CHARITIES UNDER AUSTERITY. Ethnographies of poverty and marginality in Western non-profit and charity associations.

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Abstract

In an era of growing inequality, poverty and marginality are among the gravest challenges in the political agendas of many so-called "developed" countries. However, neoliberal policies and welfare state retrenchment imply that poverty alleviation, formerly one of the main duties of welfare states, increasingly relies on non-profit and charity organizations. In contrast to the attention that such organizations in the global south have attracted among ethnographers, ethnographies of non-profit and charity associations in Western societies addressing poverty relief is scarce. With the special issue "Ethnographies of Poverty and Marginality in Western Non-Profit and Charity Associations", we aim to fill this void. In this introductory article, we discuss the implications that current societal transformations have for the forms, functionality and effects of NGOs and charity associations, as well as the role that ethnographies of such organizations may have to shed light on the social processes through which poverty relief as a policy objective become institutionalised and practiced. Last, we present the participating authors and their contributions to this special issue.

Keywords: Charity organizations, organizational ethnography, poverty, volunteering, marginalization

1. Introduction

Poverty has become one of the most pressing challenges in the political agendas of so-called "developed" countries. The recent economic and financial crisis, the dismantling of the Fordist welfare state in many countries (one of the neoliberal era's hallmarks), and the increasing implementation of neoliberal policies, have intensified these challenges (Dickinson 2016). High unemployment rates, rising living costs, increasing economic burdens (mortgages, rents, taxes…), coupled with the deterioration of public aid, have positioned many families below the poverty line, obliging them to rely more heavily on non-profit and charity organizations to cover basic needs such as food or housing. Official Eurostat figures, for example, show that of the 500 million people living in the European Union, a staggering 119 million are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Eurostat 2017). The Red Cross Europe alone has over 1.3 million persons as staff and volunteers delivering care and support to the most vulnerable people and communities. In the US, during the same period, Americans donated almost $400 billion in private charity and 64.5 million U.S. adults volunteered a combined 7.9 billion hours of service (CPS, 2013)

The implementation of restrictive public measures in the form of austerity programmes and cuts, on the one hand, and a favouritism for more neoliberal and deregulatory policies, on the other, have hampered the alleviation of poverty and have led to increasing marginalization, expanding therefore an unparalleled global socioeconomic inequality (see Piketty, 2014). Indeed the spread of these political agendas and the reduction of

government social welfare expenditures partly explains the growth of the number of charities and the non-profit sector (Rice, 2007).

Liberal agendas adopted by modern states do not only explain the increasing privatization of health, education and social services, but also the externalization (i.e., outsourcing) of fundamental duties of the welfare state. Thus individual citizens are urged by politicians to volunteer, to donate, signalling that voluntary effort is understood as a necessary supplement to government action, particularly in times of economic recession (Clemens & Guthrie, 2011: 1). The government transfer of duties to third parties usually takes the form of both free material donations provided by private or corporate donors and unpaid work provided by volunteers.

These societal transformations have not only increased poverty, marginalization and inequality. They are also altering the forms, functioning and effects of charity organizations addressing the sector of the population in situations of poverty, creating some profound contradictions. First, *unattended welfare duties open the door for market-driven forces along increasing auditing and inefficiency.* As a consequence of the withdrawal of the welfare state, non-profit organizations have been forced to rely more heavily on funding from the corporate and financing sectors (notoriously on bank foundations and business fortunes). Charity has thus become increasingly professionalised – as illustrated for example by a growing number of academic departments in philanthropy since the 1980s (Katz 1999) – implying a huge industry, which spends billions on dependency-producing programs, including food pantries (Lupton, 2011). Ironically, people who have been evicted because they could not face the payment of their mortgages are now at times dependent on food and aid provided by the same banks that disposed them from their houses.

The partnership with banks and foundations have, in many cases, led to new organizational forms and practices such as the proliferation of intermediaries (between corporations, large foundations and non-profit organizations), and new pressures in the form of business-like accountability, auditing and control (see Strathern, 2000). Thus in charity organizations professional managers are gaining greater control, contrasting with the old ideal of voluntary civic engagement (Clemens & Guthrie, 2011: 7). Such incursion of private management, together with the macroeconomic pressures to constrain welfare spending, shape specific actions of public officials and welfare office workers (Lipsky, 1984; 2010), leading to an increasing mismatch between street-level worker's decisions and priorities on the one hand and policy-makers' or administrators' directives and priorities on the other (Holm, 2002). According to Lipsky, bureaucratic disentitlement is a mode of fiscal and programmatic retrenchment that takes place through obscure and routine actions of public authorities, and through failures to take action, that result in tragic distributive consequences for the last recipients (Lipsky 1984). Increasing auditing and control generally translates into a heftier bureaucratic burden that makes assistance slow and inefficient (see Strathern, 2000; Valenzuela, Lubbers and Molina, 2017).

