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Opening Up the “Black Box” of “Volunteering”: On Hybridization and Purification in Volunteering Research and Promotion

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The scholarly exploration of “volunteering” has mainly focused on identifying its antecedents or consequences, in order to facilitate the management and promotion of volunteering. In this dominant stream of research, the phenomenon of volunteering thus remains a “black box”—a taken-for-granted and fixed reality. The article sets out to open the black box of “volunteering” by not accepting it as a fixed, unproblematic object, but by exploring volunteering as a constructed phenomenon whose boundaries are managed and utilized by a variety of actors. To deconstruct volunteering, the article utilizes the Latourian notions of “hybridization” and “purification” as simultaneous and entangled mechanisms. We critically review the literature on “volunteering” and problematize the fundamental properties of the “pure” perception of “volunteering,” their hybridization and eventual purification. The article concludes by highlighting how the constant tension between hybridization and purification mechanisms is in fact what makes volunteering proliferate as a phenomenon that has an increasing public significance in contemporary society.

During the last three decades, there has been a burgeoning public interest in “volunteering”. This interest is regularly expressed by state agencies and international bodies, corporations, and influential nonprofits, which often represent and promote volunteering as a highly glorified route for participating in civic life and contributing to the public good. An adjacent proliferating terrain is the growing scholarly work on volunteering, which often produces

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discourses that feed into the promotional work of these powerful institutions and foster their efforts (Ganesh & Mcallum, 2009). In this nexus of public policy aspirations and the production of relevant knowledge, a wide range of possible definitions to “volunteering” is constructed (Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994; Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996), which consequently lead to a fluctuating quantitative characterization of the phenomenon (as demonstrated by Chambré, 1989). “Volunteering” thus appears as a notion that is imbued with various meanings, yet intensively promoted by actors who often attempt to grant it a coherent meaning. Our review article aspires to explicate this tension and its coming to existence. Inspired by Lewis and Schuller’s (2017) exploration of the concept of “Non-Governmental Organization,” we may also characterize “volunteering” as “a productively unstable category,” which requires a shift from focusing on the concept’s definition to exploring “the interests in maintaining the [concept’s] appearance of linguistic continuity and uniformity” (2017, p. 635) and tracing the concept’s sociopolitical operations and effects. Furthermore, Macmillan’s Bourdieusian analysis of the discursive attempts to distinguish the “third sector” from other fields of human activity (Macmillan, 2013) leads to pondering why similar distinction attempts in relation to “volunteering” became important to both scholars and practitioners. We thus propose to move away from the widely accepted scholarly perception of volunteering as a solid object that can and should be defined, measured and studied, toward a focus on the rising political and scholarly interest in volunteering, and how it stabilizes “volunteering” as a distinctive, legitimate, and significant object of scholarly enquiry.

The approach we propose is developed through a review of (mostly) qualitative and ethnographic literature in the field of volunteering research that could provide an alternative to previous influential reviews (e.g., Musick & Wilson, 2008; Smith, 1994; Wilson, 2000, 2012). These earlier reviews predominantly focus on theories and (survey) research that seek to explain why people are volunteering by examining individual-level and country-level variables—thus, aiming at delineating a “social profile” of the volunteers. In his latest review essay (2012), Wilson starts from a volunteer process model (antecedents, experiences, consequences) and notes that “the first stage of the process model—antecedents of volunteering—continues to attract the most attention but more and more scholars are paying attention to the third stage, the consequences of volunteering, particularly with respect to health benefits. The middle stage—the experience of volunteering—remains somewhat neglected” (p. 176). The increasing interest in the causes and consequences of volunteering can be related to the desire of influential actors, such as governmental agencies, corporations or large nonprofits, to benefit from the outcomes of volunteering and for this reason enhance volunteers’ recruitment. To feed into these policy aspirations, the dominant theories of volunteerism are often instrumental in the sense that they seek to improve the functioning and management of the phenomenon they aim to describe (Mosse & Lewis, 2006), and performative in the sense that they reinvigorate and stabilize their object of investigation (cf. Fournier & Grey, 2000). This dominant stream of scholarly work often neglects the study of volunteer experiences and practices (as indicated by Wilson, 2012), but also pays relatively modest attention to the practices and discourses used by professionals in the field of volunteering, such as volunteer managers, consultants, and academics, and particularly neglects their efforts to promote volunteering.

The quest for causes and consequences in dominant theories produces volunteering as a “black box” (Latour, 1987) that displays only inputs and outputs—“antecedents” and

“consequences” according to the theoretical model of Wilson (2012)—while concealing its “inner workings,” “controversial” histories, and “the commercial or academic networks that hold[s it] in place” (Latour, 1987, p. 3). Hustinx and colleagues proposed to “open the black box of volunteering” in order to understand the changing qualitative patterns of volunteering (Hustinx & Denk, 2009; Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010). Indeed, scholars of volunteering began to address what happens “within” the black box: some depicted changes in volunteering patterns, such as the trend from long-term and committed volunteer engagement to a more episodic style of volunteering (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Lichterman, 2009); others followed the socialization of volunteers to organizational settings and distinguished between various phases of their participation in the organization (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal 2008); and some work has been conducted on exploring the meanings attached to volunteering (O’Reagan, 2009; von Essen, 2016), which mediate biographic determinants and consequent emotional effects (Flores, 2014).

