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**Voluntary Work with Refugees:
Exploring Cross-cultural Meetings "In the Street".**

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Voluntary Work with Refugees: Exploring Cross-cultural Meetings "In the Street".

This paper¹ presents the practice of a team of volunteers that pay Sunday visits to houses taken up by refugees in Athens. Voluntary work constitutes a cross-cultural meeting which is invested with different meanings from the two sides. The different interpretations of voluntary work by both sides create conflicts, misinterpretations and lead to different modes of action to the ones proclaimed by the organization and the volunteers. Volunteers invoke the code of hospitality in order to describe their practice. In their narrative they appear as guests enjoying the hospitality of refugees and thus they feel they ought to bring gifts with them. But since culturally the offer of hospitality presupposes the existence of a proper household -a space that is characterized by order- street-workers try to impose an order in refugees' lives. They try to render the refugees capable house-holders by transforming "to dromo"/"the street" where they live, into "spitia"/"houses". Thus -once more- volunteers come in conflict with their initial political intentions and attempt to apply their own cultural models to the refugees.

An anthropological approach of voluntary work

I am currently doing my PhD in the Department of Social Anthropology and History, University of Aegean. The subject of my PhD concerns the politics of voluntary work and the meaning of voluntarism in two different NGOs/ contexts in Athens. For two years, I was a volunteer and actively took part in the activities of two non governmental organizations that work with refugees. My research is based on participant observation, interviews and life stories of key informants- volunteers. I also conducted a few interviews and chronicles with certain refugees- receivers of aid. The focus however of my study is on volunteers and their point of view of voluntary work, its meaning, and its connections with other aspects of their lives i.e. towards the state, concerning gender matters etc.

There are only a few ethnographic accounts of the cultural dimension of voluntarism and NGOs. Thus the benefits of an anthropological methodology- theoretical approach and in depth micro-level analysis are missing. My PhD research aims to add an ethnographic approach to the studies of voluntarism and NGOs in Greece. Ethnographic accounts enrich the understanding of the multiplicity of NGOs and the cultural meaning of voluntarism since they account for historical, social and cultural

¹ This paper is based on research conducted in the context of my PhD research. I would like to express my gratitude to the Hellenic Ministry of Education and the EU Program EPEAEK, for their generous financial assistance during my PhD.

aspects (Cellier 1995, Buchowski 1996, Dunn 1996, Earle and Simonelli 2000, Fisher 1997, Flower and Leonard 1996, Gezon 2000, Knight 1996, Procoli 2000, Sampson 1996, White 1996).

Finally, I wish to combine an anthropological with a political science approach and view the phenomena from an interdisciplinary perspective. Concepts such as “charity” and “civil society” are often used by actors –volunteers, NGO representatives etc- in order to speak for different actions, meanings of voluntary work, as well as different kind of relations with the other- recipient of voluntary work. In my PhD I intend to explore these terms as indigenous categories, rather than analytical ones.

Introduction

This paper presents the practice of a group of volunteer street-workers in Athens that once a week pay visits to houses taken up by refugees². I focus on the volunteers and their efforts, interpretations and meanings as far as voluntary work and the relations with the other are concerned. The cultural background of their practice defines their interpretations and way of action. Volunteers’ “systems of meanings” (Geertz 1973) and culturally defined notions on house, order and “filoxenia” shape and reshape the way the practice as well as relations between volunteers and refugees is formed. Those relations often contradict the political intentions of both the organization and the volunteers themselves. Their cultural background influences the way work with refugees is actually done. Thus although the practice aims in the cultural bridging, it also includes intensities, conflicts, tensions, and different interpretations and cultural models from all sides that influence the communication.

