

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Precarious Citizenship and Melancholic Longing: On the Value of Volunteering after the Refugee Arrivals to Europe 2015

Marie Sandberg¹ and Dorte J. Andersen²¹ Centre for Advanced Migration Studies, Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, DK² Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark, DKCorresponding author: Marie Sandberg (sandberg@hum.ku.dk)

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2018 among volunteers who participated in the refugee reception at Copenhagen and Flensburg central train stations during the ‘summer of welcome’ in Europe 2015, this article examines tensions between volunteers’ retrospective accounts of acting upon a pronounced humanitarian crisis (‘the refugee crisis’) and the existential crisis, when the state of urgency has moved elsewhere. Based on the volunteers’ recollections, we argue that the practices of volunteering enacted different registers of *doing good*, which gave rise to a (momentary) Europe-wide civil society by ‘doing the right thing’, yet also created a paradoxical longing for this particular sociality of civil society action interlinked with crisis. We designate this longing the *melancholy of volunteering* as it announces an ungrievable loss of the sociality presupposed by crisis. These tensions between being able to do good and the melancholy of volunteering enables us to envision European civil society as a troubled topos for political participation.

Keywords: Refugee arrivals 2015; Refugee relief; Citizenship; State of exception; Crisis; Melancholy

Introduction

When arriving at the central railway station in Flensburg one cannot help noticing the sign ‘Refugees Welcome’ still commemorating the autumn 2015 when around 80,000 refugees arrived in this Northern German town on their way to Sweden. Thousands were stranded because Denmark denied the passage to Sweden and finally stopped the crossings altogether, making Flensburg a hotspot for the arrivals to Europe. Overnight, the initiative Refugees Welcome was set up at the railway station, providing refugees with essentials as well as alternative routes across the border. Similar experiences were observed in locations en route through Austria and Germany and into the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The arrival of an unprecedented number of refugees in Europe during the summer and autumn of 2015 gave cause for thousands of citizens in Northern Europe to participate in activities providing for

the arrivals at their local train stations and beyond, a phenomenon which was soon to be named the 'summer of welcome' (Karakayali & Kleist 2015).

This article scrutinizes tension between, on the one hand, the practices stabilizing the helping initiatives, turning them into routine despite their appearance as being in 'a state of emergency' and, on the other, the volunteers' experiences of the aftermath of 'crisis' through their retrospective reflections on what happened during and after the 2015 arrivals. The tension between experiences in 'the time of crisis' and those of the aftermath, we argue, concerns the valuing of the volunteers' deeds, at once celebrated as humanitarian action and disregarded, left in a void. The 2015 refugee arrivals created a Europe-wide sociality made up of volunteering acts of 'doing good' across Europe's borders, yet this sociality, spurred as it was by crisis, proved to be volatile. The 2015 'refugee crisis', then, was not only a European border crisis reflecting a disabled EU incapable of making joint action (Anderson 2017) but also a valuing crisis reflecting the precariousness of European civil society.

The article is based on fieldwork conducted in the context of the interdisciplinary *Helping Hands Research Network* comparing informal refugee relief initiatives across European borders (see Introduction to this Special Issue).¹ Field-visits were organised through so-called "fieldworkshops" (Sandberg 2020) in which network members would open ongoing research sites for their colleagues' short term field visits. The fieldworkshops pursued a multiplicity of methodological strategies including group-based in-depth interviews, walking conversations and exhibition visits. In this article we draw on insights gained through these collective interventions, yet two fieldwork locations in particular, the central train stations of Copenhagen and Flensburg, are central to our observations. Importantly, fieldwork was conducted in 2018 (i.e., some years after the 'summer of welcome' 2015), which means that our interlocuters are reflecting on their volunteer practices in retrospective.

Acknowledging the transformative power of volunteer work, we zoom in on humanitarian action and volunteer work, asking what it actually means for the volunteers to help out, and how different versions of 'the good deed' are enacted through those practices. Whereas Malkki's (2015) seminal work on humanitarian aid workers shows how global aspirations are simultaneously locally situated, we propose the notion of valuing practices (Heuts & Mol 2012) to explore the volunteers' retrospective reflections through multiple registers of 'doing good'. With this notion we further aim to underline how acts of helping out can mobilise different yet related registers of 'doing good'. Valuing practices designates that doing good is not a universal or normative value, rather it is a situated activity which draws on a mix between localized, often historically situated motives and European and global aspirations; universal moral codes and ethical registers, including humanitarianism and human rights. Hence, valuing practices enact different registers of doing good, registers that are in dialogue, sometimes by collaborating, other times in playing out tension and even conflict between rationales and motivations.

Following recent work by della Porta (2018), we contend that the European border regime in 2015 provided a unique opportunity for many individuals to join forces and act as part of a greater whole. Border scholars use the term border regime to deal with the complexities of European borders, capturing a neo-liberal agenda opening the field of bordering to a multiplicity of actors settling and disrupting borders: '[A] space of negotiating practices' formed by 'a multitude of actors whose practices relate to each other, without being ordered in the form of a central logic or rationality' (Tsianos et al. 2010: 375). With its restrictions on mobility, the European border regime paradoxically produced Europe-wide unifying acts of solidarity informed by a certain humanitarian self-understanding: the obligation to aid the suffering 'other' and the trust in the fact that the world really can be changed to the better (by us, Europeans) (Delanty & Rumford 2005). The volunteers' participation across European

borders during the summer of welcome can thus be read as the momentary appearance of a Europe-wide civil society.

