

University of Groningen

## Book review essay of

Heyse, Liesbet

*Published in:*  
Sociology-The journal of the british sociological association

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/0038038516674849](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516674849)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Heyse, L. (2017). Book review essay of: Monika Krause (2014). The Good Project. Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason; Silke Roth (2015). The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals; Rene Fox (2014). Doctors Without Borders: Humanitarian Quests, Impossible Dreams of Medecins Sans Frontières. *Sociology-The journal of the british sociological association*, 51(3), 701-707. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516674849>

### **Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### **Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*



## Book Review Essay

Sociology  
2017, Vol. 51(3) 701–707  
© The Author(s) 2017  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0038038516674849  
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc



Monika Krause

*The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason*

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014, £13.79 ebook (ISBN: 9780226131535), 233 pp.

Silke Roth

*The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals*

Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, £95 hbk (ISBN: 9780415745925), 222 pp.

Rene Fox

*Doctors without Borders: Humanitarian Quests, Impossible Dreams of Medecins sans Frontières*

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, £14.99 pbk (ISBN: 9781421413549), 328 pp.

**Reviewed by:** Liesbet Heyse, *University of Groningen, the Netherlands*

In May this year, the humanitarian sector attempted fundamental reform at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey. This reform attempt was deemed a necessity due to structural flaws in the current humanitarian system. Established institutions in the sector published various reports pinpointing these fundamental flaws, such as an unequal and insufficient financing and funding system, the lack of attention to local capacities to deal with humanitarian crises and fragmented evaluation and reporting requirements (ALNAP, 2015; ODI/HPG, 2016). The current system was said to have reached its limits, being confronted with persistent performance problems, resulting in too little aid, often too late and of the wrong kind.

Interestingly, in the two years leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit, three very interesting books on humanitarian aid workers and the organizations they work for were published, each in their own way providing in-depth insight into how some of the problems central to the Humanitarian Summit have been able to develop. Although all three books are quite different in aims and focus, all are based on qualitative research (interviews, document analysis and observation).

In this essay, I will discuss these three monographs in light of the above-mentioned challenges central to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). First, I will discuss Monika Krause's book, in which a field-level analysis of the practices of the humanitarian sector is presented, thereby providing the most overarching analysis of the sector of the three books discussed. I will then continue with Silke Roth's work, who focused on the aid worker as a unit of analysis. By studying their biographies, Roth provides an analysis of the humanitarian workforce, the people core to the practice of

humanitarian aid provision. Third, I will discuss the work by Rene Fox, who had unique access to one of the most well-known and widely discussed aid organizations in the sector: Medecins sans Frontières (MSF), also known as Doctors without Borders. Through her analysis, we learn about the practice of humanitarian aid in one specific aid organization and the challenges it presents to aid workers. Finally, I will discuss the three books in comparative perspective, also in light of the results of the WHS.

### ***The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason***

Krause's book focuses on the humanitarian sector as a field and the practices that characterize it, and thereby provides invaluable insights into some structural problems in the humanitarian sector as addressed at the WHS, especially relating to the way the funding system of humanitarian aid is organized. Krause presents an original and carefully crafted argument about the rationalization and 'projectification' of the humanitarian sector, based on interviews with 50 desk officers in 16 of the largest aid organizations in the world. She convincingly argues that the project is at the core of what she calls the humanitarian production process, in which the logframe is a key tool in the market of humanitarian aid. In this market, Krause claims, the consumers are not those who receive services, but donors. The receivers of services – the 'beneficiaries' – have to provide labour in this production process, not only directly by means of 'food-for-work' or 'money-for-work' aid projects, but also indirectly by playing their part as beneficiaries with particular needs, so that NGOs can convince donors to fund projects.

All work in humanitarian organizations, according to Krause, is tailored to the production unit of the 'good' project which is produced via the project cycle. This production process has its own manuals, trainings, language and methods and is closely connected to the rise of the logframe approach in the sector. Krause presents a nuanced analysis of the logframe approach, which originally freed aid workers from being accountable for achieving unattainable goals such as poverty reduction and economic growth. Instead, the logframe allowed aid workers to focus on projects based on achievable activities for specific target groups in a defined time. In order to acquire funding for these projects, aid organizations had to provide a logframe to donors, outlining project objectives, activities, outputs and indicators. The logframe, Krause argues, has resulted in a very focused approach to aid provision, so that nowadays aid organizations do not look beyond the beginning and end of their projects, leading to fragmentation in aid provision.