The political convictions of the volunteers and the objectives of the organization aim in creating equal relations with the refugees. Voluntarism in this particular frame has an intense political content. Programmatically voluntary work is described in political terms, as a political action of solidarity towards the other and also as a political stance towards the Greek state. The objective is to “help one to help oneself” through helping one become an acting subject. The fundamental intention of the volunteers is

² Legally the etic interpretation of “refugee” (Voutira 2003) as legally defined by the Geneva Convention is the one also used by NGOs and in policy. Henceforth in this article the term “refugee” will be applied when referring to them since this is the way they define themselves and the volunteers refer to them as well. The term “refugee” is used both by street-workers as well as by the people whom they meet “in the streets” who are thus self-defined. The people the group of volunteers meet are either asylum seekers (they have applied for an asylum in the country and possess a temporary permit to stay here) or they have no legal documentation whatsoever.

to draw the refugees from a situation of passivity in which they are placed (politically and legally they are considered by the Greek state as non-citizens and are thus posed in an inferior position). The street-workers try to avoid continuous benefits and their subsequent transformation into patrons of the refugees. However their attempt seems to fail, as the case of Rat Hotel that follows demonstrates. The refugees “shut the doors” to the volunteers and deny any contact with them. Progressively and despite their opposite intentions street-workers shape patron relations with refugees when they realize that their former tactic has failed. Thus they begin to provide to them as many materials and services they can. This effort is often exhausting for the volunteers that continuously offer money, goods, and services and make escorts to hospitals. Leila’s family case-study is presented to demonstrate the way in which the action of the team was shaped after Rat Hotel. Through politically unorthodox methods - offers of materials and services in the refugees- the volunteers finally manage to achieve their initial objective and transform the refugees into acting subjects.

Furthermore it is the cultural code of hospitality that volunteers invoke in order to describe and perceive their practice. According to their rhetoric, the refugees are the house-holders that offer hospitality to them. Through this inversion the refugees are not comprehended as the passive recipients of alms of volunteers and they are no longer conceived as put in an inferior position³. On the contrary, the volunteers consider that they are found in a hierarchically inferior place since they are entertained in the houses of refugees; they accept their hospitality, the “kerasma”-offers- and communication.

Since the refugees are considered as “oikodespotes” -house-keepers offering hospitality- they need to become capable ones. Thus the volunteers try to change them into culturally acceptable and proper householders. This includes a series of actions: acquirement of the property of the space, transformation of occupied buildings into "houses". According to their own cultural model of a proper “noikokirio” –household- and a proper householder, the volunteers intervene in the houses of the refugees. The buildings are cleaned; they are dyed, equipped with furniture, carpets and other objects. Simultaneously, the volunteers undertake the role of guarantors towards the

³ In analyzing humanitarian aid, the receivers of the aid are usually de facto perceived as the passive receivers of the offer, according a Maussian-like exchange theory paradigm (Mauss 1st published in 1924).

householders whose houses are under occupation, and progressively they transform the property status quo from occupation into renting.

This intervention constitutes another contradiction of the practice of voluntary work. Volunteers' political intention is to give space and the ability of action to the other. However what they also do is try to impose their own cultural model and their own terms. As long as the refugees are concerned, they consciously attempt to make the volunteers their patrons, so that they shall provide, protect and guarantee for them. They also seek to impose their own cultural logic driven by the objective to survive under very difficult conditions. In the grounds of a state that officially denies them the right of legal and political existence –since they are non-citizens and shall not be attributed the refugee status⁴- and in a context of poor social care towards them, they struggle to survive also through relations with indigenous people⁵.

Voluntary Work Athens (VWA)

Voluntary Work Athens is a non governmental organization that was founded in the 1990s, a period where there was a rapid increase of NGOs in Greece⁶. The field of action of the organization extends to various 'target-groups'. Voluntary work is practiced with refugees, immigrants, minority groups (Muslims) and psychiatric patients. Voluntarism in the frames of the organization has an intense political content. It is conceived as a way of political action. Many of the volunteers are intensely politicized and are also –or used to be in the past- members of left-wing political groups –as they define themselves.

Officially the main purpose of the contact with various 'target-groups' - recipients of voluntary work, is to render them active subjects so that they will be able to act for themselves. At the same time, voluntary work has a denouncing character that is expressed through the public announcement of the problems of various groups and the political background of their deprivation. Parts of the voluntary action constitute

⁴ The people that the volunteers meet are not officially considered refugees; i.e. they have not been attributed the refugee status by the Greek state. Some of them are officially asylum seekers (have or shall go through the interview process where they are going to apply for an asylum) but there are also others that carry no official documentation whatsoever. For the volunteers the legal status of the people they seek to contact and help is not of primal importance.

⁵ Mestheneos (2002: 192) stresses that aliens in Greece often seek to survive through patron relations they create with indigenous people.