Eventually, however, the European border regime closed the local possibilities for participation in the Northernmost parts of the continent, after the Balkan route was closed due to the EU-Turkey statement.² In the volunteers' accounts of the aftermath of urgency, we argue there is a strong sense of loss of direction and purpose among those volunteers participating most actively; they long for past fellowship, a community arising from activities that have disappeared, including questioning of one's own participation. We designate this longing for a past sociality as *the melancholy of volunteering* because the object of loss (the crisis gone elsewhere) cannot be mourned (Butler 1997). Following Butler (2012), we suggest that the inclination to act upon humanitarian crisis is a 'responsiveness which precedes the ego, a kind of response that therefore is and is not my response' (136). Thereby linking the urgency of acting upon a humanitarian crisis as against the existential crisis when the urgency is officially called off and moved elsewhere, we highlight the emotional stakes of being part of this Europe-wide civil society. The valuing of volunteering is compromised by the experience of being needed and valued only when everything else falls apart, leaving a precarious void in the aftermath of crisis. We thereby contend that the valuing practices enacted through the 2015 refugee arrivals are driven by concerns which compel action and intrinsically link to a more general crisis of citizenship in times of precarity. Following Muehlebach (2013: 298) we contend that precarity connotes 'the many in-securities (and responses to them)' that European citizens are facing during late-capitalism, encompassing economic insecurity along with feelings of democratic dispossession, and, as we will argue, devaluation of their civil society actions. In conclusion we argue that the melancholy of volunteering troubles Europe profoundly, thereby suggesting new contours for political action in Europe.

The analysis presented is twofold: Part one unfolds registers of doing good as practices of routinizing and ordering in a state of exemption; part two unfolds the melancholy of volunteering. Together they illustrate how volunteer practices enacted different yet related valuing and emotional registers of doing good spurring new forms of sociality and melancholic longing. Before we plunge into the analysis, we outline the scholarly debates informing our analysis of civil society action and the registers of doing good.

Elusive European Civil Society

In this section we wish to highlight how informal everyday reception practices enacted new imaginings of a Europe-wide civil society. As Delanty and Rumford (2005) argued in *Rethinking Europe*, the EU (including its border regime) would never succeed in creating any uniform or Europeanized foundation or frame for a European civil society. Rather, as they suggest, when capturing the prospects of an emerging European civil society, this process should be 'conceived of in terms of multiple and competing orders of justification articulated through different cultural repertoires (national, transnational, cosmopolitan, etc.) and forms of sociality' (Delanty & Rumford 2005: 20). Hence, Rumford and Delanty's concern goes beyond institutional frameworks and asks of us to examine the dynamics of Europe in society and everyday life, including dissatisfaction with the ways European transformation has so far been dealt with from an institutional point of view. Hence, European civil society is a discursive field of contestation, not controlled by human rationality and deliberation but made and remade in relations. Delanty and Rumford go as far as to characterize it as a 'cosmopolitan disposition' embracing not only European values but also the values of 'the other' (Delanty & Rumford 2005: 76). Being European connotes at once taking 'white man's burden' upon oneself, that is, the obligation to help those in need (Bex & Craps 2016) and a fundamental self-questioning of the possibility of doing this (Balibar 2003).

Following della Porta (2018), we contend, that the summer of welcome created new possibilities for envisioning European civil society as a troubled topos for political, democratic participation. As della Porta (2018: 3) states:

The solidarity movements (but also those opposing them) emerged in a situation in which late neoliberalism brought about a decline in citizenship rights—particularly, but not only, in social rights. Political opportunities are therefore to be located within a critical juncture, which is characterised by a fluid temporality, under-structured and (more) open to agency.

In a similar vein, we understand this critical juncture as an opening for renegotiating and reimagining the contours of a Europe-wide civil society. It is not our intention to finally locate where or what this European civil society is, rather our focus is the boundary work performed by the volunteers' everyday refugee relief, at once reconstituting, shifting and dismantling a Europe worth aspiring to through their valuing practices.

Building on Isin's (2008) notion of 'acts of citizenship', della Porta 2018 understands the migrant mobilisations in 2015 as protest movements and thus a resistance towards established politics. By contrast, we argue that the volunteers activated a Europe-wide civil society through borderspanning solidarity acts, which were both in line with more established normative ideals, for instance a notion of cosmopolitanism, but also questioning what good deeds do to the world. Following Butler (2004), we propose to understand the valuing practices as ways of reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss by asking questions of 'who counts as human' and 'what makes a life grievable'? What happened in 2015 was more than social movements' acts of resistance towards established politics; the 'state-of-emergency' became a very real spectacle in which EU officials, European state authorities and European citizens alike were struggling to define the valuing of precarious lives.