However, Latour also encourages us to explore the “controversial histories” and the “networks that hold the black box in place.” Scholars of volunteering, therefore, could benefit from exploring the assemblage(s) of networks, mechanisms, and discourses that makes “volunteering” a phenomenon that is delineable, stabilized, and utilized, and thus renders itself to scholarly scrutiny and political promotion. Nevertheless, there is less critical academic discussion on the ways in which volunteering is constructed, how this construction is promoted and how volunteering appears as a significant social phenomenon. Therefore, we will propose in this review to understand “volunteering” not as a fixed, unproblematic notion but as a relational construct of which the boundaries can be constructed, strategically managed, and instrumentally used by a variety of (institutional) actors. We highlight the processes of consolidating “volunteering” as a separate realm of discourse and practice, the power struggles around this consolidation and how it serves the public promotion of volunteering. Furthermore, this article aims to open up the black box of “volunteering” and write a different account of this notion that is more focused on its construction and promotion processes and less on its “inputs” and “outputs”.

To understand how “volunteering” is becoming an object of interest and promotion, we adopt a perspective developed by Bruno Latour in his essay “We Have Never Been Modern” (1993). In this text, Latour discerns two fundamental sets of practices that constitute a “modern” enterprise: the work of translation and the work of purification. The work of translation and mediation creates hybrids: new constructions that are produced by linking and fusing components that have been previously located in separate spheres (such as “science” and “politics”). However, this work is inherently connected to the work of purification, which creates and maintains an epistemological distinction between the spheres: hybrid constructions can only be composed of pure elements, and, therefore, the mechanisms of hybridization and purification occur simultaneously and are mutually dependent. According to Latour, modern enterprises become possible and proliferate through the constant tension between their hybrid character and the aspiration to present them as belonging to a singular domain. This tension is not an obstacle to be solved or a contradiction to be overcome, but it is exactly what enables modern enterprises to emerge, and to become powerful and successful. Nevertheless, the modernistic epistemology is focused on the work of purification, while obscuring the work of translation and the inherent connection between these two

mechanisms. Latour suggests going beyond the modernistic paradigm by making both types of work visible, acknowledging their simultaneous occurrence and exposing the fact that they enable and reinforce each other.

Our review examines how hybridization and purification interact in the construction of the contemporary notion of “volunteering”. Bringing Latour’s ideas to the field of volunteering research, the notions of “purification” and “hybridization” assist in capturing the interplay between volunteering as an abstract and monolithic social construct and volunteering enacted as ambiguous actions in diverse social settings.¹ Furthermore, volunteering is simultaneously “pure” and hybrid, and the mechanisms of hybridization and purification occur simultaneously as well and produce this constant tension. In fact, this tension is what enables the existence and the proliferation of “volunteering”.

The point of departure in our exploration of the contemporary proliferation of “volunteering” begins by identifying four main properties that have become prevalent in the dominant perceptions of volunteering and create what we term “the pure sense of ‘volunteering’”: unpaid, out of free will, conducted for the benefits of others, and associated with a nonprofit, nongovernmental sector. These properties will further serve as the axes of our analysis along the article, according to which the mechanisms of “purification” and “hybridization” will be explored. We will pay particular attention to the actors and social groups that take part in these processes, and what it entails for the nature of volunteering. We demonstrate that both mechanisms are necessary for the proliferation of “volunteering” as a phenomenon that has an increasing public significance in contemporary society, and we ponder upon the social meaning of this increasing significance.

THE PURE SENSE OF “VOLUNTEERING”

Theoretical delineations of “volunteering” by scholars, working definitions of the concept by policy makers and practitioners, as well as studies documenting popular perceptions of “volunteering”—conjoin to create a consensual and prevalent understanding of “volunteering.” The prevalence of this understanding of “volunteering” across countries and sectors has reached a relatively recent culmination in the recommendation for a unified definition of “volunteering” produced by the International Labour Organization (ILO) through partnership with the Johns Hopkins University Civil Society Center and its network of international partners. This definition perceives “volunteering” as work to distinguish it from leisure activities, but distinguishes “volunteering” from other types of Labor by defining it as an unpaid activity that is conducted by individuals out of free determination and willingness (International Labour Organization, 2011). Another central feature of “volunteering” associates the notion with some form of organization in a particular institutionalized sphere, often termed as the nonprofit, nongovernmental, or third sector (Butcher & Einolf, 2017; Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994).² These four main features serve in this section as four axes around which various attempts to define “volunteering” are organized. These attempts conjoin to posit “volunteering” as a distinguishable phenomenon which is imbued with an autonomous meaning and logic.

