The Power of Voluntary Activity: Global Perspectives. Introduction*

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ABSTRACTS

This special issue explores voluntary activities from a global perspective. Questioning their assumed universality and Western-centric foundations, the contributions examine voluntary activity as a historically contingent social practice that carries different meanings and consequences across time and space. Case studies from England, Lebanon, India, Slovenia, and Switzerland demonstrate how voluntary activities can both challenge and reinforce existing structures. By tracing their diverse historical trajectories, the issue highlights the ambivalent power of voluntary activity as a site of empowerment, obligation, and social transformation.

Das Heft untersucht Freiwilligkeit aus einer globalen Perspektive. Indem die Beiträge diese als historisch bedingte soziale Praxis begreifen, die zu unterschiedlichen Zeiten und Orten verschiedene Bedeutungen und Auswirkungen hatte, hinterfragen sie deren vermeintliche Universalität und westlich geprägten Grundlagen. Fallstudien aus England, dem Libanon, Indien, Slowenien und der Schweiz zeigen, wie freiwillige Tätigkeiten bestehende Strukturen sowohl in Frage stellen als auch stärken können. Durch die Darstellung und Analyse ihrer vielfältigen historischen Entwicklungen hebt das Heft die ambivalente Macht freiwilliger Tätigkeiten zwischen Selbstermächtigung, Verpflichtung und sozialer Transformation hervor.

A central imperative in postcolonial studies is to question seemingly universal Western norms in order to dismantle entrenched certainties. This process, often referred to as "provincializing Europe,"[1] of challenging familiar frameworks and re-examinating

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1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

seemingly universal knowledge and practices reveals how they are localized and carry cultural meaning from their local origins. While many scholars have embraced this approach, it remains relatively unexplored in the research on voluntariness. From a postcolonial viewpoint, this is particularly striking. With its emphasis on individuality and free will, voluntariness draws on particularly Western concepts of human freedom that emerged at the dawn of European modernity. It is constitutive of the modern human subject that informs political philosophy and liberal ethics, with their characteristic blind spots.[2] But is voluntariness, with its core assumptions, an originally Western notion, one that may have been exported or have served colonial expansion? Can it be used beyond the cultural context of its origins to analyze ideas and practices in non-Western societies? Does it, then, belong to those European concepts that are, to quote the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, "at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations"?[3] And if so, what similarities and distinctions characterize non-Western conceptions of voluntariness?

This special issue raises these questions in order to explore voluntariness from a global perspective. It does not offer an exhaustive geographic coverage. Rather, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate about the power, both historical and contemporary, of voluntary activity. To this end, we conceptualize voluntary activity in terms of individual agency and responsibility and thereby as a means to contribute to the formation of subjects and the fabric of societies.[4] This expansive understanding of voluntary activity is this issue's shared conceptual framework, offering a critical lens through which to examine diverse forms of voluntariness in different contexts. The contributions collected here explore the conditions and constraints and the meanings and implications of voluntary activity in a set of differently structured global contexts.

Understanding voluntary activity as a subject-constituting practice necessarily links it to power. Taking a closer look at the practice of volunteering can shed light on this multifaceted interrelationship. On the one hand, volunteers, both individually and collectively, can challenge and reshape social orders, acting as agents of reform or even revolution. Their activities give them the potential to drive social change and make the world a different place. On the other hand, volunteers can also be mobilized to fulfill assigned duties and motivated to provide socially essential functions that other actors—the state, the market, or religious institutions—fail to deliver.[5] Thus, volunteering can be taken to be a civic duty and even a moral obligation, as tellingly captured by *Voluntarily Obliged*, the title of a book on the history of philanthropy in Switzerland.[6] Recent developments

2 Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

3 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16; Nikita Dhawan, *Die Aufklärung vor Europa retten. Kritische Theorien der Dekolonisierung* (Campus, 2024).

4 See also Regula Ludi and Matthias Ruoss, "Dialektiken der Freiwilligkeit: Editorial," *Historische Anthropologie* 31, no. 2 (2023): 203–207.

5 See Matthew Hilton and James McKay, eds., *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got the Big Society* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

6 Beatrice Schumacher, ed., *Freiwillig verpflichtet: Gemeinnütziges Denken und Handeln in der Schweiz seit 1800* (Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2010).

in managing volunteer work and the collecting of data on weekly hours of volunteering and the social profiles of volunteers bespeak this interpretation. This aligns with the desire of state actors to exploit voluntariness for various political objectives.[7] Collecting such data not only measures civic engagement; it also silently affirms and normalizes the outsourcing of caring, welfare, and other services to unpaid labor.