Researching Retrospective Accounts on Everyday Humanitarianism

The 2015 refugee arrivals undoubtedly created space for citizen participation on an unprecedented level, a space which had previously been unavailable for most and a space articulated perhaps most explicitly in Angela Merkel's 'Wir Schaffen Das' [We can do it], the slogan meant to unite the German nation around receiving newcomers. As indicated, the act of volunteering—and particularly helping newly arrived refugees—ties the participation to normative ideals; volunteering in refugee relief imply acts of 'doing good'. We asked our interlocutors to recollect and share their experiences with their voluntary actions, discussing with them what it meant for them to help out and how they now, some years after the sense of urgency, experience the implications of what they did. Scrutinizing emic understandings of what it means 'to help out' and do 'the right thing' enables us to engage with questions of normativity without entering philosophical discussions of what legitimizes universal morality and ethics. Our interest is in what is it to help out understood in terms of the valuing practices and actions involved when volunteers enact different versions of 'the good deed'. Here we appropriate the notion of valuing practices suggested by Heuts and Mol (2013) to explore the retrospective reflections on the volunteers' practices through multiple registers of 'doing good'. The notion of valuing practices designates that 'doing good' is not a universal or normative value, rather it is an activity. In this sense, valuing practices enact different registers, and as we shall illustrate, the registers do not form in isolation, rather, they are in dialogue, sometimes by collaborating and other times in playing out tension between the rationales and motivations of those participating in the activities. Our aim is not to criticize volunteer aspirations nor judge upon what is inherently good or not in these practices. Rather, we pursue a better

understanding of the contours for political action made possible by the volunteers' reconfigurations of civil society action expressed in refugee relief.

Whereas humanitarianism usually designates organised refugee relief work in the world of international development aid, we focus on the less formalized initiatives. Because the fieldwork material mainly consist of the volunteers' retrospective accounts, we researchers were not 'there' as it all 'went on', rather events were reenacted through our research participants' recollections. Not seeking exact reconstructions of past events, the time span and the temporal multiplicity of past-present coexistence became an opportunity for the volunteers to reflect on their deeds and for us as researchers to learn from the volunteers' retrospective accounts. As Ferreira and de Almeida (2017: 208) show, the issue of multiple temporalities is important when conducting retrospective fieldwork, because lived time and remembered time are seldom chronologically ordered but rather co-exist and entangle. The role of the ethnographer is vital then, for the way memory is evoked and past events re-enacted during fieldwork conversations, analytically inviting 'the looking back' to become a guiding principle for the volunteers' accounts (cf. Sandberg 2020). As researchers we thus contributed actively to evoke memory, seeking to spur the volunteers' retrospective accounts.

Part of this re-enactment involved going to the premises of former 'hotspots', in our case Flensburg and Copenhagen main stations, respectively. By asking questions about past events in those locales, memories aroused and incidents conjured. During those walking conversations, performed in a mix of German, Danish and English languages, our research participants pointed out important sites, explained how things were arranged and organized, for instance through the construction of counters for distribution of food and water, temporary play zones for children, and sleeping/relaxation areas zones for exhausted parents. In some instances the interviews and walks were group based, which meant that the volunteers' recollections also spurred further commemorations among the research participants. At Flensburg Central Station, we entered the former office for Refugee Welcome volunteers, which was closed down by then but still had all the props and furniture stalled there. This visit to the 'volunteer museum' (cf. Sandberg 2020) caused much retrospective reflection, not least memories aligning with broader societal valuing of deeds, presented in the following as different valuing registers of doing good and the melancholy of volunteering.

A Sociality of Valuing Practices

The arrival of refugees in 2015 prompted several Northern European citizens to reach out and give a helping hand, also despite the majority not previously being engaged in refugee relief or volunteer work. Particularly revealing about these events is the sheer scale of coming together around a common purpose, the speed with which networks were set to work, and the readiness of volunteering as a unitary army of action. During our fieldwork, the volunteers recollected strong feelings of being in a state of urgency and being forced to act, creating a spontaneous will, not only to engage in activities of helping out, but also taking control and organizing practices and intentions of others, to be part of a community and to send the message that other reception politics than the established ones were possible. Following Heuts and Mol (2013), we highlight how these motivations for engaging in the crisis were mobilised through different yet related registers of 'doing good' (cf. above).

Ordering chaos

The initiative called Refugees Welcome Flensburg was created at the railway station almost overnight. It provided the arrivals with essentials: food, clothing, sleeping places, because the authorities did not manage to arrange for and deal with the people arriving. As one of the volunteers, Maja, expressed:

When we came down there, there were hundreds of people and donations, piled up in front of the Bahnhof (...) so the message—not only from our side—had gone viral all over Flensburg, and one had the feeling of [hard to hear] comparable to the Fall of the GDR wall, because there was this 'yeesss'! And in fact it was a bit overwhelming for the arriving people, who were loaded with presents and clothes, and they just stood there with how many bags of food (laughs). It was kind of crazy! (Interview 20180119).

'The helpfulness was huge', recalls Birte, another of the volunteers, astonished with the generosity of people in Flensburg. During a tour at the railway station in early 2018, she described how an elderly lady brought 100 eggs every day, a Turkish baker delivered free Arabian bread and the fire brigade also helped: 'Something was needed and moments later it was there [...] such as providing advice about where the biggest chance for asylum would be including family reunification [...] however also preventing "schleusserei" [trafficking] and cooperating with the police' (Interview 20180120). She brought children's clothing to the train station because of a call on the Refugees Welcome Facebook group. When she realized that more organization was needed, she simply stayed, and together with others she began to clear the chaos created on the first days where hundreds of 'Flensburgern' came to the station with 'stuff' for the refugees and to help in person (Interview 20180120).