A fundamental characteristic of the pure depiction of “volunteering” is that it is an activity that is not remunerated financially. Even when volunteers receive some financial or social benefits for their involvement (such as volunteer allowance or social insurance), state legislation or volunteer contracts emphasize that there are no formal working or employment relations between the parties. To this delineation through negation, a second defining property is added to “volunteering” by the perception of the phenomenon as not directed toward a personal benefit: the “other-regarding” aspect of volunteering (Story, 1992) portrays this activity as morally good, as expected to transcend the acting subject in support of others. This aspect delimits volunteering from morally insignificant actions such as leisure activities on the one hand, and from actions that are perceived as immoral or destructive on the other hand. Indeed, reviews of the proliferating academic literature on volunteering led to an indication of “ethical” aspects—such as “altruistic” motivations or civic concerns—as a crucial, but disputed, component in defining “volunteering” (Cnaan et al., 1996; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Also the public perception of “volunteering,” as reflected in surveys and interview-based studies, seems to reaffirm the central status of its “altruistic” dimension (Handy et al., 2000; Meijs et al., 2003), often perceiving this dimension as necessary for defining an action as “volunteering” (von Essen, 2016). A study in a nationwide voluntary-based NGO in Israel suggested the term “pure volunteers” to describe those who are motivated to volunteer by altruistic and civic concerns, and to distinguish them from volunteers who have additional motivations, such as gaining work-related experience; this term was shared by the scholars who conducted the study and by the third sector practitioners they interacted with and interviewed, who manage volunteers as part of their professional duty (Ben-David, Debbie, York Alan, & Natti, 2004).

A third defining property of volunteering which is central to its “pure” construction is that “volunteering” is performed out of free will (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). In this way, volunteering is considered as an expression of the autonomous subject and fits well with ideas, or ideals, of the relation between man and society in secularized modernity. In relation to the widespread academic interest in the altruistic character of volunteering, the attention that has been devoted to volunteering as an activity performed out of free will is surprisingly scant (Haers & von Essen, 2015). This scholarly neglect might reflect the underlying philosophical and ideological assumptions of these theories, which presume particular idea(l)s of subjectivity and its degree of agency vis-à-vis social institutions and structures. “Free will” seems thus to be taken for granted when volunteering is discussed, and is accordingly academically understudied. We shall not engage in the metaphysical discussion concerning the possibility of free will at any length, but we do argue that the alternatives are not between total determinism or a taken for granted autonomous subject. A critical study of volunteering has to explore the social conditions that restrict people from acting out of free choice. Hence, we further explore below how critical studies illuminate the limitations posed by social institutions and structures on this pure sense of “freedom” or “autonomy” ascribed to volunteering, succeeded by an exploration of how this pure sense is nevertheless maintained by some actors.

Lastly, “volunteering” is often perceived as an organized activity associated with an autonomous institutional sphere. Some scholars consider “informal volunteering,” which is conducted outside formal organizational frameworks, as part of a broader notion of

“volunteering” (Butcher & Einolf, 2017; Wilson & Musick, 1997), but then it is commonly assumed to be carried out beyond kinship ties, and thus carrying a public significance beyond the private sphere. However, other scholars call for an institutional separation between organized and informal volunteering, perceiving interpersonal aid as constituting a “fourth sector” (Williams, 2002). As ample studies of formal volunteering have demonstrated (for a comprehensive review, see Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013), its organization is mostly conducted through nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations, associated with a third sector that is perceived as an autonomous sphere of activity. This common organizational characteristic of “volunteering” reiterates the properties of this notion we indicated above, as an activity that is not directed at personal gain, whether this gain is economic or political, and is associated with an autonomous type of action. “Volunteering” thus is not only associated with a particular organizational logic, but also with its institutional realization in the form of an autonomous sector with a distinct logic.

“VOLUNTEERING” AS A HYBRID PHENOMENON

Alongside the prevalent, “pure” understanding of “volunteering”, a small number of studies are engaged in developing a more critical perspective on the phenomenon. These studies analyze “volunteering” as a hybrid terrain, which conflates actors that may have various and sometimes conflicting motivations and which are associated with various, seemingly distinct and separated, spheres and institutional domains (e.g., Chartrand, 2004; Grubb, 2016; Hustinx, 2014; Paine, Ockenden, & Stuart, 2010). This mingling of actors, motivations and logics problematizes the fundamental properties of the “pure” perception of “volunteering” as an unpaid and altruistic activity conducted out of a free determination of the individual, and demonstrates that practices of “volunteering” and its promotion are often hybrid and quite remote from the “pure” understanding of this notion.

First, the association of “volunteering” as an activity organized through nongovernmental organizations is problematized with the increasing involvement of “third parties” (i.e., actors perceived as external to the third sector—government agencies, corporations, and educational institutions) in facilitating volunteering (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, & Hustinx, 2010). While the third-party model still perceives the involvement of these parties as external to the “pure” manner of organizing “volunteering”, other studies that are reviewed below have documented how such actors may be constitutive forces in the proliferation of volunteering.