The social practice of volunteering is thus an ambivalent force—at times disruptive and subversive, at others stabilizing through its capacity to meet urgent social needs and promote social cohesion.[8] Moreover, the scope of voluntary activity is bound by structural dimensions, including familial networks, social hierarchies, state institutions, and market forces.[9] Voluntariness, therefore, is tied to agency and empowerment and, at the same time, interacts with the intersectional dynamics of class, race, and gender. A growing body of literature, for example, shows that in Western societies opportunities for civic engagement have been subject to the gendered division of labor in that its organization has assigned different tasks to men and women. Historically, however, conditions for volunteer work were not uniform or stable, and in some contexts, they offered actors opportunities to challenge or and even undermine gendered norms and expand their scope of activity while submitting to social expectations.[10] On a closer look, the concept of voluntary activity is elusive and difficult to define precisely. For this reason, it is essential not to view voluntary activity as monolithic but as a diverse set of practices articulated through the semantics of their culturally and historically specific descriptions. Consequently, semantic analysis and a careful reading of the sources is vital to provincializing the history of voluntary activity.

This special issue engages with the growing body of research and the widening debate on voluntary activity. In recent years, studies have looked into this phenomenon from multiple perspectives, often struggling with its inherent ambiguity. Some studies have referred to the "voluntary sector" as a "loose and baggy monster." Others have investigated the "moving frontier" between it, the state, and the market.[11] The conversation at the end of this issue underscores the challenges of defining the phenomenon, especially from an interdisciplinary perspective and in light of current global developments, such

7 Lester M. Salamon et al., eds., *Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector* (The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, 1999).

8 Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

9 For an analysis of the contemporary ambivalences of volunteering, see Silke van Dyk and Tine Haubner, *Community-Kapitalismus* (Hamburger Edition, 2021).

10 Melanie Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Work und Labour History," *Labour History* 74 (1998): 1–9; Regula Ludi and Matthias Ruoss, "Die Grossmütter und wir: Freiwilligkeit, Feminismus und Geschlechterarrangements in der Schweiz," *L'Homme: Europäische Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 31, no. 1 (2020): 87–104; Manon Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

11 Special issue on "The Politics of Voluntariness in Modern History," eds. Jürgen Martschukat and Alexandra Oeser, *Rethinking History* 29, no. 1 (2025); Jeremy Kendall and Martin Knapp, "A Loose and Baggy Monster: An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector," in *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector*, eds. Justin Davis Smith, Colin Rochester, and Rodney Hedley (Routledge, 1995), 65–94; Geoffrey Finlayson, "A Moving Frontier. Voluntarism and the State in British Social Welfare, 1911–1949," *Twentieth Century British History* 1 (1990): 183–206.

as the climate crisis and the growing trend toward autocracy. Its ambiguities have led many researchers to propose narrow and seemingly clear definitions, but while they have provided important insights, they have also constrained the phenomenon and limited it to specific sectors, regions, and frameworks.[12] Such limitations are an inevitable consequence of deductive approaches. But the aim of our issue is to articulate the content of the concept of voluntary activity on the basis of contemporary and historical practices and perceptions in different periods, places, and political contexts from England and its North American colonies to Slovenia, India, Lebanon, and the United Nations, thereby offering more open, inclusive, and diverse perspectives on the phenomenon. This historically grounded approach offers two significant advantages. First, it allows us to understand voluntary activity as a dynamic concept and to emphasize its historical and transcultural trajectories. Second, it brings into focus the local diversity of voluntary activity, underscoring its varied modes, programs, and language. By grounding the analysis in diverse historical and cultural contexts, this issue contributes to a nuanced understanding of voluntary activities that goes beyond narrow definitions and their consequent sectoral boundaries.

This special issue also considers the global circulation of knowledge and how people have consequently changed the conditions of voluntary activity. Our assertion that voluntary activites are historically situated and locally anchored does not suggest that they are isolated. Modern global interconnectedness facilitates the exchange of ideas and practices. Research on globalization shows that these exchanges are entangled and cannot be conceived as the one-way system or top-down process that modernization theory posits. For entanglement implicates translation, interpretation, adaptation, creative misunderstanding, and resistances in both directions.[13] Yet a global history of voluntary activity is necessarily uneven, particularly as it pertains to colonial and postcolonial contexts. Differing social, religious, and political conditions; conflicting ideas of freedom, responsibility, and duty; and global power relations and inequalities have all influenced the dynamics of voluntary activity. This is not only true of its culturally different understandings but also for how actors in different places have engaged with global discourses, adopting, transforming, exploiting, and rejecting them.[14]

This special issue brings together articles that examine the power of voluntary activity from different perspectives. Mara Albrecht, Eduardo Aboultaif, and Haitham Sakr investigate *qabaḍāyāt*—voluntary, non-state security actors in mid-twentieth-century Lebanon—from a perspective inspired by global history paradigms. These self-appoint-

12 See, for instance, the articles in the special issue on "Freiwilligenarbeit und gemeinnützige Organisationen im Wandel. Neue Perspektiven auf das 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," eds. Nicole Kramer and Christine G. Krüger, *Historische Zeitschrift*, Beiheft 76 (2019).

