expressed concern but considered their limited time on the island leaving them little option but to follow the instructions. Disconcert and uncomfortableness were thus part of how the volunteers operated in the field.

The volunteers focused on their social relationship with the refugees and their desire to create or sustain hope among the people living in a terrible situation. Part of what they were doing was also to make amendments for how the Greek and European authorities treated the refugees. As Catherine, one American volunteer in her 50ies, put it:

The work that we are doing—honestly, I just go right to human connection, treating them with dignity, and difference, and respect. All of the ways they have been treated, the journey here, where they come from, in the camp—trying to counter that a little bit. By giving, being open and respectful. Just that they are valued—because they come from places that have not valued them.

Contributing to keep up the faith that things would become better and providing hope was also part of their everyday voluntary work. As such, the volunteers were pursuing a commitment akin to Boltanski's notion of a *politics of the present* (Boltanski, 1999, p. 192), which was oriented 'toward present suffering and present victims.'

Similar to the situation at Lesbos at some moments, in the Northern European reception spots, typically at Central Stations or other major crossroads for the arriving refugees, the number of people seeking to volunteer, and assist was enormous, sometimes more than what could be organized by the ad-hoc volunteer networks or the more established organisations (such as local Red Cross groups). This state of volunteers *en masse* at times created conflict and tension among the volunteers. For instance, At Malmö Central Station in Sweden, the need for help almost developed into a competition about being allowed to help. As Amanda, a Malmö based volunteer in her 30ies, who coordinated incoming donations as well as schemes for the volunteers, recalls:

...well, there was a huge need for being able to help out. In fact, people went into a kind of aggressive mode when they were not allowed to give a hand there (laughs) [...] It was a kind of a 'right' to be allowed to help. We received several angry messages from people who ended up never being called in as volunteers, and they had then passed by the Central Station several times observing that it was always the same volunteers working there. So, they thought it was only our friends who got to do the helping. That was clearly not how it worked (laughs).

Likewise, coordination and limitation of donations from helping citizens were difficult. If for instance a call was made for a children's buggy in the Facebook-group, then '[...] one hour later 25 buggies would pile up at Malmö Central Station, which the *Jernhusen* [the owner of the premises of Malmö Central Station] was not too happy about (laughs).' The 25 buggies are easily dismissed as ridiculous and as help given without any direction. Yet, another understanding of this urgency to help out is possible: We can consider the buggies as manifesting an ethical link enabled between the individual imagination of distant suffering and a global solidarity (cf Malkki, 2015, p. 116), in turn transforming the provider from passive spectator to active care-giver.

At Malmö Central Station, a plethora of volunteer initiatives were present, in addition to the formal NGO's like Red Cross and Save the Children, such as Kontrapunkt, Konvoj för Medmänsklighet ['Convoy for Humanity'], Refugees Welcome Malmö, 'Allt och alla' ['Everything and everyone']. The main task was to accommodate the arriving refugees with food, advice and temporary shelter, often in frustration with the slow reaction of the Swedish Migrationsverket, who established an information point at the Malmö Central only weeks after the volunteers had established themselves there (Frykman & Mäkela, 2019). Most of the arriving refugees wanted to move on to other destinations in either Sweden, Norway or Finland, and temporary accommodation was organized by among others Kontrapunkt, the local mosque and the Swedish Church. Among the volunteers working at the station, Amanda further recalls some tensions and conflicts about who was supposed to do which tasks. 'There were some individuals, who—there was a group who was like “this is us who will oversee food preparation. This is our thing”.' Amanda further depicts how certain groups of friends developed as a natural outcome of people working together for several hours during a span of time, yet at some point daily crisis meetings were necessary in order to sort out who was supposed to do what.