Governments and state agencies are increasingly identified as prominent actors in the promotion and shaping of “volunteering”. Tonkens, Verhoeven, van Gemert, and van der Ent (2013) have documented “calls for volunteering” issued by five Western governments, aimed to encourage their citizens to take part as volunteers in the provision of social services. Rozakou (2016) explored governmental efforts to promote volunteering through an alignment of regional (European) and national (Greek) efforts. Ogawa (2009) described the legal infrastructure, policy measures, and discursive techniques used by the Japanese state to encourage citizens to engage in “volunteering”, but mainly in particular forms of volunteering that the state was interested to promote. While in some national contexts volunteering was traditionally nurtured through partnerships between the state and nongovernmental actors (Henriksen,

Strømsnes, & Svedberg, 2018; Rothstein, 2005), Rose (1999, 2000) demonstrated how third-sector organizations, community-based projects, and volunteer efforts have become part and parcel of more recent forms of neoliberal governmental technologies, that together with state agencies (through public-private partnerships) and other actors govern the political behavior of citizens. These new technologies of governmentality created new and hybrid settings of welfare provision in which services previously provided by government and its regular employees are gradually delegated to volunteers through the intermediation of third sector organizations (Hustinx, De Waele, & Delcour, 2015).

The simultaneous use that the neoliberal state makes in seductive and punitive mechanisms (Harvey, 2005) is also reflected in governmental techniques related to volunteering, which create a continuum between attempts to encourage and facilitate volunteering to the conflation of volunteering with punitive measures. “Welfare to work” programs, also termed as “workfare” (Krinsky, 2007), have expanded from the United States to other countries (Theodore, 2003), subjecting the right to social benefits to commitment for what is often termed as “volunteer work” or “community service.”³ Civic service programs that organize “volunteering” activities for youth are sometimes “suggested” by social workers to young poor as a preincarceration measure (Simonet, 2005). The most extreme edge of the continuum is probably the attempts to present to convicts the “promise of community service” (Bazemore & Karp, 2004), as a replacement to imprisonment or as a route for social reintegration. These governmental techniques constitute together an increasingly dominating complex of punitive measures against people living in poverty (Wacquant, 2009). Despite their punitive character, these programs are framed as “community service,” as within and around them there is a frequent use in a discourse that is associated with volunteering programs and civil society organizations (De Waele & Hustinx, 2019). Although perceiving such programs as “volunteering” is obviously highly questionable, the aspiration of governments to associate them with the notion of “volunteering” demonstrates the problematic character of framing volunteer work as derived from a free will or as autonomous from governmental imperatives.

Next to the increasing involvement of the state in the promotion of volunteering, market actors such as corporations are increasingly involved in volunteering. A main track is through programs of corporate volunteering, in which companies offer their employees—on an individual or group basis—to take part in episodic or project-based volunteering activities, often hosted by or coordinated through nonprofit organizations (Basil, Runte, Easwaramoorthy, & Barr, 2009; Meijs & Van der Voort, 2004). However, corporations and business persons are also involved in encouraging public volunteering through funding and creating coalitions with nongovernmental organizations (Muehlebach, 2012; Shachar, 2014). The intimate connection between the market and the upsurge of volunteering in the public domain was carefully described in the ethnographic work of Muehlebach (2012), who described how “the domain of public giving” has “emerged in tandem with the market” (p. 21), and locates this mutual dependency as a fundamental principle of neoliberalism, which is “a force that can contain its negation—the vision of a de commodified, disinterested life and of a moral community of human relationality and solidarity that stands opposed to alienation” (p. 25). As some of these studies indicate, market actors usually do not operate independently from the state, but in alignment with it, and, therefore, hybrid settings where volunteering takes place

are increasingly shaped by the confluence of state and market actors (Eliasoph, 2011; Hustinx, 2014; Wijkström, 2011).

However, hybridity is not only a characteristic of the organizational and institutional settings in which volunteering takes place: it is also expressed in the conflation of various motivations, discourses, and practices that can be discerned in the participation patterns at nongovernmental organizations. A growing number of studies demonstrated that calculated interests (e.g., résumé building) may be an important motivation for “volunteering” (e.g., Handy et al., 2010; Katz & Rosenberg, 2005; Matthews, Green, Hall, & Hall, 2009; Mesch, Tschirhart, Perry, & Lee, 1998). However, these studies still perceive engagement in “volunteering” as resulting from a determination by an autonomous subject, whose calculated interests and motivations can be delineated and researched, while tending to neglect the ways in which individuals navigate between different and sometimes contradictory motivations (e.g., Fleischer, 2011). Altruism, as a defining property of the “pure” form of volunteering that stands in opposition to “egoism,” is a notion that is not always definitive but open to interpretations. For example, parents volunteering as coaches in their own children’s football teams claimed that their engagement was not only to the benefit of their own kids, but had a crucial social significance in their neighborhood (von Essen, 2016). In contrast to the “disembodied, abstract beings” (De Jong, 2011, p. 22) that are produced by traditional accounts of altruistic behavior, exploring “embodied relations” and “practices” (p. 37) enables us to evade a reductionist binary of “altruism” versus “selfishness,” which is usually accompanied by assuming a moral hierarchy between the two categories (De Jong, 2011).⁴ A more complex set of motivations was identified, for example, in studies of corporate volunteering, where the motivations of employees to take part in volunteering activities are not only guided by a mix of altruistic and calculated or “egoistic” motivations, but were also scattered across a range of feelings of commitment—toward the company and fellow employees on the one hand, and toward the nonprofit involved and its beneficiaries on the other hand (Peloza & Hassay, 2006; see also Yeung, 2004). Such hybrid volunteering settings also produce differential modalities of agency among volunteers and beneficiaries, which satisfy corporate interests in volunteering as well as employees’ aspiration to a sense of personal and professional meaningfulness (Shachar & Hustinx, 2017).