Krause's analysis of the humanitarian sector as a production process, or commodity market, is related to her argument that the sector can be understood as a field as defined by Bourdieu. The production of projects takes place in a context of competition for 'humanitarian authority' as field-specific capital, referring to the question of what is legitimately humanitarian. With the project as the shared practice and this question at the core of the sector, the sector can be regarded as a field, despite the fact that all aid organizations have their own ideas as to what is legitimately humanitarian. By means of a classification of 'pure' aid organizations (International Committee of the Red Cross and

MSF) and organizations ‘polluted’ by the state and politics, among others, Krause concludes that the field is characterized by a fragmentation of reason. However, on the level of practices, the sector is engrained with the project logic and the bureaucratic processes that follow from it. This also shows, as she convincingly argues, from two attempts at reform in the sector – being the introduction of Sphere standards and the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) – which were in the end absorbed into the humanitarian production process as production standard (Sphere) and a Fair Trade standard (HAP).

### ***The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals***

Silke Roth’s monograph gives in-depth insight into the biographies of aid workers, both expatriate and so-called ‘local’ and/or ‘national’ staff. By means of over 60 qualitative interviews, Roth analyses the life histories of aid workers, how they entered the sector, with what motivation and how they experience their work and think about their future careers. While doing so, she identifies a set of paradoxes in aid work, or Aidland as she calls it (cf. Apthorpe, 2005). These paradoxes pertain to the privileges and inequalities that are engrained and reproduced in the humanitarian system whose exact purpose is to address these issues. Roth’s analysis resonates with concerns expressed in light of the WHS that humanitarian aid is dominated by the West and there is little attention to and room for local capacities.

Roth shows how this reproduction of inequality and privileges is related to how the sector is structured, how staff are recruited and treated and how different groups of staff relate to each other. For example, since getting a first job in the sector for westerners is often only possible by means of (unpaid) internships, mainly those from high income backgrounds can afford to enter the sector. Furthermore, Roth shows that aid organizations are inclined to give expats higher level jobs, even if they are less experienced than national staff, thereby reproducing a system of inequality resembling the colonial era. At the same time, national staff are often overqualified for the jobs they are hired for and experience difficulties with making a career in aid work. This separation between expats and national staff is further exacerbated by the fact that expats often ‘stick to their flock’ and do not mingle with their national colleagues during and after work. This is partly due to differences in life styles and values, with expats often being younger and single, and national staff being older and living a family life.

Roth also shows that, although aid workers are often assumed to be purely motivated intrinsically, also more self-centred goals are important, especially to expats. This refers to goals such as personal development (even though this is sometimes achieved by being aware of the suffering of others), a sense of adventure and ‘being different by making a difference’. This makes expats very interested in training and critical self-reflection, also with regard to the sector at large, but it also results in regular changes in work contexts and jobs to meet these self-centred goals. Roth argues that this does not help efforts in the sector to professionalize.

Next to these more general patterns, Roth also pays attention to the heterogeneity of perceptions and experiences in her sample of aid workers, categorizing differences between national and expat staff, and within these groups. For example, she identifies three pathways to enter the sector in the expat interviewee group (an early childhood

attraction, gradual development of interest in political and social work/goals while being in another job and a life event that sparked the decision to alter jobs), but also differentiates between the way national staff and expat staff enter the sector. For national staff, working for an aid organization may provide opportunities for a good or better salary and for developing themselves for jobs in the public sector or within international organizations. Also generational, gender and racial differences have Roth's attention, leading to the conclusion that class and nationality seem to be far more important in this reproduction process of inequalities than gender, especially for national staff.

### ***Doctors without Borders: Humanitarian Quests, Impossible Dreams of Medecins sans Frontières***

In both the work of Krause and Roth, MSF is referred to as a key and special actor in the humanitarian sector. This also showed in MSF's position during the preparation phase of the World Humanitarian Summit, since MSF decided to withdraw from the summit right before the start of it because it no longer believed in the sector's commitment for fundamental reform.