Incompleteness and frictions were part of the volunteering *en masse* at Malmö Central Station and on the island of Lesbos. Along with the keen willingness to help out, the tensions among volunteers can be understood as part of the complexities of local and diverse everyday humanitarianism(s). The social relation modality of humanitarianism suggests how humanitarianism can become more about the *right to help*, rather than a humanitarian gap for individuals to fill in and help out. While images from the media and Internet mobilized the volunteers to action, the encounters with 'those in need' through volunteering yet again changed their perception of what was possible, and how to enact 'doing good.' The social interaction with refugees and other migrants was characterized also by the volunteers' need to help, (Malkki, 2015), the sheer number of volunteers present in the field, and unquestionable the asymmetry built into the relation, including that the humanitarian actors had the freedom to leave the field again. The particular historical moment of EU's asylum system breaking down, and the social conditions within which the volunteers found themselves trying help out, set certain premises for the performance and expression of humanitarianism. As we will discuss next, as the volunteers returned home from Lesbos and, in the case of Northern Europe, as refugees moved into more secluded camps, volunteers' perception of being a humanitarian actor molded into a more reflexive modality.

## 6 Temporality of reflexivity: Ambivalence and doubt

In this modality, the temporality of volunteering at Lesbos and in Northern Europe had different meanings, relating on the one hand to volunteers' reflections as they were leaving Lesbos, and on the other, in Northern Europe to changing circumstances where the refugees became less visible in the public sphere and moved into reception centers elsewhere. These cases reflect different forms of temporalities, in the one case the volunteers are leaving the crisis, and in the other, the crisis are leaving the volunteers because it moves elsewhere. In both circumstances, however, this modality is characterized by thoughtful and self-scrutinizing moments of reflexivity. This reflexivity modality in both places con-

stituted a new relation to the ‘suffering Other,’ and new ethical links to the world were initiated and enabled.

In the case of Lesbos, this phase for the volunteers took place merely 2–3 weeks after arrival and was not tied up to a changing socio-political context. Instead, this modality derived from volunteers’ expression of their experiences of volunteering as they were leaving the field. Their imminent departure generated a different perception of their role as volunteers and initiated new insights into how to ‘help’ and their relations to those they had come to help. Bendixsen noticed how volunteers shortly before departing Lesbos, talked more openly about their fear that their work in the field had not improved the refugee’s situation and expressed the limitation of their short voluntary stay. Some were frustrated that their abilities had not been brought to use, such as their teaching skills.

Catherine, for example, was modest about her volunteering contribution, and as other volunteers, the day before leaving she expressed her limitations: ‘I have certainly gained more from this than the people I am imagining helping will gain from it.’ Nonetheless, she, as others, was hoping in doubt that her immediate small acts (washing the toilets, playing with children outside Moria Camp, talking with young men living in the camp) made some, although limited, positive difference. Nina, another American volunteer in her 50ies, stated toward the end of her stay: ‘I helped some. I showed real friendship at Open Café and helped the ladies take showers.’ The day before leaving Lesbos, Nina expressed: ‘I didn’t know what I was getting into. I thought this would be the most depressing... But I didn’t expect to come and help hundreds of people.’ Because she had not worked inside Moria camp, it had been less depressing: ‘I could have a cocktail in the evening and go to the beach.’ She recognized her privileged position, yet found this unproblematic, as touristic activities made it possible for her to mentally cope with the volunteering situation. Simultaneously, Nina considered her contribution not to end on the flight back home: she planned to use her journalistic background, network and skills to inform others when returning home.

In the Malmö and Flensburg border landscapes, the reflection of volunteering and its practices took place over time, in particularly as refugees disappeared, as the train stations were again emptied, and less people needed help, simultaneously as the volunteer warehouses were more than ever filled with donations of shoes, clothes, blankets and baby strollers (Sandberg & Andersen, 2020b). The ‘crisis’ moved into a new stage; most refugees were in the process of applying for asylum, living in reception centers, less visible for the public. In this temporal stage of ‘the long summer,’ volunteers talked in retrospect of the time past with a certain melancholy and longing for a period when their help had been needed, when people came together in solidarity and when they had been part of something larger than themselves (Sandberg & Andersen, 2020a). Volunteering thus was given a different meaning—and for most it had been life changing.