A reconceptualization of “volunteering” as a form of unpaid Labor is introduced in the works of Simonet (2005) and Taylor (2004, 2005). It enables to analyze volunteers’ trajectories in terms of “career” (Kaplan-Daniels, 1988), and assists in understanding some negative impacts of volunteering such as “burnout” (Talbot, 2015). Furthermore, such reconceptualization contextualizes individual engagements in volunteering schemes in a broader political-economic structure. Studies have demonstrated how groups that are considered to have a disadvantageous position in the Labor market are pushed to engage in volunteer work in order to improve their employment prospects. Among these groups are young graduates (Taylor, 2004) and unemployed youth (Simonet, 2005), recent immigrants (Bauder, 2003) and refugees (Tomlinson, 2010), unemployed (Baines & Hardill, 2008), and single mothers (Fuller, Kershaw & Pulkingham, 2008). Such encouragement sustains “the fantasy of employability” (Bloom, 2013) among members of these groups, and their navigation between this fantasy and the structural limitations of the Labor market reveals the

fragility of the dichotomy between “altruistic” and “instrumental” motivations to volunteer. Other groups, who are excluded from remunerated jobs due to conservative social perceptions regarding their appropriate gender and class roles (Kaplan-Daniels, 1988) or due to (regular or forced early) retirement (Muehlebach, 2012), may engage in volunteer work as a way to retain their sense of “civic utility,” displaying a sense of agency in front of imposed limitations.

These various types of unpaid (or underpaid) workers who are depicted as “volunteers”, enable governments, in direct or indirect ways, to take this unpaid Labor force into account when enforcing budgetary cutbacks and a lessening of the paid Labor force in various public services. Building on this type of literature, volunteering can be viewed not a form of civic engagement, but as part of “the total social organization of Labor” (Glucksmann, quoted in Taylor, 2004, p. 38; cf. Simonet, 2005), and particularly as a form of Labor which plays a role in the neoliberal restructuring of the Labor market and of public services (Krinsky & Simonet, 2017). In this political-economic context, we may expect to witness a decay of the construction of volunteering as a freely determined engagement by the individual.

The hybrid character of “volunteering”, as highlighted in this section, undermines dominant perceptions of this form of participation as a purely altruistically motivated or as an autonomous, individualized act. The pure image of an autonomous subject engaging in volunteering out of her/his free will is increasingly challenged as patterns of institutional involvement in volunteering are becoming clear, as the pressure to engage in volunteering to comply with social norms or requirements (e.g., in the Labor market) increases, and as there is an increasing dominance of various governmentality techniques in the field. The increasing governing of volunteer activity should lead us to consider alternative depictions (e.g., Hustinx, 2010) of the relations between agents, institutions, and structures, and what is the meaning of “choice” and “participation” in this context.

PURIFYING “VOLUNTEERING”

We finally want to draw attention to constant attempts to “purify” volunteering. While there is convincing evidence that contemporary forms of “volunteering” are inherently related to state policies and the economic market, ongoing processes of distinguishing “volunteering” from these realms remain crucial for its legitimization. The legitimacy of “volunteering” also relies on its popular perception (depicted above) as a pure engagement that is altruistic and autonomous. This perception has to be nurtured by promoters of “volunteering” and by the volunteers themselves, who construct it as altruistic by dissociating it from political or economic interests. A few ethnographic works have described the processes through which volunteer work is distinguished from political and economic activities and being constructed as a separated, autonomous realm of action. Following Latour (1993), we term these distinction processes as mechanisms of “purification” that (re-)associates “volunteering” with its “pure” sense.

A first step in purifying volunteering is framing it as an autonomous act, where individuals are engaged out of free will, and disguise the structuring and coercive mechanisms that

were described in the previous section. In fact, it seems that as volunteering becomes more structured and the pressure to volunteer increases, promoters of volunteering increasingly frame it in terms of individual choice rather than as an obligation to society, to a certain affiliation group, or to an institution. Lichterman described the shift in American culture from an older style of participation in civic clubs, in which the long-term, active commitment to the organization predominated (Lichterman, 2009), to a “plug-in” style volunteering: short-term, target-oriented, and professionally supervised participation in a loosely structured organizational environment, which enables individual volunteers to constantly shift between various tasks, positions, and organizations (cf. Eliasoph, 2011, pp. 117–118; Lichterman, 2006). Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) coined the notions of “collective” and “reflexive” styles of volunteering to conceptualize this shift in biographical terms. Dean (2014) demonstrated how the work of volunteering brokerage organizations reinforces a centrality of instrumental motivations which are associated with the reflexive style of volunteering. Hustinx (2010) and Eliasoph (2011) described how the dimension of choice becomes central in contemporary volunteering programs and elevates reflexive and “plug-in” styles of volunteering, while participation forms that do not comply to this autonomous ideal are losing popularity.

