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Informal volunteering in Greece's discriminatory migrant regime: Practices in inclusivity

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CHAPTER 6: The Politics of Aid: Discursive Boundary-Making and the War of Position in Greece's Humanitarian Landscape



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ABSTRACT

During 2017 and 2018, Greece hosted roughly 80,000 border crossers who had arrived in the EU, fleeing mostly conflict, economic, and political instability. Different actors working within the humanitarian landscape offered various forms of assistance and solidarity.

Through ten months of ethnographic fieldwork on Lesbos, this chapter explores the tensions that emerged between informal volunteers and paid aid workers and state actors. It employs Gramsci's war of position to argue that discursive tactics by informal volunteers to delegitimize the state and state-sanctioned aid, challenge cultural hegemony and subvert the border regime. This chapter contributes to research that expands upon the role of civil society in displacement. Through analyzing discursive tactics as potential sites of power and struggle over meaning and symbols in society, it also offers insights on how to disrupt dominant power hierarchies.

KEY WORDS

Informal volunteers, border crossers, war of position, Greece, Moria camp

Introduction

Clara was an informal volunteer from Northern Europe who had lived on the island of Lesbos, Greece, for three years. She had been present in 2015 when thousands of border crossers made landfall in overcrowded rubber dinghies each day, and she was actively volunteering on the island before many large organizations arrived to help. She had previously volunteered in Pikpa, a camp set up by local and international “solidarians”— a neologism meaning those who engage in informal anti-institutional and anti-hierarchical aid (Rozakou 2016). Pikpa housed the most vulnerable border crossers, such as those who were members of the LGBTQ+ community, in late pregnancy, or had lost loved ones on the Aegean Sea en route to Greece. Clara was part of a border-monitoring¹⁹ search and rescue (SAR) activist team and also engaged in solidarity and teaching in an educational space. She described herself as an activist rather than a volunteer and chose not to collaborate with certain organizations. When I asked what she thought of large organizations, such as UNHCR, she responded:

We are definitely not working on the same thing [. . .]. I think UNHCR is legitimizing what is happening; their job is to support the government with logistics [. . .]. They are even officially supporting the EU-Turkey deal. Then we are not working on the same side at all [. . .]. I think they're part of the problem. I think it would be better if they leave.

During my fieldwork in 2017-2018, Greece had an aid landscape that was an assemblage of government and non-government organizations (NGOs), solidarity initiatives, political activist groups, and individuals who aided and engaged with border crossers in varying, sometimes contradictory ways. Watching how moments of tension and antagonism played out on the ground, I became interested in how each group positioned itself vis-à-vis others. For example, informal volunteers often mentioned that certain government organizations and NGOs were “part of the problem” or “on the other side,” while interviews with government actors sometimes revealed similar conceptions of solidarians and informal volunteers. I later wanted to explore how discursive framings of ‘the other’ worked productively to challenge or maintain the status quo of the border regime.

The interlocutors represented in this chapter were mainly informal volunteers; they arrived to Greece mostly from other areas in Europe, were heterogenous and comprised

¹⁹ Border-monitoring groups patrolled specific points along the island’s east coast to rescue people from boats that made landfall and to monitor and report on the legality of actions of border guards and Frontex. For example, they helped the boats dock safely and offered immediate medical care, bottled water, and emergency blankets. These groups also reported illegal pushbacks of boats into Turkish waters, an action that goes against international asylum law.

diverse people who had varied understandings and practices of solidarity, but whose anti-hierarchical, non-discriminatory, and egalitarian mission separated them from regular volunteers, whose political convictions were not so outspoken. Through ethnographic snippets of an unfolding event between two diametrically opposed camps on Lesbos, one organized and run by the Greek state and UNHCR, the other by solidarians and informal volunteers, I show how tensions emerged and became articulated on the ground. I then trace the discursive boundary-making methods—defined as the construction and maintenance of one’s identity through enacting discursive boundaries between an imagined in-group and an imagined out-group—that informal volunteers used to separate themselves from certain humanitarian and government organizations (see Crowley 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006; Mac Ginty 2017). In the discussion that follows, I consider how these discursive methods contribute to the war of position, following Gramsci, to challenge the cultural hegemony of the state—namely its reification of citizenship as the dominant form of political organization and borders as necessary and inevitable.