Second, *charity, despite its good intentions, is not free from moral notions of deservingness, particularly regarding labour inclusiveness*. As anthropologist Maggie Dickinson puts it, "the Fordist-Keynesian welfare regimes that emerged in the 20th century were built around and constituted what James Ferguson (2013) calls "work

membership", which forms the basis of social belonging in industrial societies" (Dickinson, 2016:271). Hence organizations to assist the needy were somehow designed as a safety net for those who were expelled or marginalized from the labour market (disabled people, people with mental health issues or chronic illnesses, 'illegal' migrants, people with psycho-social difficulties, single mothers, etc.). From here it follows that the people who could not access the select "labour club" and had to resort to relying on public assistance tended to be considered as *system-dependent* and *incomplete citizens*.

For much of European history, work has been considered a virtue and idleness a vice. Accordingly poverty, or the impossibility of self-subsistence, has been equated with idleness or laziness, being therefore observed and treated with harshness and punishment (see Piven and Cloward, 1971). And this ideology has become reinvigorated under neoliberalism. Today, programs directed to poverty relief tend to be also punitive in order to push people (primarily single mothers) toward the labour market. In New York City, for instance, welfare office workers operationalise policies that ease access to food assistance for poor workers by making them work for food stamps, combining therefore protective work supports for the employed and punitive welfare regimes for the unemployed: it does not simply correct the structure of inequality, but it is in its own right a system of stratification that commodifies labour in many ways (Dickinson 2016).

However, often the type of labour that is available is so precarious that most of this people have engrossed the percentage of the so-called *working poor* (cf. Newman 1999). In fact, in a critical functionalist analysis of poverty, Gans (1972) argues that one of its societal functions is to get "dirty", dangerous or dead-end work done, forcing people to take up this kind of work because they have no other choice than to accept it at low wages and precarious labour conditions. Yet societies have been slow to consider alternatives to labour inclusiveness, even now with increasing automation of work, which is expected to affect many more people. As Standing observes regarding societal perceptions of the universal basic income, "[t]he mainstream view has (...) been that giving people money, without conditions or obligations, promotes idleness and dependency, while being unnecessarily costly" (Standing, 2008:1).

The underlying norms of labour inclusiveness have even affected the way in which charity organizations help the unemployed, going beyond providing basic needs such as food or shelter. As Lupton puts it, "the ultimate goal should be to help them forge their own path: in essence, to be able to work to transform their own lives and that of their community" (Lupton 2011: 223). As a consequence, charity organizations often –implicitly or explicitly– aim to teach, rehabilitate, and re-educate individuals through what are regarded *appropriate* daily routines, skills and habits related with labour inclusiveness and social *reinsertion* (e.g., punctuality, formality, saving, etc.) and the "correction" of *deviant* habits or behaviours (i.e., *culture of poverty*, Lewis, 1966). Much of these values and habits are based upon the work ethic and the neoliberal logic – efficiency, employment, saving, routine, discipline, etc.

Third, *along with the commodification of labour, charity organizations also increasingly commodify their provisions in an attempt to dignify the situation*. With the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism (see Harvey 1991; Boyer and Saillard, 1995), not only production, but also consumption becomes a fundamental means of social integration. As a consequence some charities are devising new strategies to *dignify* the poor, such as

transforming the old food banks into supermarket-like centres where clients *simulate* purchasing (i.e., choosing) different products for the value of money-like charity coupons they receive. In other words, clients are channelled through consumption in order to be integrated in the market-driven society. Similarly, fundraising and charity campaigns (particularly for international humanitarianism) increasingly adopt consumer-based principles, offering online shopping platforms for ethical consumption and using celebrities for branding, thereby banalizing the suffering of others (Fluri, 2017). More than a century ago, Engels, in his 1845 treatise on the condition of the working class in England, already pointed out that charitable giving, whether by governments or individuals, is often seen by the givers as a means to conceal suffering that is unpleasant to see. Charity, in other words, is a way to make poverty invisible for the burgeoning urban culture.