When the Swedish border to Denmark was closed on November 2015, many refugees got stuck at Copenhagen Central Station (Sandberg 2018). They were forced either to go back to Germany or to apply for asylum in Denmark. The initiative the Volunteers of Copenhagen Central Station was initiated a few months earlier in the early fall of 2015. Most volunteers at the station were students or pensioners, including people who were or had formerly been asylum seekers. Afshin, who came to Denmark from Afghanistan as a refugee at the age of five and volunteered as an interpreter when the initiative at the Central Station was established, describes how the volunteers organized 'Firkanten', the Square in the middle of the Central Station:

We had small 'stations' ready, so when the refugees arrived heading for Sweden, they got small bags divided into the categories Families, Youth, Children. For the families the bags included diapers, tooth paste, food and stuff, so they could take the bags and continue their travel right away. Because we did not have any shelter to offer them where they could sleep in the beginning (Interview 20180220).

Afshin's estimate was that around 150,000 refugees were transported to Sweden and Norway via Denmark during those months, and he vividly recalls how 'we became specialized in purchasing the right tickets and tracking the right platforms' (Interview 20180220).

Fatima, another of the volunteers at the Copenhagen Central Station in 2015, heard what was going on at Copenhagen Central Station through a friend and decided to drop by. Fatima describes her first time at the station as chaotic. Refugees and volunteers were all over the place, surrounded by huge donations of clothes and food. There was obvious frustration among everyone present, including staff from the Danish Railway Company (DSB), who did not seem to approve of the volunteers' presence. Yet, eventually an agreement was reached with DSB accepting the presence of the volunteers and overnight stays for refugees.

The volunteers managed to organise chaos into daily routines and structures surprisingly quickly. Refugees arrived from Syria via Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and on from there via Flensburg to Copenhagen. Every half hour, a new train would arrive from Flensburg with approximately 50 refugees on board. In the first few months, this amounted, according to Fatima's estimate, to 1,500–2,000 people reaching Copenhagen Central Station a day: 'I still know all the timetables by heart!' Fatima tells us as we walk through Copenhagen Central Station she recalls the events:

We had our shifts, and our tasks were mostly to help refugees arriving get some rest, perhaps a shower. Later on, we created the 'Safety Zone' in collaboration with DSB. Often we took care of the children so the parents could relax and get some sleep (Interview 20180209).

From conversations with volunteers, it is our impression that things happened very spontaneously. Initiatives developed because there was immediate need for help and a match between the needs of those arriving and the abilities of the helpers to actually do something: delivering food, offering interpretation or simply provide comfort. Yet, chaos became ordered with an amazing speed, as Maja depicts:

Then this happened, it was amazing, and I have never experienced anything like this, I never thought this could be possible. However, without anyone organising it, people [volunteers] just started sorting and organizing. Things [ie. donations like clothes, shoes, foods], in the middle of the night (Interview 20180119).

Doing good became an organisational coming together where objects were put on their separate shelves and the helpers found their place through their vocations in the networks, a routinizing of the state-of-exception, an act of providing structures to chaos, of ordering and doing things with accuracy, of getting things sorted and done.



Photo by Refugees Welcome Flensburg 2015.

Substituting the state

Another register of doing good expressed by the volunteers was that of acting as substitute to public services whose task it would normally be to sort out chaos. As mentioned above, the promotion of a need for civil society actors to play a role in the maintenance of welfare tasks has become a common agenda in most Northern European states. What happened in the summer of welcome can be interpreted as an (extreme) example of such engagement.

Volunteers often articulated a visible lack in the public services provided to manage the situation. Even the police were experienced as having trouble acting out what would be their responsibility, controlling flows of people and providing order to chaos. As Maja recalls:

The Bahnhof [in Flensburg] was happy we were there and the police as well. Angela Merkel had said, we will let people travel as they like in Germany, this was in the first short phase [of the refugee arrivals 2015]. And it was obvious that the police was relieved and happy because they were also allowed to be 'the good people'. They were really super helpful and we enjoyed each other's company (Interview 20180119).

Hence doing good meant 'filling out for the state'. In the notion, 'Wir Schaffen das' lies not only a slogan articulating unity around a cause but also a call from state authorities for citizens to engage because the state cannot cope. Here the 'doing the right thing' involves the taking over of responsibility, not only because there is a 'naturally constituted need', which would be the humanitarian claim, but because those institutions who would normally be responsible are under pressure and cannot handle the situation.

In a group interview with members of Refugees Welcome Flensburg, we were told that when DSB [Danish State Railways] decided (without asking Danish authorities) that refugees stranded at Flensburg train station should be transported with buses from Flensburg through Denmark to Fredericia, from where they could continue their journey to Copenhagen, the German railways (DB) handed over responsibility for organizing the busrides to the volunteers. Refugees Welcome was thus in charge of getting people on buses in an orderly manner and they were even given the direct number to DSB by DB to be able to ask for more buses when needed (Interview 20180120).

According to Fatima, the presence of volunteers at Copenhagen Central Station were accepted by DSB because it was obvious that the refugees would not disappear by themselves and no one from the authorities would step in to organize things at the station. As long as the volunteers were not wearing any official clothing like yellow reflective stripes jackets, which would appear as if they were wearing official uniforms, the police also tolerated their presence.