⁶ The appearance of NGOs in Greece seems to be quite limited, compared to the situation in other European countries (Anheier 2001, Mouzelis 1995).

publications in the press, appearances in the television and in the radio as well as attendance in antiracist demonstrations.

The political character of voluntary work for the organization (for the founders but also for most volunteers) is summarized in their reaction towards other forms of volunteerism. Voluntarism in the context of the Olympic Games Athens 2004 was condemned as completely contrary to the 'true spirit' of voluntarism. Their critique was based on the commercialization of the Olympic Games, the "national" character of the endeavor and the state's promotion of Olympic voluntarism. Television programs, newspaper articles, statements and events stressed the need that all Greeks become part of the national effort. Although during the period I was in the field many NGOs were very optimistic and expressed the opinion that the Olympic Games of Athens would promote volunteerism, according to the volunteers of this particular organization, such was only a meaningless hope. Olympic volunteerism had nothing to do with the politicized volunteerism that they expressed and believed in. For them, voluntary work principally constitutes the expression of social solidarity towards populations that are on the fringe of the Greek state. It is not simply a practice of selfless and unilateral offer of time and materials. In the frame of such reasoning, refugees, minority groups, psychiatric clinic patients etc are not simply considered as categories with special needs, but as groups facing policies that further push them on the fringe.

Voluntary Work Athens' volunteers aim to approach the other in equivalent terms. Offers of materials and services are considered leading to the configuration of relations of power, dependence and patronship that politically contrasts the constitutive aims of organization and its volunteers. The transformation of voluntary work into "filanthropia"/ "charity" is the biggest danger. "Filanthropia"/ "charity" is considered politically suspect since according to a historically based perception of the phenomenon, it is perceived as the practice of the medium social layers that aimed to control the other and to strengthen the social prestige of the donors.

"Charity ladies that have tea and save poor": this is considered to be the model of old-fashioned charity that is opposite to a volunteerism based on the equality and the respect of other.

During the last two decades there has been an increase in discourses around the category of civil society. In an analytical level -by political scientists mainly- NGOs are considered as the main formations representative of civil society. In Greece civil

society is thought to be making its first shy steps in the beginning of the 1990s. Like many other NGOs, Voluntary Work Athens in an official level adopts a rhetoric that revolves around civil society in order to describe its action. In such a context, voluntarism is differentiated from practices of the past that are included in the form of “filanthropia”/“charity” and comes to constitute part of civil participation.

"Support of refugees" program

In 1996 Voluntary Work Athens began visiting the camp of Saint Andrea in Nea Makri, where resided around 200- 300 Kurds, mainly from Iraq. Like other NGOs - Doctors of the World, Doctors without Borders, Hellenic Red Cross etc- VWA aimed to provide help to Kurds who were staying there. This activity progressively took an institutional character and led to the formation of a new program of action of the organization, the “Support of Kurdish Refugees” program. The decision to point out Kurds as their “target-group” is based on the more general confrontation of the Kurdish question during that period in Greece. Furthermore, the special characteristics of asylum seekers in Greece –not only with regard to that period, but also until today – indicate the Kurds as the most numerous ethnic group⁷.

During the last eight years the “program of support of Kurdish refugees” of VWA has extended its action in various areas of Athens.

Abstract from the organization’s booklet:

"Groups of trained volunteers activated in giving Greek... as well as English language lessons. They supported the refugees in their job pursuits and collaborated with other NGOs for the resolution of basic problems of survival and existence in various reception centers. Volunteers organized art exhibitions with pieces made by refugees, aiming in the cross-cultural communication. Later... we activated in... Koumoundourou square where we provided information with regard to their refugee status... "

In 2001 the organization founded a small “xenonas”/ guesthouse, where asylum seekers are “filoxenountai”/“entertained”. The guesthouse of VWA represents an innovative effort to avoid institutionalization and apathy on behalf of the refugees. It

⁷ Although official statistical facts concerning asylum seekers in Greece enlighten asylum seekers according to nationality, rather than ethnicity, the estimation is that Kurds is the most numerous ethnic group. According to UNHCR, Iraqis (most of whom are Kurds) are the most numerous group of asylums seekers in Greece in the last five years.

is now the only self-managed guesthouse in the country. According to the guesthouse regulations, the “guests” ought to participate in the functional expenses of the guesthouse (electricity and water supply bills) and take care of their private expenses and maintenance on their own. With the weekly monitoring of volunteers and occasionally professionals –social workers or psychologists– asylum seekers belonging to different ethnicities live together under the same roof (Afghan, Kurds from Iraq, Kurds from Turkey, Arabs from Iraq, Sudanese etc).