Last, and elaborating on the above, *charity has reverse effects*. Some authors point out that charity has unwanted long-term effects, such as the reproduction of structural inequalities through disempowerment and marginalization of those depending upon this assistance (Lupton 2001; Rice 2007; Minn, 2007; Bornstein, 2009; Hanson, 2015). While charity makes donors feel better, it may hurt and exclude those who receive it. In contrast to the social values attached to giving (generosity, praise, recognition, kindness, etc.), those attached to the receiving end are negative (shame, guilt, stigma). Furthermore, scholars have identified that to encourage charitable donations and volunteerism, charity organizations have come to represent poverty in increasingly sensationalistic ways in order to overcome the "compassion fatigue" (Rozario, 2003) that citizens might feel when being confronted repeatedly with representations of suffering. In the context of contemporary American humanitarianism, Rozario identified the influence of entertainment-oriented mass culture, "a creation of a sensationalistic mass culture in the form of presentation in print and film of vivid accounts of suffering" (Rozario, 2003:481). By doing so, they increase the stigma of people in situations of poverty.

The increasing inequality and thus dependency on charity organizations in the western world call for research into the different forms, functioning and effects of these organizations. Yet despite the recent interest for NGOs and humanitarianism in the global south (e.g. Fischer, 1997; Redfield, 2005; Bornstein, 2009; Minn, 2017; Malkki, 2015; Hilhorst, 2003; Mosse, 2005; Hindman and Fechter, 2010), charitable organizations in the global north have been more rarely the object of anthropological research (exceptionally, see for example Glasser, 1988; Douzina-Bakalaki, 2017). Given the increasing inequality in western societies however, we believe it is time to shed light on the diverse forms, the functioning and (reverse) effects of these organizations. Therefore, this Special Issue is specifically devoted to the ethnographies of non-profit and charity associations in Western urban settings that are active in the areas of poverty and marginality in the post-welfare state era. In the remainder of this introduction, we first define charity and charity organizations, and then focus on how ethnography can help us understand these organizations better. Finally, we present the different contributions to this special issue.

2. Charity and the diversity of organizational forms

What is charity and why is it so important in our current societies? Charity basically means a voluntary giving to those in need. In economic terms, charity is currently the main means of provision for people in need. Total charitable giving, in the US, has nearly doubled in real terms since 1990 and charitable gifts of money exceed 2% of gross domestic product (List, 2011: 157). In light of general privatization and retreat of social assistance's services, agencies and charitable organizations, together with volunteerism and the altruism of individual donors, perform a vital and inestimable task in our society. The reality of people suffering from poverty, without these agents, would be much worse.

In anthropological terms, the philanthropic act of charity can be regarded as a "common heritage of humankind" (Isaac, 1993: 14), fulfilling similar functions of economic forms of integration (Polanyi, 1944) such as reciprocity (see Molina et al., 2017), gift-giving (Parry & Bloch, 1989) or exchange (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1925).

In religious terms, in the Western tradition charity is closely associated with Christianity (Bonner et al., 2003; Minn, 2007; Neumann, 2007; Cohen, 2005), although the act of providing the needy shares a long-lasting nexus through major religions, history and places – for instance, the Christian alms find an equivalent in the Jewish *tzedakah*, in the *zakat* and *sadaqa* in Islam, or the *dāna* in Indian religions (Neumann, 2007; Cohen, 2005). The word *charity* derives from the Ancient Greek *agape* (ἀγάπη) and the Latin *caritas*, and finds a continuity in the old French *charité*, the Spanish *caridad,* or the English *charity*, referring to love of God and/or God's love. Its religious meaning embraces both normative (behavioural, material) and moral (justice, equality, reciprocity) principles, as shown in classic biblical texts:

> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:31-46)

However today charity institutions are almost everywhere and present a vast heterogeneity beyond these religious foundations. While charities are usually inscribed within a three sector model (public, private or market, and voluntary sector), they sometimes mediate between these organizations and other actors and institutional levels. Institutional poverty relief can take many different faces (NGOs, guilds, fraternities, religious institutions, welfare state, private foundations, social enterprises, grassroots organizations, etc.), settings (community kitchens, food banks, hospitals, etc.), actors (clients, benefactors, volunteers, administrative staff, social workers, etc.), or idiosyncrasies (religious values, political agendas, formal and informal rules, etc.) to very different recipients that are usually grouped under the same social label (e.g., the economically poor or socially marginalized) although they present a wide array of profiles and can be associated with other problems (chronic diseases, disabilities, mental health problems, addictions, unemployment; O'Connor, 2001).