During fieldwork in Flensburg 2018, Sandberg and research colleagues were invited on a small tour with members of the Refugee Welcome network to the Central Station in Flensburg. This Station had been the crucial ‘hotspot’ for arriving refugees during 2015. It was a central site for the Refugee Welcome Flensburg initiative where they had gathered, coordinated the upcoming arrivals, and handled the immense amounts of donations (Sandberg & Andersen, 2020a). When entering the premises, all the central props and furniture were still there, bearing witness to the days when ‘it was all going on,’ as Karin, one of the

coordinators of the network, explained. Together with a disassembled play corner, a huge desk made from wooden plates with the words imprinted 'Wir sind die coolen' ('we are the cool ones') was stored to the side in one of the rooms.



*Ill. 1: Flensburg Central Station (Photo Marie Sandberg, 2018)*

It was a time of challenge, as Karin recalled, and a time of self-confidence, that this way of acting, of trying to make a difference, was the right track to make. The many donations contributed to an atmosphere of recognition from co-citizens. Several photo collages put together by the volunteers capturing cheerful moments, smiling, and hugging people from the 'summer of welcome'. Yet, as Karin further recalled, the cheerful moments and feeling of 'coolness' and self-confidence was retrospectively followed by second-thoughts and doubt:

I think of the events as filled with euphoria, and then one tends to forget what the events in fact represented. [...] We only give people two hours of positive stay, and we have no idea whether they will get approved and are granted asylum after all. So, one needs to be careful not to think how much we have done. The only thing we have done is to show them a friendly face. And perhaps give them faith in other people wanting them to be all-right [...] However, we don't know what happened to them afterwards. So, I think a basic doubt has grown on me afterwards. (Interview 20180120)

The feeling of doing the right thing, came along with an aftermath of reflection about the momentary character of the assistance provided. Kareem, a volunteer activist based in the area of Gothenburg who took part in the reception of refugees arriving via Copenhagen to Malmö Central Station, likewise reflected on the aftermath of the 2015 refugee arrivals as troublesome, partly due to stress and partly due to uncertainty as to how and where the volunteer networks future would lead, and with what purpose. At the same time Kareem also recollects the reception work as a hopeful event:

I want to maintain the hope that because of the meetings I had with single individuals, that made a difference. It was the train staff that turned a blind eye and didn't ask for

tickets. The single mom that let people live and eat at her home. The Danish working-class man that helped us communicate about the whereabouts of the police and also hiding people at his home near Copenhagen central station. These are the people that gave me hope when our state failed to live up to the ideals it spewed for all of our lives. People still did amazing things, and this hope I think today has always been the only hope we have. But I could not see it clearly back then.

Keeping up faith in the meaningful dimension of the act of helping was center stage for Kareem. He linked his hopes for a better future to a more general critique of state policy and warfare politics:

We need to reframe the debate about migrants and refugees, we need to place the blame where it belongs, and we need to be considerate about who we will become when we choose to deny people a safe haven from the violence we perpetrate. By for example selling weapons we are not only watching from the sidelines, without wanting to take any responsibility, we also profit from this madness. We need to stop the bombings, not the refugees. That is the only ethical and dignified thing to do.

The temporality of volunteering thus engages with future visions for changing political grounds as part of a future-making process (Kleist & Jansen, 2009), closely connected to the feeling of ambivalence and doubt. As Karim's statement shows, the commitment to politics among the volunteers takes several shapes and transforms accordingly their increasingly wide-ranging recognition of what their practices were a part of. The increased use of humanitarian tropes in migration management and control, and in the externalization of borders by nation-states, means that NGOs and the more informal humanitarian work becomes unwittingly part of that process.