Eliasoph (2011) further described the efforts made by coordinators of empowerment projects and volunteer-based initiatives to maintain a flexible and optional image for these projects, which is aimed to ensure that these projects will be clearly distinguished from the rigid patterns of state activity that is increasingly associated with “the gray shadow of the bureaucrat.” The distancing of “volunteering” from the state described by Eliasoph is related to the distinction of “volunteering” from the types of civic engagements that are associated with the state, such as membership of political parties or trade unions, which are identified and degraded as “politics.” An exception in this regard are Scandinavian countries, where volunteering was historically interlinked with interest organizations, trade unions, and leisure activities supported by the state (Henriksen et al., 2018). In earlier works, Eliasoph (1998, 1999) also describes how American volunteers and local activists tended to refrain from issues that were perceived as potentially contentious, and from confronting powerful actors such as corporations or the federal state; they preferred to maintain group cohesion and feelings of capability to act. This idea of spontaneous volunteering as a distinct form of participation, which is distinguished from political or social activism and thus purified from political meanings, assists in disguising the political processes described above that steer civic participation to apolitical forms of volunteering. Bringing these purification processes of volunteering to the fore supports scholarly attempts to problematize the conceptual divide between apolitical volunteering and political activism (e.g., Henriksen & Svedberg, 2010) and could highlight forms of participation that evade such divisions (e.g., Daly, 2010).

In addition to the distinction of “volunteering” from “politics,” volunteers also tend to distinguish their engagement from remunerated labor. This work of purification becomes especially necessary in the blurred setting of corporate volunteering. In a study of corporate volunteers in two Swedish corporations it became evident that although employees were allowed to be engaged as corporate volunteers during working hours and hence paid, they repeatedly maintained that their efforts were unremunerated (Hvenmark & von Essen, 2013).

The reason for this paradoxical approach to their engagement was that they were keen on distancing themselves from the instrumental and calculus rational motives of the corporation in order to nurture their self-understanding as persons doing good deeds to the benefits of others. Other studies provided evidence to the ways in which volunteers distinguish their engagement from the paid work of others: upper-class American women in the 1980s developed “civic career” that would not challenge the status quo in which professional, remunerated work is done by men (Kaplan-Daniels, 1988); Italian pensioners distinguished the care work they provided to elderly people from the work of migrant workers who took care of the same elderly people (Muehlebach, 2012, pp. 201–228).

The purification of “volunteering” from its political and economic aspects corresponds to its perception as occurring mainly within the organizational structures that constitutes the third sector—an organized sphere that is nongovernmental and not for profit (e.g., Corry, 2010). This sector is an institutional realization of the ideal of “civil society”: a public realm which is perceived as distinctive from other social spheres, such as the economic market, the state-related political system, and the family, where citizens get organized autonomously to influence civic life and collective concerns (e.g., Dekker, 2009). This perception of civil society—which is purified from “external” contagions such as economic or political interests—conforms to the liberal tendency “to enclave certain matters in specialized discursive arenas” (Fraser, 1990, p. 73), and reinforces “neo-Tocquevillian” approaches that “imagine civic activity [as] residing in an institutional realm of voluntary, face-to-face associations” (Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014, p. 803). Similar to civic action, volunteering appears to be associated with a realm of autonomous associations and with the liberal ideal of civil society, rather than as a constructed action that may occur across sectors, particularly as their boundaries are becoming more blurred than before. Although there are alternative conceptualizations of civil society (e.g., Gramsci, 1971; Hegel, 1991[1820]), a liberal version of the role and function of civil society, particularly influenced by Locke (1690), became dominant among scholars of the third sector. The perception of “volunteering” as occurring mainly within the institutional realm of the third sector, associates this form of participation with the liberal apolitical ideal of the civil society.

The purification of “volunteering” from “politics” and “Labor” and its association with the ideal of “civil society”, raises questions regarding the identity of the actors engaged in this work of purification. Jakimow (2010) demonstrated in her ethnographic work that in India “volunteering” as a value is adopted by the upper-middle class, signifying the self-distinction of this class from the seemingly corrupted, inefficient and popular mechanisms of politics. Her work corroborates Chatterjee’s (2004) claim that the associational formations that constitute civil society might be ideally universal, but are in fact habitually and institutionally limited to the upper and upper middle classes. Illustrated by ethnographic examples from India, Chatterjee argues that the majority of the world population is illegible to the civil society and organizes itself through what he calls “political society”—a use in mass-based political structures for gaining power and achievements. Ethnographic evidence shows that also in Israel, a pure sense of volunteering has been constructed, promoted, and universalized by a privileged ethnonational and upper middle class social stratum; these efforts were part of a range of strategies deployed by this privileged group to come to grips with its declining hegemonic stance (Shachar, 2014). In the UK, middle class dominance in the field of

volunteering is reproduced by the tendency of volunteering recruiters and managers to focus on middle class youth who are more responsive to their recruitment efforts (Dean 2016), as recruiters are increasingly pushed to satisfy the neoliberal state's quest for growing numbers of volunteers (Dean 2015). The work of Simonet (2005) implies that the capacity to purify a hybrid form of volunteering is differentiated according to class and racial hierarchies: while privileged youth described their experiences in a voluntary-based civic service in terms of civic and altruistic engagement, underprivileged youth described the same service in terms of Labor and attributed more importance to the limited financial allowance that was provided to servers.