3. Ethnographies of NGOs and charity organizations in the global north

The fact that non-profit and charitable institutions involve various levels of actors, settings and rules, embracing sometimes specific cultures (see above), makes them particularly suitable for an institutional ethnographic approach, in a triple sense (Hejtmanek, 2016; see Goffman, 1961; Foucault, 1995). First, some charitable institutions can be taken (at least heuristically) as *total institutions*: settings grouping similar people cut off from the wider community and sharing common norms and aims. Goffman (1961) classified orphanages, poor houses and nursing homes, besides sanatoriums and jails, as total institutions. Secondly, sometimes non-profit organizations (e.g., community kitchens) are capable of fulfilling roles previously ignored by governments, or traditionally realized by families or local groups, in an attempt to mitigate social problems, playing both roles (e.g., providing care and a fictional family to the client) and acting therefore as social institutions, like kinship. Thus, non-profit and charity organizations can be approached from diverse perspectives since they frequently provide other types of support beyond material assistance that are typically fulfilled by the family or close friends (e.g., emotional, material, financial support). Institutional ethnography can examine the specific design of institutions and their corresponding strength, the specific events within an institution, or the mechanisms by which knowledge and culture are organized and dispersed. And third, charitable and non-profit organizations can be approached as formal institutions, since they are created, and enforced through channels of accepted official organizations (courts, legislatures, bureaucracies) and state-enforced rules (constitutions, laws, regulations).

An ethnographic approach to the institutional context where persons in situations of poverty and marginalization are assisted allows researchers to focus on the relationship between macro-structure (poverty policies, welfare state, citizenship, etc.), the meso level (networks of non-profit organizations, etc.), and the micro level (interactions in the institution), offering a complete picture of interest for policymakers, practitioners and scholars alike. At the micro-level ethnography unleashes all its power, producing a dense, deep, full-grained account of the daily reality. Ethnography can shed light on the social processes through which poverty reduction as a policy objective becomes institutionalised and practiced (Green, 2006), providing a dense, qualitative description of the daily practices and discourses, its driving moral principles, and both the social roles and perceptions of the actors involved. The ethnographic incursion provides another dimension and perspective of the mundane intricacies of everyday life, off the records and away from official statistics, touching upon imaginaries, sensibilities, patterns and tendencies. It also delivers a relational vision of the internal institutional dynamics, revealing the relationship between the institutional aims, the underlying idiosyncrasy, the different actors and intersections at play (namely gender, class, and nationality, race and/or ethnicity). As a qualitative, face-to-face strategy, as Ybema et al. put it, "although the quotidian experiences of people working in organizations may, to some, hardly seem exciting, for organizational ethnographers much of the intriguing 'mystery' of organizational life is hidden in the ordinary exchanges of ordinary people on an ordinary sort of day" (2009:1). For instance, particular norms and relationships of reciprocity have been described among clients (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009) or between clients, volunteers and benefactors (Rice, 2007).

At the meso-level, it has been observed that the way in which day-to-day organizations are structured effectively influences the opportunities of clients or members of these

organizations to get to know each other and to create new links with both similar and different people (Small, 2009). Sometimes ethnography has detected a mismatch between the decisions and priorities of social workers and those of policy-makers or administrators (Holm, 2002).

At the structural level, discourses and policy of poverty and marginality have taken shape through a series of oppositions that reproduce social imaginaries of the deprived: sustenance and deterrence (i.e., to warrant eligibility), deserving and undeserving (e.g., *good* and *bad* poor), non-rights and rights (e.g., need, duty, citizenship…). These oppositions are often embedded in the purposes of public assistance and the eligibility for such assistance (Asen 2002). While some authors wonder whether we are tending toward a three-sector model (state, market and voluntary sector; Rifkin, 1995), others envisage a pervasive top-down influence from the hegemonic discourse to the micro-logic of the charity daily practices (references).