## 7 In conclusion: Provincializing everyday humanitarianism

Scholars have recognized that humanitarianism is a polysemic term, being 'an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government' (Ticktin, 2014, p. 274). We have suggested that to continuously provincialize humanitarianism, its logic and practice must be understood through a lens of temporality and the insights of ethnographic approaches. The temporal dimension offers a useful window into how humanitarianism comes to mean different things at different phases. The three suggested modalities of volunteering offer a way to analyze these differences in more systematic ways. In the first modality, we showed that the volunteers were driven by an urgency to act. This generated a commitment that is political, and transformed 'distance suffering' for the volunteers. The practice of volunteering situated the individual volunteers as part of a community of action to alleviate suffering. As Malkki (2015, p. 9) argues: 'The commitment to a particular cause and the rejection of injustice inevitably ties individuals and creates unity among them, allowing volunteers to feel part of something greater than themselves.' The incapacity or unwillingness of the different European states to sufficiently respond to the situation, impelled the citizens to partake in their voluntary work. The voluntariness and humanitarianism derived thus from the shortcoming of the nation-states and a felt urgency to respond to conditions of needs.

While there are clear limitations to this humanitarianism, 'to be concerned with the present is no small matter' (Boltanski, 1999, p. 192). Speaking up on distant suffering can

be understood as diminishing the distance between those suffering and themselves, and as bearing witness and narrowing the gap to distant suffering. While the volunteers could have opted for giving money to NGOs established in the field, as an individual act (ibid., p. 18), their volunteer participation contribute to a political modality which includes the constitution a collectivity of people responding toward suffering, developing a different politics of commitment toward alleviating suffering.

In the second modality, the volunteers sought to pursue humanitarian work in the field through offering here-and-now material relief (nutrition, basic commodities, and showers), immaterial assistance (hope, faith, and presence), and creating awareness on social media (Facebook). Through this social encounters with refugees and migrants, they became intensely aware and frustrated of the asymmetric power relations of the social relations endemic between them and those they attempted to 'help.' Their practices showed instances where the asymmetric relation was very clear (i.e. freedom of movement), and sometimes did more harm than good (playing with kids outside Moria Camp created sometimes chaos and fights among the children who wanted the toys when the volunteers left). They also came to recognize that their volunteering benefited themselves, in terms of self-development, improved their bad consciousness, and urgency to help (Malkki, 2015). Their own doubt of their contribution became part of their humanitarian practices and how they acted in the field. Despite their recognized limitations, they nonetheless insisted on humanitarian action and voluntarism to create new relationships based on what is human, as a form of action. Humanitarianism was also being friendly, and treating people with dignity, difference, and respect.

The third modality took place as an afterthought, as they were leaving the critical situation, or the migrants were moving out of their reach and thus their capacity to help. Leaving Moria camp to return to their homes, volunteers came to rethink what their contribution in the field had entailed and the limitations of their volunteering practices. Expressing ambivalent feelings, volunteers moved between doubt and hope that their presence had made a positive difference. In Northern Europe, as the refugees and migrants moved out of the train stations and into camps, the urgency of the situation grew into one of a state of *longue durée*. While insisting on a non-political position, the volunteers came to recognize that they had been used as service providers by the state, and that their work had contributed to maintain a system they did not support (see also Hoppe-Seyler, 2020). Some expressed a melancholy of volunteering when the spectacle was gone (see Sandberg & Andersen, 2020a), perhaps a longing to be part of something larger than themselves, although the characteristic of what they were longing for (a state of exception, but also a state of suffering), made such a state of the mind rather ethically problematic.

Together these modalities show how humanitarianism from the departure of volunteers is a process that changes over time, shaped by social encounters, and the socio-political situation. Humanitarianism for volunteers in Europe is multilayered; it is a commitment to distant suffering, trying to alleviate suffering here-and-now, and making distant suffering closer. While volunteering was only a period in their life, interviews with volunteers suggest that it continues shaping how they reflect about the world in which they are living. Speaking up about distant suffering might bring suffering closer to home and politicizing themselves and their surroundings. Remaining imperfect, everyday humanitarian voluntarism contributes to denaturalize the refugee situation in Europe, how

refugees are treated by the nation-states, bringing to light the situation as disturbing and in need of change.

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