The Street-work Team

Apart from the guesthouse, the “Support of Kurd Refugees” Program also includes the action of a team of volunteers that does "douleia sto dromo"/ “work in the street” or "approach of homeless refugees" or "street-work" as it has prevailed to be called after the term in English. Forty year-olds that used to be active politically in the past, twenty year-olds that perceive their voluntary work in political terms, immigrants – refugees that work voluntarily as interpreters and foreigners that offer voluntary work in the frames of European exchange program⁸ are the members of a multifunctional group of volunteers that do “street-work”. Once a week volunteers visit old buildings that refugees have taken up and stay under very bad conditions (wrecked houses, with no water or electricity).

For the last eight years, the "street-work" team has been making visits to Ano Nea Smirni (1999-2001) –an area where even today many male Kurdish refugees stay- in the Pedio tou Areos and in Victoria square. In the last 3 years the group has been paying visits in Academia Platonos. The team henceforth does not offer help only to Kurds, but to any other groups of refugees it meets. During the period I conducted fieldwork, volunteers came in contact mainly with Iraqi –Kurds and Turkmen mainly. The street-work group characterizes those people as "refugees" even if their legal status varies: some of them are asylum seekers, and others do not possess any legitimizing document.

Officially street-work aims to record the problems and the conditions of existence of refugees. Furthermore, one of its main purposes is to mobilize the refugees via information for legal and medical matters, as well as on other organizations where

⁸ EVS: European Voluntary Service. A program sponsored by the EU where young people are encouraged to offer voluntary work in other European countries. The EU finances both the receiving organizations and the volunteers who travel, by providing money for their maintenance and training.

they can address. However the way that voluntary work is actually structured, depends as much on the composition of the team of the volunteers, as well as on their interaction with the refugees they meet. Street-work constitutes a cross-cultural meeting, which is shaped and intermediated by the content that both sides attribute to it: volunteers and refugees. Very often the initial intentions of the volunteers contradict the final result and the way their relations with the refugees are shaped. The two case studies that follow indicate two different tactics of the street-work group and the reaction of the refugees.

Rat Hotel

The Rat Hotel -this was the name given to the space by one of its provisional residents- was an old factory in the area of Kolonos where a vague number of Kurdish men from Iraq resided (from 100 to 300 individuals). In spring 2002, the street-work team visited the space for first time. The team began to make weekly visits and to speak with the refugees. The volunteers faced a lot of problems: people were circumspect, many times they were even aggressive, the communication was hard, the conditions bad. When I first went to the "factory" in the summer of 2002, the street-workers were familiar to the residents of the place, although the population of the refugees was changing all the time.

Entering in the yard through a wrecked door, the space looked like a stockyard of abandoned objects: an old car, piles from iron, waste everywhere. From the old factory they had only remained wrecked columns, on one of which featured a red cross as a remnant after the last earthquake. As other volunteers had warned me before our visit, I wore socks and athletic shoes, despite the summer heat. We were walking over water, filths and waste. We thought that people were probably suffering from scabies, hepatitis, while others were sick with unknown diseases.

As we walked we entered in what had remained from the building. The refugees had set up self-made shack from carton. Some people recognized the members of the street-work team and greeted us as we passed by their carton houses: "Sala'm male'kom" we also replied. We carefully walked one after the other. They had put me walk between two male volunteers for protection as they clarified. However I was feeling insecure throughout the visit. As we entered the Rat Hotel and passed through carton houses the light became dimmer. We stepped on dirty waters and smelled

mixed smells: food, sewerage, waste that was burned and that made the atmosphere suffocating.

After a while we came out to the back side of the building in a clearing. People came closer in order to hear what the interpreter said. I felt a claustrophobic feeling of hemming. I managed to appear self-controlled and as I realized afterwards I was not the only one in the team. All volunteers felt like fainting and had the same wish to get out of there as soon as possible.