MSF has often been the subject of attention in academic publications (see, for some examples, Krause, p. 7). Fox's work is an interesting and valuable addition to this set of publications because of her unique access to the organization for more than 20 years, at the international level, in different MSF sections and in different projects and countries. In that time span she had access to a wide variety of information, ranging from publicly accessible material and internal documents to interviews, personal observations of meetings and projects and email exchanges between MSF staff. Fox's book is interesting because it discusses the dilemmas at the core of the WHS such as the dominance of the West, what aid organizations (and states) should and should not do and how to address ethical issues and political realities. MSF's position on these matters is most of the time fundamentally different than those of governments or other aid organizations. Fox's book thereby provides an interesting angle on these matters.

Fox came into touch with MSF in 1993, during her academic research into medical issues in France, Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she met staff from the sections of MSF Belgium and France. Over the years, she was allowed to closely follow MSF's internal debates and discussions and based on these observations, Fox presents 'a sociological portrait of MSF – of its principles, value commitments, culture, and field missions, and of the medical and moral challenges constantly raised by its humanitarian action' (p. 2). She does this on the one hand by means of more general description. For example, she studied MSF blogs from the field to get insight into the motivation of MSF staff to engage in this type of work. Furthermore, she discusses MSF's growth as an organization throughout the years as well as the associated increased bureaucracy and hierarchy, and reflects on the different debates this development triggered in and between the different MSF sections. On the other hand, Fox zooms in on particular cases in MSF's history such as the role that MSF played in the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa in the 1990s, tuberculosis projects launched by MSF in Russian prisons and the temporary expulsion of MSF Greece as an MSF member because of its independent actions during the Kosovo War.

Fox presents us with a rich account of how MSF as an organization came about, developed and is continuously reflecting upon its role and work in the humanitarian sector. Interestingly enough, this account is not explicitly related to particular theoretical perspectives: Fox lets her sources speak for themselves. A clear picture emerges of MSF's strong culture of debate in which staff constantly question and discuss MSF's role in the humanitarian sector, the desirability and consequences of the organization's growth, MSF's adherence to the humanitarian principles and the dilemmas the organization encounters during their projects. The most enlightening parts of the book in my view are the insights Fox presents in the internal debates between MSF sections and between MSF headquarters and the field, when they concern internal disagreements about matters of mission, strategy, principles and ethics. In these sections, Fox provides interesting insights into scholars in humanitarian aid organizations, organizational sociology and organizational change.

### **The Three Books in Comparative Perspective**

It is especially the combined reading of these books that provide readers with opportunities to gain deep understanding of the humanitarian sector and its problems. Krause's book provides insights into why the humanitarian system is as it is nowadays: this iron cage of project management practices in a state of fragmentation of reason. Roth's work adds to this claim of fragmentation by showing us the world of aid workers of all sorts: at headquarter and field level, as expat and as national or local staff. Her analysis shows how privileges and inequalities keep on being reproduced in the system, even if this is unwanted, and helps to understand better the sector's inclination to forget about local capacities. Fox's work shows how even within one organization fragmentation of reason can exist.

In terms of similarities, all three books show the pervasiveness of projects in the humanitarian sector, as is argued by Krause. The aid workers Roth interviewed speak of their experiences in the frame of projects, for example, when they mention the constant change of staff in projects, the composition of and hierarchy in project teams and their frustrations when working in projects, both with regard to team dynamics and in terms of difficulties to implement projects. Also in Fox's analysis the project is prominent, because it is the decision to start or end projects, and the project's implementation that leads to discussions and disagreements between and within MSF sections. Hence, Krause's powerful and provocative argument on the good project adds a new and valuable perspective on aid work.

However, there are also striking differences between the analyses of the three authors. What is particularly striking is that in Krause's analysis the aid workers of her focus (i.e. desk officers), seem to be mechanically working in this iron cage of projects, caught in the cogs of an orderly production process, not able to escape from it. However, in Roth's and Fox's books, aid workers come across as passionate, emotional and sometimes frustrated human beings, struggling with a messy world, knowing that things go wrong while at the same time trying to cope with these flaws, each in their own ways. Furthermore, and maybe in relation to the above, both Roth and Fox seem to present a much more diverse picture of humanitarian aid workers by showing how various groups of aid

workers experience their work differently and by discussing how even within one organization, views differ and conflicts arise.