When 'doing good' implies acting out the responsibility of the state and public institutions, it also involves voicing complaints against authorities who ought to take responsibility. Complaints reached from those against an intensified policing of European state borders, over accusations of European political elites not protecting the values they advocate for, such as human rights, to complaints about individual national politicians who 'take no responsibility' for the consequences of their own actions. As Afshin expresses:

I was really annoyed with the [Danish] government, and had in fact a hatred towards the politicians. Especially Inger Støjberg [the then minister for foreigners and integration], she was the one who started all this. I prompted to go to her and ask her: What would you do if you were forced to flee to Denmark! (Interview 20180220)

In the Danish context taking over responsibility took a different direction than in Germany where the state explicitly called for citizens' help. By contrast, the Danish state's official help extended to helping refugees out of the country. Many citizens explicitly did good as resistance towards the populist and right-wing tendencies expressed in official state policies, thus aiming to show the world that the country had a more humanitarian face, a frequent narrative motivating a large amount of volunteers. Through their actions, volunteers articulated not only their personal disagreement with the state, but more importantly they actively showed that there existed a more cosmopolitan, alternative community of hospitality beyond the exclusionary national community presented by the state.

Opening a space of hospitality

During these events, the railway stations of Northern Europe reinvented themselves. The welcome culture and its greetings transformed them from mere places of transit into places of interacting, belonging, temporary homes for thousands of people. 'Doing good' expressed as acts of opening up, providing space, creating community and zones of safety where refugees can withdraw from the public gaze and re-group, thus also transforming the railway station into a temporary shelter.

Fatima ended up staying at Copenhagen Central Station every day for eight months, even not attending lectures at the university where she studied (Interview 20180209). Maja and Birte admitted to almost abandoning their families to participate in the activities at the railway station where they gained a substitute family (Interview 20180119 and 20180120). As articulated during the group interview with members of Refugees Welcome Flensburg, for some volunteers this also included long sought for identities, for example for a volunteer using a wheelchair, who in the interpretation of our interlocutors all of a sudden felt as an important part of something. Among the group of volunteers we interviewed at Flensburg Central Station were two interpreters who expressed how for the first time after arriving in Northern Europe they felt as valuable members of the society (Interview 20180120).



Refugees Welcome Flensburg was elected as Humans of the Year 2015 by Flensburger Tagesblatt readership. Photo: Sandberg 2018.

Doing good here involves the active provision of a space of comfort and hospitality, a space where the excluded can feel as part of the community, maybe by being welcomed with material gifts or by having a purpose, acting within the welcome culture, or simply just tagging along with others. With time, this space moved to communal activity houses or to local citizens' homes. Volunteers at the Copenhagen Central Station also engaged in the Danish volunteer initiative Venligboerne (directly translated: Friendly Neighbours), which in the immediate years after 2015 managed to establish a communal house in Copenhagen. In Flensburg this coming together as a community reached a high when Refugees Welcome Flensburg was elected as Humans of the Year 2015 by Flensburger Tagesblatt's Readership, a reward which is usually given to a single person but here was given to all those who participated in the activities at the railway station.

The Melancholy of Volunteering

The situation changed dramatically with the Balkan route closure in spring 2016 following the EU-Turkey deal. When the urgency disappeared (or moved elsewhere), volunteer experiences also changed significantly, generating a need to cope with what we interpret as a melancholy of volunteering. Inspired by Butler's work on melancholic subjectivity, we suggest the melancholy of volunteering as depicting a loss that cannot be mourned because the longing for crisis is socially unacceptable (Butler 1997: 254). Thus, the melancholy of volunteering announces a paradoxical longing for time of 'crisis', paradoxical because the volunteers acted upon a critical situation to make it if not disappear then at least ease a bit for everyone involved. Melancholy is not a pre-given state of the individual's mind. Rather, following Butler and scholarship on emotional practices (for instance Scheer 2012), we contend that emotions such as longing, feeling of loss and the need to reorient oneself are effects of doings rather than simply mental states. Further, emotions like melancholy are mobilised socially, and they are communicative because when named or put into words, they can spur further emotional attachment (Butler 1997: 212; for analyses on the role of emotions in volunteer mobilisation see also Kleres 2017; Sutter 2017: 6).

The melancholy of volunteering cluster into emotional registers of volunteering enacted retrospectively. The registers connote volunteers' attempts to respond to emotions spurred when the sociality of valuing practices is no longer there. Even when they are communicated by single individuals they do not follow them or exist 'an sich'. Rather, the registers act as soundboards through which the volunteers' afterthoughts are reflected and enacted.

Redirection and sense of loss

In Sønderborg, situated in close proximity to Flensburg on the Danish side of the border, a local version of the volunteer refugee relief initiative Venligboerne also thrived during the summer of welcome in 2015. In early 2018, we visited some of the then coordinators of the group, Kaj and Inge. They told us about the urgent call for stepping up and countering xenophobia when 'the refugees arrived Denmark' in 2015. Now, however, some years later they both felt challenged in promoting interest and engagement in their initiatives:

I did in fact speculate a bit, because it has been somewhat up hill lately, and perhaps it [the local Venligboerne initiative] has had its moment and the refugees simply don't need it anymore. Because they [the refugees] shouldn't show up to please us, they should participate in because they get something out of it. So now we'll probably try something new probing if there's someone else we can use our energy on (Interview 20180117).