The interpreter made the known introduction in Arabic "we are from a small organization.. we have come before... to help you although our power is little". Once a sick man with high fever was brought to us, and another that had heart problems also came and told us he had to be operated. We began to give out leaflets with Doctors without Borders' address but they insisted that they could not go alone there. The interpreter made an appointment with them in order to escort them in the next day (in the end the refugees did not appear to the appointment).

Progressively the stifling sentiment went away and I could observe people around me. It was obvious that some of them approached, listened to us for a while and (as the interpreter explained to me later) said "its them again" and left. The team tried to talk with them. With the help of the interpreter we asked them where they were from, which problems they faced, how we could help.

The refugees with the time had ceased asking the team for help. They knew that either they could not, or would not help them. Their requests mainly included work, legal permit to stay in the country and when they realized that the volunteers could do nothing about these matters, they asked for material things and services.

When they first started visiting Rat Hotel, the volunteers noticed that the refugees asked for things "it is as if they have not realized who we actually are.. it is as if they believe as to be government officers", one volunteer told me. Most street-workers insisted that the relation with the other should not be based on benefits and offers, but only on a symbolic level. The decision of non benefit/ offers was actually a conscious political choice of the team that insisted on dealing with the refugees in equal terms.

In this spirit the team attempted to clean the space from the enormous amount of waste that had accumulated. The team brought garbage bags, gloves and spades and tried to help the refugees clean the Rat Hotel. The amount of waste and the unwillingness of many refugees to participate made the effort impossible. The small quantity that was gathered was considered a success by the team since it was a joint

activity with the refugees. The cleaning of the space was a demand that street-workers express; a desperate effort to do something factual "*with* the refugees.. and not *for* the refugees" as they said.

In our last visits to the Rat Hotel most of the refugees would not even speak to us.

There was a lot of intensity in the team and many times its members disagreed intensely. Some people said "they (the refugees) are bored of us. We do not have anything to give to them and they know... ". The interpreter in particular felt that all the anger and the aggressiveness of refugees addressed to him. He could not answer to their constant questions: "why are you coming? You come and go and you don't do anything... what do you want here?" Many times after a visit in the Rat Hotel the interpreter was so frustrated that burst out with anger to the other members of team "why do we go? After all we do nothing".

The persistence of the street-workers to go each Sunday to the Rat Hotel even when the disposal of refugees was negative and aggressive, their agony to form some kind of relation with the refugees, to become acceptable and welcoming in their space, finally turned out fruitless.

In autumn 2002 the team stopped its visits to the place, while the refugees often said "we kicked them out of here".

Leila's family

The case of Leila's family that follows is indicative of the shift on the way voluntary work was organized after the Rat Hotel.

Leila, her husband and their two children left Iraq and after two years of staying in Turkey, they arrived to Greece. In Athens they broke the padlock of an old house where nobody stayed and began to live there. In a Sunday afternoon, as we were passing through the house, the street-work team noticed the typical indications of a refugee house. On the door there was a chain with a padlock that made the house resemble empty, whereas in the courtyard there were clothes, containers with water and other objects that implied human presence. The interpreter struck the door shouting "Maleka!" (= "home" in Kurd/ Sorani). In the end they opened the door and we started to talk with them. The team stood around the interpreter who translated: "we are from the X organization.. We help refugees... Each Sunday we come out in the street". Then the volunteers asked how many stayed in the house, when they had arrived to Greece, what kind of legal documentation they possessed.

The refugees were hesitant. Even when we asked them if they needed something, they did not express any "demands". After a while however they began to say that they needed some things: blankets, foods, clothes.

From then on, the street-work team visited Leila's family almost each Sunday. As to other houses, they went each week, certain times bringing sachets with foods or toys for the children, then they asked if they needed something, if they had a certain health problem.

In one of our visits Leila announced us that she was pregnant in her third child. She was worried how to bring up a child under these conditions, with the uncertainty of their stay in the country, in a house with no water or electricity. She said she wanted to have an abortion. Since she was already one month pregnant, she should have it in ten days since, as she said, her religion forbids an abortion after forty days of pregnancy. The volunteers started to talk and ask each other if somebody could make the escort in the following days. Nobody however in the street-work team was available to escort her to the hospital in such a short notice. Leila then started shouting to the team, she was aggressive towards what she considered an indifferent reaction by the volunteers who did not seem to understand. Finally Leila kept the fetus.