One may wonder how to interpret Krause's analysis of an orderly world based upon the project practice in relation to the more 'messy' and diverse picture that is sketched by both Roth and Fox. Various issues come to mind. First, Krause has purposefully focused on the work of desk officers in aid organizations, as she clearly states, whereas Roth has interviewed all kinds of aid workers both in headquarters and in the field, with different nationalities, gender and socio-economic status. Also in Fox's analysis different types of aid workers have their say, ranging from managers to experts to national staff. This might explain how Krause identified a common language and practice based on the logic of the project, whereas in the other two books there is more heterogeneity in research results.

Second, given that desk officers mostly work in headquarters of aid organizations, and that these headquarters are still often located in the western world, it could be that Krause's interviewees had mainly western backgrounds, which may have added to the shared vocabulary, views and experiences. Unfortunately, the methodological appendix in Krause's book does not provide insight into the specific nationalities of her interviewees so one cannot conclude whether this is a plausible argument or not.

Third, in Krause's book the qualitative data gathered (interview material) seem to play a different role than in the other two books. From the start, Krause explicitly acknowledges diversity in perceptions and practices among aid workers and organizations and stresses that her goal is to identify overarching patterns in the sector. She delivers this promise by crafting a powerful argument which reflects her impressive ability to combine a wide range of different academic literatures and documents from the sector with the insights from the interviews. Through this endeavour, she arrives at an analysis of the history of humanitarianism and the dynamics and practices in the sector at large, however, without touching upon exceptions to the pattern she identified. Roth also provides an impressive chapter outlining the history and characteristics of the sector as well as a theoretical background to her analysis. Whereas these two chapters are very valuable to understand the paradoxes in aid work she identifies, her interview material seems to be more at the heart of her analysis, with more room for diversity in patterns.

All in all, each of these three books helps to contextualize the analyses presented in the other two books. Having learned of Krause's argument, the project suddenly is also quite prominent in the works of Roth and Fox, thereby contextualizing the more diversified analyses in their books. The other way around, based on the work of Roth and Fox, one could conclude that Krause has identified a very powerful and strong practice in the sector that disciplines the work of desk officers (and donors), but that other types of aid workers may view, experience and respond differently to. Not only Roth's and Fox's work but also that of others (see, for example, Fechter, 2016; Heyse, 2013 [2007]; Shutt, 2012; Tam and Sato, 2012) seem to hint at the possibility that aid workers might also be able to manipulate, rework or resist the practice of the project.

In the end, the WHS resulted in some successes but not in fundamental reform according to many (Bennet, 2016). The combined reading of these three books helps scholars and practitioners understand why, making the above analyses of continued importance for both scholars and practitioners.

## References

- ALNAP (2015) The state of the humanitarian system. Available at: <http://sohs.alnap.org/> (accessed 25 October 2016).
- Apthorpe A (2005) Postcards from Aidland. Paper presented at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, 10 June.
- Bennet C (2016) World Humanitarian Summit: Political breakthrough or fringe festival? Available at: <https://www.odi.org/comment/10401-world-humanitarian-summit-political-breakthrough-or-fringe-festival> (accessed 12 July 2016).
- Fechter A (2016) Aid work as moral labour. *Critique of Anthropology*. Forthcoming.
- Heyse L (2013 [2007]) *Choosing the Lesser Evil: Understanding Decision Making in Humanitarian Aid NGOs*. Farnham/Abingdon: Ashgate/Routledge.
- ODI/HPG (2016) Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era. Available at: <https://www.odi.org/publications/10381-time-let-go-remaking-humanitarian-action-modern-era> (accessed 25 October 2016).
- Shutt C (2012) A moral economy? Social interpretations of money in Aidland. *Third World Quarterly* 33(8): 1527–1543.
- Tam P and Sato C (2012) Is the non-unitary subject a plausible and productive way to understand development bureaucrats? *Third World Quarterly* 33(8): 1511–1525.