We met Inge and Kaj in the communal house where Venligboerne organises coffee meetings during Saturdays, targeted at newly arrived refugees in Sønderborg. Both of them have retired and are now active in several other volunteer groups related to the elderly in their community and language classes for refugees. The initiative had up to 750 members on Facebook, but support was declining and not many attended the weekly activities. The lessening interest together with a discussion of whether the group's focus should stay solely on refugees or whether it could also target socially vulnerable people made the future of the network uncertain. The change in refugee arrivals necessitated a reconsideration of purpose among the volunteers enacting emotional registers of reorientation and eventually reinvention of themselves. The aftermath of crisis thus leaves room for a rethinking of purpose, activating emotional registers of reason and scope of volunteering.

When talking to aforementioned Afshin, who helped out at the Copenhagen Central Station, he was very aware of the psychological costs of volunteering:

People [refugees] started to arrive—up to 1500–2000 refugees in one day. All kinds of people came, wounded, victims of torture, everything. There were a lot of kids and this affected me the most. Because children were not supposed to witness such kinds of things. [...] It was us, The *Hovedbanegårdens Frivillige* [volunteers of the central station] who were here. And several did not make it, they cracked psychologically. They were not used to watch and hear about such things. To me, I have been through this [as a refugee], I have seen similar things. I have seen worse things, even (Interview 20180220).

A further emotional register enacted in the volunteers' retrospective accounts is a sense of loss, yet on multiple levels. Even though Afshin was prepared and had experienced the pressure of fleeing himself when he left Afghanistan at the age of five, in the aftermath of the summer of welcome he experienced severe changes in all levels of life:

I lost my apartment, my work, my school. All in one day in the month of December [2015]. And I lost my girlfriend. So all four things at one time, this really hit me in the face. I couldn't... I was fired from work because I couldn't sleep normally, and I had used all my time here [at the station] and I was kicked out of school [his education] for the same reason, and there was so much going on here [at the station] so I was really stressed out. [...] For 21 years I had managed to live my own life. After the refugee crisis—my life changed 360 degrees. I ended up in a situation where I did not know what to do with myself (Interview 20180220).

The 'refugee crisis', as Afshin depicts it, for him turned into a crisis on very concrete levels along with an existential crisis. The same intersection of crises was present in Fatima's account. Even though the Volunteers at the Copenhagen Central Station initiative is no longer active, Fatima still works as a volunteer and has also been active in Venligboerne. Fatima is 23 years old and describes herself as a 'couch voter', someone who would stay at home instead of voting and who would not engage in politics at any level. When Fatima gave us a tour around the Copenhagen Central Station in January 2018, completely void of refugees, it becomes clear that she shares a similar sense of loss as Afshin:

I would call it a mild trauma, we [the volunteers] all got, because it is not normal for people to experience and hear about such things. Among the volunteers I know there

are some who are still having problems with their sleep, and has various degrees of PTSD. However, it was this feeling of necessity; that we had to do something, because no one else would (Interview 20180220).

This sense of loss and the presence of crisis on existential levels is of a melancholic kind because the loss is not something the volunteers can really grieve. What is lost is the 'refugee crisis', which is not a desirable situation to regain and which is socially unacceptable to long for. The melancholy of volunteering understood as emotional practice is shaped by and intrinsically linked to surrounding practices and thus enacts a sorrow which cannot be mourned (cf. Butler 1997).

Ethical doubt

The volunteers' afterthoughts also enact emotional registers of ethical doubt. In Maja's reflections this doubt appears as questioning whether the feeling of 'doing good' only projected selfish needs and ultimately was an illusion:

At times things got very personal [...] for instance when they [the refugees] were around the age of my son. [...] and it feels strange, that it gets tough, primarily, when it is something recognizable, where one thinks 'It could have been me'—that is kind of egocentric. There was so much euphoria about the work we did and one tends to forget what the refugees actually represented. And I tried to communicate this as well, because we give them, perhaps two hours of positive stay here, and we have no idea whether they will be recognized and get a permit. So one should be careful to think that much has been done to help people. The only thing we did was in fact to show them a friendly face. [...] So afterwards, I think there is more a sound feeling of doubt (Interview 20180119).

Maja's afterthoughts illustrate how the excitement and adventure—the euphoria—so closely connected to the volunteers' valuing practices in retrospect generated fundamental uncertainty about the practices themselves. This difficulty in shifting from the exceptional to the mundane is seen in similar volunteer mobilisations (cf. Krøjer 2015: 13), pinpointing a challenge several volunteers found themselves in after the summer of welcome. Following Butler (1997), the moral matrix of 'normality' prevents the volunteers from celebrating their achievements and mourning their loss of purpose because 'doing good' time was so obviously out-of-joint. Walking with us at the central station in Copenhagen, Fatima likewise reflects such ambivalence:

We closed down [the initiative] in April 2016, and it was strange, it was strange removing it all. I get a good feeling when I am back here now, but also a feeling of sadness, because we are not out here anymore. And because one thinks 'what could we have done better?', but we've done what we could, and probably we could not have done it differently. We did perhaps too much (20180209).