4. The contributions in this special issue

This *Special Issue* of the Journal of Organizational Ethnography is devoted to charity organizations that focus on poverty alleviation in Western urban contexts. As indicated before, although NGOs and humanitarianism in the global south have received increasing interest (see Fischer, 1997; Redfield, 2005), charitable organizations in the West have been rarely the object of ethnographic research in itself (Minn, 2007; Bornstein, 2009). This analysis becomes particularly pressing today, in a moment where austerity policies, privatization and welfare withdrawal are common-place. Therefore, this issue presents a selection of theoretical and empirical papers that analyse in detail the consequences of those rapid changes driven by market forces in the daily context of charity institutions attending impoverished and marginal sectors of the urban population. These ethnographic accounts portray the contradictions, tensions and daily realities of these institutions, providing very relevant clues and insights for professionals, scholars and policy-makers actively working on charitable issues and poverty alleviation in urban settings.

Most of the contributors have engaged in long-term ethnographic fieldwork, sometimes working as volunteers, in diverse charity settings like food banks or community kitchens. All these papers make an empirical contribution to the emerging literature on the outcomes of charities working under the new austerity schedules along the new market-driven forms of governances, showing some of their consequences. One of the clear conclusions is that the fight against poverty, in order to be effective, requires a strong and coordinated collaboration between different agents: state and municipal services, on the one hand, private organizations, charities, NGOs and civil society on the other.

Cepic's paper, "Ambivalent Gifts: An Ethnography of Charity in Croatia", analyses the effects of charitable giving and receiving in contemporary Croatia and the incursion of neoliberal discourses and practices. The paper engages in the analysis of givers and recipients of charitable aid by highlighting the contrast between the socialist past and the increasingly neoliberal present.

The paper "Charities as symbolic families", authored by Grau, Escribano, Valenzuela-Garcia and Lubbers, sheds light on the roles and responsibilities charity organizations are assuming in the face of Welfare State withdrawal. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a catholic charity organization in Spain, it indicates that to provide effective help, charity

organizations adopt the traditional roles of care typically provided by the family. These roles are also symbolically assumed through bonds of interconnectedness, obligation and commitment, sense of belonging, interdependence and the projection of symbolic spaces of hearth. Thus, charities can be understood as something else than care providers, as the relational dimension with clients extends beyond the recipients/providers relationship.

Henshaw's paper, "Administering Solidarity: Grassroots Welfare in Post-Debt Crisis Greece", analyses the consequences of relinquishing welfare provision to volunteers, showing how the impetus to address poverty is transformed through the process of administering it. Henshaw engages with volunteering work, logistics, and bureaucracy.

Ionita's paper "'Do unto others…': Exploring Food Aid Volunteers' Understanding of Food Access Issues", explores how the right to food is exercised within an association that runs a weekend soup kitchen in a social welfare community centre in Bucharest, Romania. Ionita also focuses on volunteers and on how the volunteers involved in this food charity activity perceive the beneficiaries of their generous act and their current life circumstances, as well as the extent to which a sense of community is built between those who prepare the food and those who receive it. Observation particularly focused on the purchase and cooking of ingredients. Due to the particular nature of the way cooking and food distribution takes place within the week-end soup kitchen, contact with beneficiaries is very limited and the volunteering activity is unlikely to fuel reflections on and actions against the underlying causes of food poverty.

Lords' paper "Profit, poverty and public care: austerity's charity working" is based on a yearly ethnographic fieldwork in a charity in England. The paper finds capitalist-market rationales are enacted within the organization. Charity is subordinated to business and profit permeates the site, thus changing the way that poverty is acted upon. Workers engage in labours of negotiation to sustain an ethos of public care, and ultimately impede a reconfiguration of poverty into profit via their everyday situated labour.

Rice and Wojtyńska's contribution "Ambiguous spaces: the charity-NGO nexus in Iceland" analyses the ambiguous relationship that Icelandic charities and NGOs have with the formal social welfare services they collaborate with as well as the clients they serve. By reviewing their combined work, they identify the dangers that this ambiguous space creates for the clients they serve, namely the lack of legal protection and the systematic exclusion of segments of the population in poverty.

Last, Small, Siliunas and Wallerstein's contribution "We Can Help, but There's a Catch: Non-Profit Organizations as Enabling and Constraining Institutions" critically discusses the constraints that the poor must face ("things they must do" and "things they must tolerate") in order to secure aid from non-governmental organizations. On the basis of a critical review of US non-governmental organizations, they show that NGOs have increasingly institutionalized cultural and political notions of deservingness.

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