Since Leila did not have a "pink card" (asylum seekers' temporary stay permit to the country) she would have to pay for the hospital in her own means. The street-work members mobilized, came in touch with other NGOs and escorted Leila to the police station. In the end the team's acquaintances in other NGOs proved very useful and Leila got the "pink card". Members of team made escorts with her in the maternity clinic for the essential medical tests, and when she gave birth we visited her with gifts for the newborn.

After the birth of the baby, the relations between the team and the family got closer. The team won Leila's trust. She began to speak about more personal matters, to ask for their help. We used to spend more time in the family's house, Leila offered us tea and we sat cross-legged on the floor. We talked about the family's everyday matters, their problems or their life in Iraq. We used to play with the family's children, and the atmosphere was very friendly. All volunteers were happy to visit Leila's family every week. The interpreter translated; he was the mediator of communication. The volunteers also gave advice to Leila on how her children should be taken care of.

Soon the house changed completely. After the encouragement and suggestions of the street-workers, Leila's husband dyed the walls and repaired the windows. The street-work team congratulated the family on the repairs.

The team continues to make visits to Leila's family, most of the times bringing them foods or other things. They also helped Leila's family rent a –formerly abandoned– house in the area. In fact volunteers guaranteed to the owner of the house that the rent would be paid (actually one of the volunteers paid part of the rent), and told him that the family were “noble and nice people”. The family's standard of living has improved a lot and what they now ask for has also changed. Thus when the team brought Leila a bed for the baby she did not accept it since "it was not wooden and would not suit with the other furniture of house" as she said. The volunteers were speechless at Leila's refusal of offer.

Inversion of the hospitality code

Abandoning the effort of intervention in the Rat Hotel, the street-work team – including some new volunteers- moved its action to the near region. The experience of Rat Hotel had exhausted the volunteers. The team realized that creating relations with the refugees was a very difficult undertaking and the constant presence in the space once a week was not enough. The refugees resisted, were not always friendly to the volunteers and they did not appear willing to talk with them. As long as for the main objective of street-work, passing by information to the refugees (on legal matters and other NGOs that provide services to them), most of the time they seemed to be better informed than the volunteers.

Progressively the action of the street-work team was differentiated. The principle of non offer of materials and services began to become more flexible in the new houses that the volunteers started visiting. An entire neighborhood in Academy Plato where refugees resided in abandoned houses began to accept the systematic visits of the street-work team at least once a week.

The volunteers give out sachets with foods, clothes and medicines. They have either collected these goods or bought them with their own money. They shape relations of protection and giving, they are next to refugees providing materials (foods, the clothes), money (rent), information (for other NGOs), guarantees (toward house-owners), mediation (for the edition of a residence permit), services (escorts in hospitals and other services) etc.

As discussed above, the political stance of the volunteers, contradicts the giving character that the practice has adopted after the Rat Hotel experience. The transformation of the volunteers into patrons and providers of the refugees contrasts the political intention to deal with the other in equal terms and to avoid creating relations of dependence and inferiority. In order to deal with the contradiction inherent in the practice, the street-workers invoke the code of hospitality. According to them, their offers to the refugees are gifts for their hospitality.

Once a week, street-workers enter the refugees' houses, sit on the floor and have tea, play with the children of the family and discuss with the refugees. It all seems like a Sunday visit; volunteers pass by as many houses as possible and in some of them, they stay a little longer. It is a social meeting, where the volunteers are the guests and the refugees the house-holders.

Humanitarian help to refugees is often interpreted as the gift that lends force in the donor in relation to the recipient. The power of the donor allows him to decide on what to give and to control the recipient for the way that he uses it (Harrel-Bond B, Voutira E and Leopold M 1992: 209).

In the NGO discourse as well as in the discourse of the official Greek state, the refugees (as the immigrants) are determined through the norm of hospitality as "entertained" in the country. For the volunteers of the street-work team that visit the houses of refugees, the situation is reversed. Under the present conditions, in their narrations, it is not the refugees that are considered entertained, but themselves. According to the norm of hospitality, they need to make offerings in order to compensate a situation that by definition places them in an inferior position. As guests entertained in the refugees' houses, they need to bring gifts that 'open the doors'.