13 Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, eds., *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften* (Campus, 2002); Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

14 On the significance of local differences in global contexts, see Arif Dirlik, "Globalization, Indigenism, Social Movements, and the Politics of Place," *Localities* 1 (2011): 47–90; Angelika Epple, "Lokalität und die Dimension des Globalen. Eine Frage der Relationen," *Historische Anthropologie* 21, no. 1 (2013): 4–25.

ed enforcers of neighborhood security were intermediaries between local communities and political elites, reflecting a culturally embedded form of volunteering shaped by clientelism, honor codes, and informal power structures. Challenging Western notions of voluntariness rooted in liberal individualism, their article highlights how *qabaḍāyāt* exercised agency within Lebanon's hybrid political system. And by analyzing how their role shifted in response to historical changes, particularly during the era of reform and the rise of militias in the civil war, toward one that both reinforced and undermined state authority, the article offers a critical perspective on voluntariness as a historically contingent and power-inflected practice.

Maria Framke looks into the volunteer work of Indian women in rural development initiatives from the colonial to the postcolonial period, focusing on the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association (SNDMA) in Bengal between the 1920s and the 1970s. She explores how upper- and middle-class Indian women organized and implemented rural welfare programs to improve education, health, and economic independence for women in the countryside. Her focus is on their motivations and the different meanings they attributed to volunteering, such as care, national contribution, and female solidarity, during the transition from colonialism to independence. She highlights the role of volunteer work in shaping rural development and female citizenship in India while also addressing the professionalization of social work, evolving gender roles, and the lasting importance of grassroots women's organizations in nation-building.

Ana Kladnik discusses the changing meaning of volunteering through the lens of volunteer fire departments in Slovenia from the mid-nineteenth century to the late socialist era. She explores how the concept of volunteering interacted with changing political conditions, particularly the system of self-management in socialist Yugoslavia, which emphasized the participation and shared decision-making of citizens in shaping local communities in their municipalities. Fire departments looked back on a long tradition that anchored them in the social life of local communities. Initially exclusively male organizations, volunteer fire departments came to include women over time. For both male and female firefighters, volunteering meant unpaid and honorable work in service to the community that was tied to both national tradition and local identity.

Regula Ludi examines how volunteering has become recognized as a form of labor since the 1970s through changing statistical and political frameworks. She argues that this change reflects broader socioeconomic and political transformations, including neoliberal reforms and feminist critiques the invisibility of unpaid work. The notion of "Volunteerland" illustrates how data collection and its international standards redefined volunteer work as economically valuable. Feminist efforts to get domestic work recognized as economically valuable labor were instrumental in this process, but they also reinforced the association of volunteering with gendered, unpaid care work. Drawing on Switzerland as a case study, she shows how national statistical practices were reshaped by global agendas and local activism. She concludes that this reshaping made volunteering visible and politically actionable, but it also enabled new forms of instrumentalization

and reinforced existing social hierarchies, complicating voluntariness as a practice of both empowerment and obligation.

Jürgen Martschukat critically revisits John Locke's concept of the liberal subject by examining its entanglement with voluntary action, property, and colonial domination. Situating Locke's political thought within the dual context of seventeenth-century resistance to absolutist authority and colonial expansion, he argues that the Lockean subject was shaped through and legitimized by systems of unfree labor, land appropriation, and racialized hierarchies. Drawing on Locke's theoretical writings and his active role in the colonization of Carolina, he shows how voluntariness was both a principle of freedom and a mechanism of domination. Rather than viewing exclusion and exploitation as contradictions of liberalism, Martschukat reveals their structural integration into its formation. He concludes by calling for a historicized understanding of voluntariness that recognizes its dual potential as a tool of subjugation and a resource for critique and resistance.

Finally, a conversation between the historian Matthias Ruoss, the sociologist Silke van Dyk, and the philosopher Tilo Wesche reveals interdisciplinary perspectives on research into the power of voluntary activity. Wesche underlines both the shortcomings and the potential of a political practice based on voluntary choice, particularly when it comes to addressing global problems such as the climate crisis. Van Dyk, who researches the significance of volunteering for global capitalism, stresses how it is used as economic resource, particularly in an era of shrinking social welfare systems. Ruoss reminds us of the historicity of voluntary activity, pointing out how, time and again in the modern era, it has not only been an object of exploitation but has also revealed its liberating potential and the power of individual agency.

In bringing together these diverse case studies and conceptual reflections, this special issue underscores that the power of voluntary activity lies precisely in its ambiguity, mobility, and entanglement with structures of domination and resistance. As the contributions reveal, voluntariness is neither a neutral nor a universally applicable category; it is a historically contingent and culturally embedded social practice that carries different meanings and consequences across time and space. By tracing its local articulations and global trajectories, these articles collectively argue that voluntary activity is not a Western liberal practice, and they submit it to critical scrutiny from postcolonial and transnational perspectives. The power of voluntary activity, then, lies not only in the capacity to act freely but also in the ways in which freedom itself is conditioned, negotiated, and contested in an unequal world. In this way, voluntariness is both a political issue and an analytical lens. Understanding it demands close attention to its changing forms, enduring contradictions, and transformative potential.