Fatima's reflection that the volunteers might have been doing 'too much' indicates that substituting the state's tasks has a flip-side because the volunteers are not recognized for what they did. However, the sadness expressed by Fatima also connects to a state of sociality no longer 'out here'. The situation per se was unbearable for the volunteers, which prompted action, yet when looked at in retrospective, they desire and long for experiences attained.

Resting with their experiences, these volunteers expose another level of grief the moral matrix of 'normality' does not allow for: the longing for past sociality connected with bodily vulnerability in the face of violence. 'Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of exposure' (Butler 2004: 20). Having experienced the social attachment of bodies exposed to violence, a social attachment Northern European citizens are usually kept from experiencing, the volunteers cannot just 'go back to normal'. In the aftermath of crisis, volunteers mourn, not only the loss of a societal need for their valuing practices but also how the valuing practices have changed them, making them unfit for a return to 'normality'. As Butler puts it: '[P]erhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (submitting to ...) the full result of which one cannot know in advance' (Butler 2004: 21). The actual challenge is the impossibility to 'go back' and to know what will come when one has been involved in acts transforming one's world fundamentally (see also Drakulic 1999).

An Ethics of Relationality—The Contours of Another Europe

When political and media discourses pronounced the refugee arrivals in 2015 as a 'refugee crisis', voluntary engagement happened at an overall European scale we had not witnessed before across Europe and, as argued by della Porta (2018) the summer of welcome 2015 most certainly expressed a European-wide movement of sorts. In their retrospective reflections on 'doing good', the volunteers capture such movement, including tensions, compromises and clashes involved when the good deed is done. It appears quite distinctly how doing good is not an act that can be determined once and for all; ongoing valuations inform conversations and sometimes heated discussions about how to help out the best way but also how the good may fade into the shade of grey when reflected on in retrospect. Hence, aspiration to do the right thing involves pragmatic juggling of ideal and real, of practicing one's organizational skills (and lack thereof), of human engagement with 'the other', of emotional stakes in the involvement. Registers do not fit neatly into each other; they clash, collide or are hierarchized by compromise, making up a variety of processes that are never clear cut as if they add up, finally showing what it means to do good. Valuing is practice rather than judgement, and as Mol and Heuts (2012: 130) spell out, 'it is not a matter of taking control and imposing an ideal, but of caringly playing with possibilities'.

Hence, the volunteers' retrospective accounts illustrate how doing good does not just concern a fixed, unrealizable ideal, but rather makes up a socially located space of valuing practices. This socially located space had potential develop into more unified European collective action, although failing to do so, and thus only establishing the contours of a European civil society. What our interlocutors articulate is local pockets of doing good, pockets which were never connected through more than sporadic network relations because the help provided by the volunteers very quickly became 'disposable help' when state authorities regained control. Retrospectively, actions quickly relocated into a moral matrix and interpreted as humanitarian and philanthropic based on individual choices; the lone actor took upon herself the task of sustaining the normal functions of society, acting out tasks, which would in a more stable situation be the responsibility of public authorities (cf. Evers & Guillemard 2013), thus causing '[...] a re-valorization of volunteering as in individual (philanthropic) contribution to society, rather than a form of collective action or interest representation' (Henriksen, Smith & Zimmer 2015: 1593). Philanthropic citizenship is not made up of sociality. Rather, because of her instantiation as philanthropic, the volunteer is made into an individual agent of crisis, who individually makes the rational choice to participate. Hence, the cause for her actions

is merely the urgency or crisis and the deeper meaning of sociality, the doing good, unifying 'life's worth living' is lost.

The liberal notion of the human as autonomous actor founding philanthropic citizenship is not sufficient to understand the volunteers' experiences when doing good. As Butler (2004: 25) argues,

Although this language may well establish our legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology, it does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally.

What the volunteers experienced during the so-called 'refugee crisis' was not just the value of their own individual good deed; the valuing practices described above locate socially. The emotional drive of the practices turn into a state of melancholy, a loss that cannot be mourned, exactly because the experiences of sociality cannot be undone and they cannot become reenacted.

Crucially then, the melancholy of volunteering mourns the loss experienced by the volunteers, a loss located in what Butler calls an ethics of relationality: 'At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor of you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related' (Butler 2004: 22). The emotions revealed are exactly this: reaching out for something that can no longer be reached, a sociality informed by loss and vulnerability, and the grief over a situation which is itself ungrieveable because 'normality' does not allow for the grief. What we are left with in the aftermath of events is thus a complicated tension between the spectacle of humanitarian crises and the melancholy of volunteering as a very troublesome topos for community and politics in Europe. The refugee crisis, then, turns out to be a crisis of valuing precarious lives.

Notes

¹ The Helping Hands Research Network visited more than 20 initiatives for refugee support in five European cities: Copenhagen, Nijmegen, Glasgow, Hamburg, and Flensburg (2017–2019). Fieldwork for this article was conducted in 2018 with assistance from research assistant, ethnologist, Line Bygballe Jensen in the Danish-German borderland (Sonderborg and Flensburg) and in Copenhagen.

² The EU-Turkey statement refers to the agreement made in March 2016 in which Turkey 'agreed to accept the rapid return of all migrants not in need of international protection crossing from Turkey into Greece and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters' in this way closing down the Balkan route for arriving migrants (source: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>, accessed April 16, 2020).