"...In the end we are the ones who go to their space, do you understand? There are certain correlations hard to reverse. Perhaps what we actually try is to reverse our inferior position by giving them things. We find therefore this way in order to reverse this situation and thus we become... those that make the offer, the donors, and the philanthropists. As those that attend, mom, the big breast, (laughter)..."

Thus, they offer materials and services in order to become acceptable. They try hard to correspond to the needs of refugees and many times they exceed their abilities. The

offer "opens doors" and allows the penetration of the limits with the other, constituting the means for the claim of his hospitality.

In that way the fundamental objective of voluntary work is achieved; to render the refugees acting subjects. Even if the means are politically unorthodox and oppose the programmatic principles of the organization (that are against the benefit of materials and services), the volunteers attempt to handle the refugees as equivalent and equally capable for action. They do not perceive the refugees as the passive receptors of aid and reprehensible "charity" or "alms", but as house-holders who receive the street-work team in their houses each Sunday, and offer them hospitality. However, disagreements are often expressed between street-workers who object the offers and the configuration of patron and protection relations with the refugees.

In the present case, refugees aim to grant the volunteers will all initiative of action, so in order to render them their protectors and guarantors. Whilst the volunteers attempt to render the refugees acting subjects able to act on their own, what the refugees actually try to do is survive through the configuration of patron relations which are considered politically unacceptable by the volunteers. In a way, the primer concern of the volunteers is achieved: the refugees are certainly acting subjects. As Benthall (2001) claims, it is often the receivers of humanitarian aid that prefer offerings despite the fact that they are considered politically suspect by the givers. Or as Stirrat and Henkel stress when talking about the development process, for the beneficiaries of such programs, access to goods and services is more important than self-actualization (1997: 73).

The conflict between the different views of the volunteers and the refugees is based on different cultural perceptions and models as well as on the political intentions of the volunteers. On the one hand, this situation leads to conflicts between the two groups since the refugees often tend to have extreme demands and to ask their donors for things intensively. On the other hand, there are many disagreements in the interior of the street-work team with regard to the new way of action, as well as doubts concerning the relations that are shaped with the refugees.

Intervening in the houses - Transformation of the "street" into a "house"

On the other hand, the volunteers use the hospitality code that is based on indigenous cultural models and describes the way relations between entertained and house-holder

are formed. At the same time, they attempt to intervene in the conditions of life of refugees and in their relation with the buildings where they reside.

In practice the street-work team aims at the transformation of the buildings into "houses". In fact, the buildings that the team visits are not considered by the volunteers as "regular houses". It seems that they are more part of the "street", than actual "houses":

"... street- work.. we are talking about the margin.. not only for the persons (the refugees that are marginalized). Abandoned houses can also be considered a margin.. they are different from where we live.. an abandoned house.. it is not useful in anything... A home means something beyond the walls, electricity and water.. Homeless people will enter in a house and sleep (but they will continue to be homeless)... In the houses where we go they do not have water, they do not have electricity. They live in street...»

One of the first suggestions an enthusiastic new volunteer makes to the team, often concerns the cleaning of the internal and exterior space of a building. Since there is seldom a water supply in the buildings, the conditions of hygiene are very bad. The volunteers bring sachets of wastes, spades and gloves and clean together with the refugees.

The wish to clean the houses in the majority of the cases was not expressed by the refugees. Like in the Rat Hotel, in other buildings as well, the idea to clean the space was primarily expressed by the street-work team. In fact, the effort the team made in order to mobilize the refugees was not an easy affair and often lead to disappointments.

"I do what I can..." said M, a refugee himself. "I shout to them or I begin to clean in order to make them clean too. I stand on their doorstep and shout "Excuse me! Excuse me! Could you please come here and help me?" in order to make them come out they clean as well... I do not want however to do many things for them, because they need to do something for themselves too... they only ask for things... When you say: come and do something.. (they answer)"What to do?" And I am ashamed when somebody enters in the place and sees.. (how dirty it is).. I feel ashamed, aren't you ashamed (addressing in the refugee)? All right, how many times do I have to say the same things? Each day, each day...»