The differentiated capacity to purify volunteering, in a similar manner to the ability to represent an act as disinterested (Bourdieu, 1998), is part of a habitus to which one may be socialized, and enables an individual to accumulate symbolic capital that can be transformed to other forms of capital and power. Kaplan-Daniels (1988) noted how her informants from the upper and upper-middle class of American society have "learn[ed] about altruism through early socialization" (p. 18). Snee (2014) focused on the cultural capital accumulated during the later socialization phase of the gap year: middle class youth perceive this capital as an individualized moral worth and utilize it in self-reflexive and purpose-oriented narratives, which could be used to justify and maintain class privileges. This ability to represent one's actions and life trajectory as moral, grants her/him a symbolic capital that can then be used in other fields. In Sweden, for example, volunteering creates social capital by granting opportunities to impact formal politics and influence politicians, and the over-representation of the middle and upper classes among volunteers thus affects and warps the opportunities to participate in politics (von Essen & Wallman Lundåsen, 2015). Studies on hybrid settings that include "pure" volunteers and (often compulsory) volunteer programs for disadvantaged groups have furthermore demonstrated the potentially bifurcated nature of these volunteering settings: while more privileged volunteers perceive their engagement as altruistic and contributing to a general public good, disadvantaged volunteers experience a reproduction of their inferior status within the volunteer field, which leads to a "re-exclusion" through volunteering (Hustinx, 2014; Hustinx et al., 2015). Especially in the United States, this bifurcation often overlaps with racial hierarchies (Krinsky & Simonet, 2017). Shachar and Hustinx (2017) showed how engagement of privileged corporate employees in volunteering programs even enables them to resolve potential emotional and ethical doubts regarding their privileged positions. The promise of "volunteering" to serve as a means to social inclusion thus seems to have a different realization, as "volunteering" is becoming another sphere through which social hierarchies are reproduced.

The main agitators of the purification processes of volunteering, therefore, mainly are located within the more privileged social classes and racial groups. These processes constitute "volunteering" as carried out in a separate realm, granting it a particular "pure" meaning and in this way legitimizing it—thus helping "volunteering" to proliferate. Nevertheless, the proliferation of volunteering also depends on its hybridization processes: the expansion of volunteering requires support from political and economic actors, and attracting more individuals to engage actively in it requires the association of "impure", "interested" motivations with this activity. However, these hybrid aspects have to be subjugated discursively to the "pure" sense of volunteering. The class and racial character of

volunteering has to be obscured, and volunteering has to be represented as universal, as its direction toward some kind of collective good is one of its fundamental characteristics. This constant tension between hybridization and purification, therefore, is what makes volunteering proliferate.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a classical text that can be seen as an early theoretical foundation to some of Latour’s ideas,⁵ Simmel (1994[1909]) reminds us that connection and separation⁶ always presuppose each other:

By choosing two items from the undisturbed store of natural things in order to designate them as “separate”, we have already related them to one another in our consciousness, we have emphasized these two together against whatever lies between them. And conversely, we can only sense those things to be related which we have previously somehow isolated from one another; things must first be separated from one another in order to be together. . . . In the immediate as well as the symbolic sense, in the physical as well as the intellectual sense, we are at any moment those who separate the connected or connect the separate. (p. 5)

Bringing Simmel’s and Latour’s ideas to the scholarly discussions on “volunteering”, we could argue that when distinguishing between “volunteering” and “work”, or between “volunteering” and “political action”, we have already constituted them as somehow connected to each other. Hence, hybridity should not be perceived as a surprising characteristic of “volunteering”: the blurring between “volunteering” and other spheres is already rooted in the attempt to constitute “volunteering” as a separated sphere. As Latour (1993) noted, purification creates and maintains an epistemological distinction between spheres and in this way produces the pure elements that construct hybrids; in our case, the efforts to construct a “pure” sense of “volunteering” is what enables volunteering to only become hybrid again. The processes of hybridization and purification thus enable each other, occur simultaneously, and reiterate and reinforce each other: hybridization expands “volunteering” to new terrains, while its purification increases its public legitimacy. Together, these two processes gain an essential role in the successful production and proliferation of “volunteering”.

Exploring the notion of “volunteering” using the Latourian-inspired axes of hybridization and purification appears as a useful alternative to more classical perspectives, which cling to the “pure” notion of volunteering by assuming clear institutional boundaries and pure motivations. Paraphrasing Latour’s claim that “we have never been modern” (1993), we may claim that we never had a pure notion of “volunteering”, in the modern-liberal sense, but the “classic” forms of volunteering have always existed in the tension between its hybrid character and purified meaning. Adopting a Latourian perspective moves us away from the scholarly project of finding the inherent characteristics or defining features of “volunteering”: volunteering is never “pure” but it is a hybrid practice that is constantly “purified.” Like other social constructs, an exploration of “volunteering” should engage in the various and hybrid practices that shape it, and in the processes of purifying this notion. Our review revealed the importance of such exploration by integrating evidence from various studies regarding the significant role of governmental and corporate efforts in the creation of

volunteering. This integrative effort showed that political and market interests are not external to the realm of volunteering but play a constitutive role in its creation. Therefore, we plea for additional future research that will disentangle the hybrid network of actors and interests which produces and expands volunteering.

