



Book review of Mogstad, Heidi 2023. *Humanitarian Shame and Redemption: Norwegian Citizens Helping Refugees in Greece*. New York: Berghahn Books, 278 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

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In *Humanitarian Shame and Redemption*, Heidi Mogstad, Senior Researcher at the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen, offers a vital analysis of the affective and political terrain of humanitarian volunteer organizations that emerged in response to the so-called European ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 (Hagelund 2020). Anchored in an extended ethnographic study of the Norwegian volunteer organization *Dråpen i Havet* [A Drop in the Ocean (DiH)], the book explores how the organization navigates ‘filling humanitarian gaps’ (Mogstad, p. 81) in Greece, while reflecting on the emotional and ideological journeys of volunteers. Drawing on a 2016 pilot study and 18 months of ethnography between 2018 and 2020, Mogstad offers a compelling account of the evolving political and social dynamics that shape the humanitarian organization. Mogstad’s prolonged, multi-sited fieldwork allows her to capture subtle shifts at both the structural and individual levels. Throughout, she skillfully engages a wide range of theoretical frameworks, making the book not only empirically rich but also analytically ambitious in its contributions to debates on humanitarianism, affect, race, and national identity.

A central contribution of the book is its reversal of the ethnographic gaze, away from the refugees towards those who typically remain invisible: the humanitarian volunteers. Rather than merely unmasking neocolonial or ‘voluntourist’ impulses, Mogstad maps the intricate emotional and political assemblages that shape volunteers’ attachments to ‘humanitarian hierarchies and national frames and imaginaries’ (p. 8). Mogstad’s analysis reveals the complex position of volunteers, who often attempt to critique neocolonial systems of inequality while remaining partially complicit in them.

Throughout, Mogstad moves across various analytical scales and sites to explore dilemmas facing Norwegian volunteers, such as (de)politicization, acting as a band-aid for structural neglect, professionalization, the fetishization of the ‘perfect victim’ (p. 119), European paternalism, self-doubt, and overreach with unaccompanied minors. These challenges surface through encounters with refugees, local Greek communities, and state actors criminalizing humanitarian work; in conversations with the volunteers’

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family and friends; and in political advocacy work in Norway. Drawing on volunteers' divergent reflections and emotional responses, Mogstad highlights the complexities of being 'a drop'—the name volunteers use for themselves. She not only engages closely with their narratives about themselves, the refugees, the organization, and Norway's public responsibilities but also draws attention to what remains marginalized, unspoken, or repressed within these reflections. This includes the impossibility of imagining a 'borderless world'—a world where everyone can 'move unchained'—from within a humanitarian framework (Mbembe 2018). She also uncovers a lack of serious engagement with European—and especially Norwegian—racism, as well as the persistent challenge of escaping the ideological influence of the nation-state.

The book is structured around six chapters, enclosed by an introduction and conclusion. The introduction and first chapter ground the project in its political, theoretical, and empirical contexts; introduce the organization; and situate the narrative of 'the refugee crisis' within Greece, Europe, and Norway. Building on feminist affect theory (Ahmed 2014), these chapters lay the groundwork for the book's sustained focus on the complex role of affect and emotion in the experiences of Norwegian volunteers. Rather than repeating familiar critiques of humanitarian affects, such as empathy, pity, and intimacy, Mogstad explores less-examined (and often negative) emotions. Particular attention is given to individual and collective shame, often linked to the proclamation that Norway is failing its moral responsibility to help those in need 'on our continent' (p. 29), thereby betraying its alleged humanitarian heritage. Rather than falling into the common trap of framing feelings as pure or natural, Mogstad brilliantly highlights the situatedness of emotions within political and social fields and histories. She writes: 'I take emotions to be neither private nor psychological states but "social and cultural practices" that mediate social life and the relationship between individuals, objects and communities' (p. 10).