Acknowledgements

This paper is an outcome of the Helping Hands Research Network, financed by the Danish Research Council (DFF/6107-00111), led by Marie Sandberg (PI) and Dorte J. Andersen (co-PI).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare. The authors have contributed equally at all stages of composing the article.

References

- Anderson, B.** 2017. Towards a New Politics of Migration? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(9): 1527–1537. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1300297>
- Balibar, E.** 2003. *We the People of Europe*. Princeton, New Jersey.
- Bex, S** and **Craps, S.** 2016. Humanitarianism, Testimony, and the White Savior Industrial Complex: What Is The What versus Kony 2012. *Cultural Critique*, 92(1): 32–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.92.2016.0032>
- Butler, J.** 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in subjection*. CA: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J.** 2004. *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Delanty, G** and **Rumford, C.** 2005. *Rethinking Europe. Social theory and the implications of Europeanization*. USA & Canada: Routledge. pp. 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203640050>
- della Porta, D.** (ed.) 2018. *Solidarity Mobilizations in the 'Refugee Crisis' Contentious Moves*. Palgrave. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71752-4>
- Drakulic, S.** 1999. *As if I am not there – a novel about the Balkans*. Abacus.
- Evers, A** and **Guillemard, AM.** 2013. Reconfiguring Welfare and Reshaping Citizenship. In: Evers, A et al. (eds.), *Social Policy and Citizenship – The changing Landscape*. Oxford University Press. pp. 359–389. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199754045.003.0071>
- Ferreira, S** and **Vespeira De Almeida, S.** 2017. Retrospective ethnography on 20th century Portugal: Fieldwork encounters and its complicities. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 25(2): 206–220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12416>
- Henriksen, LS, Smith, SR** and **Zimmer, A.** 2015. Welfare Mix and hybridity. Flexible adjustments to changed environments. Introduction to the special issue. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 26(5): 1591–1600. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9622-y>
- Heuts, F** and **Mol, AM.** 2013. What is a Good Tomatoe? A case of valuing in practice. *Valuation Studies*, 1(2): 125–146. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3384/vs.2001-5992.1312125>
- Isin, EF.** 2008. Theorizing Acts of Citizenship. In: Isin, EF, et al. (eds.), *Acts of Citizenship*. London: Zed Books. pp. 15–43.
- Karakayali, S** and **Kleist, O.** 2015. Strukturen und Motive der ehrenamtlichen Flüchtlingsarbeit (EFA). In: *Deutschland*. Berlin: Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung. Available at <http://www.fluechtlingshilfe-htk.de/uploads/infos/49.pdf> [Last accessed 20 April 2019].
- Kleres, J.** 2017. Emotions in the Crisis: Mobilising for Refugees in Germany and Sweden. In: della Porta, D *Solidarity Mobilizations in the 'Refugee Crisis' Contentious Moves*. Palgrave. pp. 209–229. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71752-4_8
- Krøijer, S.** 2015. Figurations of the Future: On the Form and Temporality of Protests among Left Radical Activists in Europe. In: Meinert, L, et al. (eds.), *In the Event: toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments*. Berghahn Books. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt13w-wzdj.11>
- Malkki, LH.** 2015. *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jptn>
- Muehlebach, A.** 2013. On Precariousness and the Ethical Imagination: The Year 2012 in Sociocultural Anthropology. *American anthropologist*, 115(2): 297–311. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12011>
- Sandberg, M.** 2018. Moving the Border. The Everyday Border Work In/Of The European Border Regime. In: *Jahrbuch für Europäische Ethnologie: Dänemark*. Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh. pp. 49–58. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657792436_007

- Sandberg, M.** 2020. Retrospective ethnographies. Twisting moments of researching commemorative practices among volunteers after the refugee arrivals to Europe 2015. In: Lähdesmäki, T, et al. (eds.), *Challenges and Solutions in Ethnographic Research. Ethnography with a Twist*. Routledge.
- Scheer, M.** 2012. Are emotions a kind of Practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion. *History and Theory*, 51(2): 193–220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2012.00621.x>
- Sutter, O.** 2017. “Welcome!” Emotionale Politiken des zivilgesellschaftlichen Engagements für Flüchtend. *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 113(1): 3–23.
- Tsianos, S and Karakayali, S.** 2010. Transnational Migration and the Emergence of the European Border Regime: An Ethnographic Analysis. *European journal of social theory*, 13(3): 373–387. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431010371761>

List of interviews cited (all names have been anonymized)

- 20180119: Maja, Coordinator of Refugee Welcome Flensburg, 19.01.2018, Flensburg.
- 20180120: Refugees Welcome Flensburg group interview at Flensburg Central Station, 20.01.2018, Flensburg.
- 20180220: Afshin, Volunteers at the Copenhagen Central Station, 20.02.2018, Copenhagen.
- 20180209: Fatima, Volunteers at the Copenhagen Central Station, 09.02.2018, Copenhagen.
- 20180117: Kaj and Inge, Venligboerne Sønderborg, 17.01.2018, Sønderborg.

How to cite this article: Sandberg, M and Andersen, DJ. 2020. Precarious Citizenship and Melancholic Longing: On the Value of Volunteering after the Refugee Arrivals to Europe 2015. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 10(4), pp. 41–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.357>

Submitted: 30 August 2019 **Accepted:** 15 June 2020 **Published:** 26 November 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.