The refugees are on their way to “Europe” - as they often say- and in their journey, Greece constitutes a transit country⁹. Their final destination is countries of northern and Western Europe where -as they learn through networks of friends and relatives- the conditions for asylum seekers are much better and there is an organized system of social welfare. The sense of temporariness and continuous mobility create different relations with the space to those that the volunteers can understand and approve of. Even though volunteers recognize that the particular perception for the cleanness constitutes their own cultural value, they still claim:

"We have to educate them.. not to throw the waste outside their door when there is a bucket precisely next to them.. ... if they want to live in this society, for as long as they live, they need to respect certain things... the neighbors should not be obliged to tolerate the filth next to them.. ... we must put as a term that "guys we do not throw waste"..."

Apart from cleanness, what seems to distinguish the "house" from the "street" is the border, the limit from the exterior space. The houses where refugees stay very frequently do not have any windows or lock. Repairing of walls, fixing the door, the panes and the windows is central in order to render a house "home": asylum, a place where nobody can enter without permission.

"These houses are... home, that is to say there are walls and a roof and everything, they have the infrastructure to provide electricity, they have the infrastructure to provide running water... Home (however) means the growth, the maintainance of a human organism in a place... where nobody can enter without permission"

The transformation of the refugees in proper house-holders also includes interventions in the status-quo of their stay in a building. In many cases after the mediation of volunteers owners agree to rent a formerly occupied house to the refugees that live there. This is one from the main objectives of the street-workers who attempt such arrangements with the householders of occupied spaces. The volunteers become the

⁹ As Wantsea mentions in a research done on Iraqis asylum seekers in Greece, most of the times it is also the Greek state that reinforces Greece's role as a transit country (2004: 37). About transit migrants in Greece, see Papadopoulou 2004.

guarantors of a "family", and this is declared and recognized by the householders of the building. In certain cases - as Leila's- part of the rent is paid (without this becoming known to the official organization) by a street-worker.

The intervention in a space where men stay seems to be beyond the possibilities of the street-work team. The imposition of order in a disordered situation, an anti-structure as the spaces where men stay, in a "communa" -as volunteers have characterized the Rat Hotel- is impossible and can only lead to the withdrawal of the team and the disappointment of its members. Spaces like the Rat Hotel resist in any exterior intervention, in any attempt of "help" from teams of volunteers or other non governmental organizations.

The structure of the Rat Hotel was vague for the street-workers that could not distinguish or come in contact with his leaders -if there existed any:

"We as VWA go in order to we put a rudimentary order that refugees themselves will begin to respect"... The team attempts to come in touch with the leaders and to prompt them to this direction (to clean the space)... We don't say to them "Oh! You poor! No! They live under these conditions and they owe to themselves to protect the space".

According to the volunteers, in a family it is clear who the "leader" is. The head is recognized by the volunteers as the one to whom the team addresses, either the man or the woman, the one that expresses their "demands". In the buildings where men stay, the mobility is greater.

The weekly visits to the houses of refugees from the team also concern their actual way of life, the way their children are bread, fed or taken care of etc. In the case of a woman that struck her girl, refugees that used to stay in a neighboring occupied house inform us on the incident. One volunteer felt extreme anger and told me (since I seemed calm):

"Go to her house and tell her that what she does is completely unacceptable... that she cannot strike the girl... and you tell her that we are not going to help them again if she repeats it... that we shall not bring to them foods or make them escorts or anything else..."

Conclusion

Voluntary work “in the street” is a cross-cultural meeting embedded with different cultural interpretations by all sides. This paper focused on the interpretations of the volunteers –indigenous people who aim to contact and help the other. Although the politically defined intention of the volunteers is to approach the other on equal terms and avoid any offers of materials or services, in the end the volunteers form patron relations with the refugees. As two case studies presented demonstrate, it is often the reaction and stance of the refugees that reshape the way voluntary work is practiced. In the end the volunteers provide, guarantee and advice the refugees, while they consider themselves as guests in the refugees houses. The hospitality code –or rather the inversion of it, since in official discourses the refugees are considered the guests in the country- is the cultural model through which they interpretate their relations with the other, and justify their offers to them. Finally, the intervention on the way refugees live, their houses, the transformation of “the street” into a proper “house” and of the inhabitants into proper house-holders is another contradiction of volunteers’ practice. Once more they attempt to impose their own cultural models to the other’s lives.

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