Rather than relying on simplistic framings of volunteers as 'rootless cosmopolitans' (p. 6) acting in the name of Western universalisms, Mogstad shows how their actions are shaped by situated discourses, norms, and histories. One of the book's key contributions is its analysis of how emotions and motivations interact with Norwegian exceptionalism—including the idea of Nordic racial and colonial innocence, egalitarianism based on 'sameness,' Norwegian 'goodness,' and the colorblindness in public discussions of xenophobia (p. 46). Importantly, Mogstad shows how volunteer work functions as national identity reinforcement: what's at stake is not only refugee lives but also the redemption of Norway's humanitarian soul. Mogstad refers to this as 'provincializing' debates on humanitarianism and liberalism (p. 9). This means that she does not stop at gesturing to Western, ostensibly 'universal' categories of identity and saviorism, but instead also analyzes more granularly how humanitarianism, racial innocence, and neocolonialism interact with imaginaries across different geographical and political scales, such as the nation-state. This perspective offers valuable insights that extend far beyond the book's particular case study.

Chapters 2–4 delve into *DiH*'s origin and institutional development. Chapter 2 examines the mythologized account of Trude, the Norwegian mother of five who founded the organization after hearing about refugees arriving in Greece on the radio while sorting her daughter's clothes. Mogstad reads this narrative both ethnographically and analytically—as a personal awakening to be contextualized and as an origin myth that informs the organization's ethos. Chapter 3 zooms out from Trude to chart *DiH*'s evolution from an ad hoc emergency response initiative into a more professionalized non-governmental organization. It analyzes this evolution's

main tensions: professionalization versus grassroots identity, critiques of the desire to prioritize women and children, concerns about becoming a ‘bandage’ (p. 131) complicit in a politics of containment, and the dilemmas involved in working with unaccompanied minors. Chapter 4 shifts the focus to how the *DiH* successfully attracts volunteers by examining the various appeals of *DiH*’s founding myth, visual imagery, and organizational structure. A particular strength of this chapter is Mogstad’s analysis of how Trude’s ‘ordinariness’ is both narratively and performatively constructed (pp. 69–70) to resonate with Norwegian ideals of innocence and unpretentiousness.

Chapters 5 and 6 move from the field to the afterlives of volunteering, tracking feelings of shame, disillusionment, and political estrangement in Norway. Chapter 5 brilliantly unpacks *DiH*’s transformation narrative and suggests that, for many volunteers, the experience of being ‘transformed’ did not translate into political action. Instead, many felt alienated from their communities, overwhelmed by shame over the contrast between Norwegian comfort and the lives of refugees. Mogstad recounts how some returned to a Norway preoccupied with comparably trivial issues like toll roads (p. 151), experiencing ‘political [post-traumatic stress disorder]’ (p. 166)—the trauma of encountering the willed indifference of the Norwegian public. In Chapter 6, Mogstad moves from the individual to the structural level, analyzing how *DiH* aims to wake up the Norwegian state from its slumber through political advocacy and public debate. Mogstad analyzes the organization’s project as a ‘competing national project’ (p. 170) that aims to redeem Norway and the volunteers alike from apathy, guilt, and moral bankruptcy. This framing allows Mogstad to delve further into one of the book’s analytical throughlines: the distinction between feeling ashamed because of a sense of national or individual complicity versus ‘merely conceiving of Norway and/or yourself as morally responsible (because of Norwegian wealth and privileges)’ (p. 14). As Mogstad argues, *DiH*’s discourse largely centers on the latter, which ultimately reinscribes national ideals. She writes: ‘the discourse of national shame is contradictory: while exposing the nation, it ultimately seeks moral recovery or redemption. In doing so, it mobilises and reproduces a romanticised national ideal even as it announces the current violation of that idea’ (p. 183).

Despite its ambitious scope, the book succeeds in maintaining a clear focus on the desires and pitfalls of humanitarianism, the political force and slipperiness of emotion, the potential violence of care, and the simultaneous disillusionment with—and reinvestment in—European and Norwegian exceptionalisms. The book excels at articulating the thorniness of humanitarianism, resisting the temptation of redemptive closure while avoiding reductive binaries—such as corrupt versus pure savior, or narcissistic redemption versus genuine altruism. Perhaps most powerfully, it challenges Norway’s claims to colorblind innocence and moral superiority, revealing how humanitarian discourse erases race and frames Norway’s role in the refugee crisis as moral duty rather than colonial complicity. All in all, this work stands as an absolutely vital touchstone for scholars and activists working in Scandinavian studies, critical migration studies, affect theory, and feminist ethnography, along with those trying to complicate the colorblind illusion of Norwegian innocence and goodness.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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