Furthermore, we also highlighted the axis of purification, which is crucial in the making and promotion of volunteering. As our review began to reveal, an exploration of this axis should combine an analysis of the discursive strategies of purification along with an identification of the actors who are engaged in these purification efforts, considering their sociopolitical positions and their motivations. As hybridization and purification are often mutually dependent, the same actors can be simultaneously involved in both types of work and become skillful agents in the making and promotion of volunteering. Some of the studies we review propose that the work of purification particularly is successfully conducted by actors associated with class and racial privileges. By becoming versed in hybridization and purification work, privileged groups can realign around the promotion of volunteering, constituting it as a “white” project (Shachar, 2014) that can form a basis for their political projects of hegemony reproduction or restoration.

As racial and class hierarchies are manifested also across national boundaries, our proposed approach for studying “volunteering” may reinvigorate recent critiques raised by volunteerism scholars and practitioners from the global south. Some of these scholars claim that the dominant notion of “volunteering” does not acknowledge the variety of altruistic behaviors in non-Western countries and cultures (see a recent edited volume by Butcher & Einolf, 2017). Such critiques often propose to redefine “volunteering” in order to include Southern variations of the concept. In this way, they diversify the predominantly Western orientation of volunteering promoters, but also reinforce the aspiration to define, enhance, and promote volunteering. Future research may opt to examine how “volunteering” is purified in various contexts to create a coherent notion, a direction which may also serve as a starting point in mapping the transnational expansion processes of this notion and tracing the actors and mechanisms behind them. Scrutinizing these processes could also challenge them: instead of seeking to be included in the realm of “volunteering”, those who are not part of this realm may wish to depict their experiences in alternative manners, and potentially bring to the fore different ways of mutual support and participation in public life that can be promoted and expanded.

Paying attention to the purification processes of “volunteering” also foregrounds its identification with activities that are perceived as morally “good”, while activities that are considered to be morally insignificant (such as “non-serious” leisure activities; cf. Stebbins, 2007) or explicitly malicious are mostly excluded from the realm of “volunteering”. The relations between volunteering and morality thus appear as another potential terrain for critical exploration. There is a growing interest in exploring the association between volunteering and ethics, which is the ways in which people understand and practice moral values in everyday conduct (e.g., Muehlebach, 2012). In addition, the proliferation of volunteering promotion efforts can be contextualized in relation to the increasing trend in Western societies to position morality and moral sentiments as a generalized and preferred “frame of reference in political life” (Fassin 2012, 247). However, the relations between “volunteering” and the more transcendental notion of “morality” remains a conceptual and empirical problem.

Organizations that promote exclusionary and oppressive ideologies were labeled by Chambers and Kopstein (2001) as “bad civil society”, while Wijkström (1998) perceived them as part of civil society, even if an unwanted part. Such organizations heavily rely on volunteers, which challenges attempts to construct “volunteering” as morally uncontested activity. Future scholarly work could examine how volunteering activities are constructed as “doing good,” and to what extent does the notion of “purification” assist us in understanding these construction processes. A related line of exploration should examine how and why certain volunteering activities do become contested on moral grounds.

To conclude, volunteering appears as particularly interesting not because of its quantitative surge, but because of its proliferation in the public sphere through its constant hybridization and the simultaneous efforts of its promoters to purify it. This is a qualitative development rather than a mere quantitative surge, which maintains the importance of studying “volunteering” despite the possible vagueness of its quantitative significance. However, such a qualitative surge calls for a broader range of research methodologies that includes a more intensive use of qualitative analysis and ethnographic explorations. The scope of such inquires, as we emphasized in this essay, should not only encompass the relations between volunteers, beneficiaries, and NGO employees or volunteer managers, but also highlight the myriad of alignments of various actors, discourses, and practices, the flows of knowledge, and the processes of representation, which produce and promote the increasingly proliferating terrain of “volunteering.” Based on such inquiries, the sociopolitical implications of these processes could be further examined and reflected upon.

NOTES

1. Billis (2010) has developed a theoretical framework for understanding the hybridization of third sector organizations. As we suggest an understanding of “volunteering” that is not entangled in organizational theory, we propose a different, Latourian-inspired use in the notion of hybridization.
2. We note the ILO’s recent attempt to loosen the association between volunteering and the nongovernmental sector, by stating in its manual that the definition of volunteer work “includes volunteering done without compulsion in all types of institutional settings: nonprofit organizations, government, private businesses, and ‘other’” (International Labour Organization, 2011, p. 16). At present, this is still a contested extension of the definition, which is not reflected in most scholarly understandings or public interpretations of “volunteering.”
3. Ethnographic studies of the experiences of “volunteers” in such programs have been conducted in several contexts, including the Netherlands (Kampen, Elshout, & Tonkens, 2013) and Canada (Fuller et al., 2008).
4. De Jong’s work analyzed narratives of both paid and unpaid (i.e., “volunteers”) women workers in NGOs. Some of these NGOs were involved themselves in volunteers’ recruitment or management.
5. Pyyhtinen (2010) discussed some similarities between the ideas of Simmel and Latour.
6. We are grateful to Maud Simonet for bringing to our attention this text by Simmel and its similarities to Latour’s ideas.

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