Gramsci, along with other Neo-Marxist thinkers of his time, questioned why Marx’s prophecy that the mass proletariat would rise up against the small ruling elite, never came to pass. In answering this question, he argued that to change society, one had to change the theorizations of the intellectuals, the education system, and the philosophy of society, all of which make up and reinforce the dominant culture. This chapter aims to show how informal volunteers, through discursive framing of NGO and state actors, have challenged the dominant philosophies of society, and therefore challenged the hegemonic state narrative. This chapter also takes up Gramsci’s call to decolonize intellectual space, and follows Holmes and Castañeda, who implore anthropologists to challenge “power hierarchies in the production and circulation of representations, including within our own writing” (2016, 13) through employment of specific terms such as border crosser—which I collectively call all migrants (save for volunteers and tourists) so as to defer judgement about deservingness. They may be asylum seekers, refugees, or irregularized migrants.

The first section describes the context of the humanitarian landscape in Greece, situating it within a history of both hospitality and solidarity. It expands upon literature that discusses tensions in various aid landscapes, and introduces how Gramsci’s concepts of cultural hegemony and the war of position are productive tools to analyze these tensions. After explaining my research methods, I use ethnography of an unfolding situation between two camps on Lesbos, to show how tensions can become articulated on the ground. I incorporate interviews with various actors in which they have discursively framed the other

group to delegitimize them, and then conclude with a discussion that explores the deeper power struggle behind these discursive tactics.

This chapter contributes to research that expands upon the role of civil society in displacement. Through analyzing discursive tactics as potential sites of power and struggle over meaning and symbols in society, it also points to tactics that disrupt dominant power hierarchies.

The Humanitarian Arena and Cultural Hegemony

Filoksenia, or hospitality, has played an important role in Greek tradition and history and has been crucial in the Greek state's representation of itself on the world stage (Rozakou 2012). Hospitality, however, is not unconditional; it may consider the guests as inferior or at a minimum, creates rules for their conditional stay, and has historically necessitated reciprocity (Daskalaki and Leivaditi 2018; Voutira 2016; Kravva 2014). Although many Greeks have been active in anti-institutional forms of care and solidarity for decades, it was after the 2008-2009 economic collapse, and subsequent austerity measures that solidarity movements took strong root in society (Cabot 2014). Grassroots coalitions and individuals provided services and products directly to each other, from producer to consumer. This negated the necessity of the middlemen and created new forms of reciprocity and informal economies. For Cabot, "solidarity speaks to collective action [. . .] inextricably linked to crisis, neoliberalism and austerity" (2016, 153). Continuing this action, a "solidarian" states Rozakou, "emphasises lateral and anti-hierarchical sociality and the contrast with bureaucratic frameworks" (2016, 187).

Beginning in 2015, roughly one million border crossers passed through Greece, seeking asylum in Europe. Largely from the Middle East, they were fleeing conflict, political instability, and economic precarity (Oikonomakis 2018). This spurred the proliferation of local aid organizations and solidarity initiatives throughout Greece. Many of these began ad hoc, as the number of people crossing into Greece had increased dramatically in a short period—with roughly 800,000 arrivals from January to November 2015, and arrival rates as high as 6,000 per day (UNHCR 2019a). Members of solidarity initiatives transitioned their already robust associations to focus on aiding border crossers in addition to the locals they were aiding (Ibid.; Rakopoulos 2014). For example, they offered accommodation in informal (often squatted) settlements, educational and vocational classes, legal and medical aid, and logistical information (Rozakou 2016; Cabot 2014). These solidarity associations were

structured differently than hospitality of the past. As my co-author and I argued in chapter 5, the hierarchies and obligations inherent in hospitality are antithetical to solidarity, which is rooted in egalitarian and anti-hierarchical ideals. Hospitality and solidarity are therefore rivals.

A new trend also emerged in Greece and throughout Europe: the organization and arrival of informal volunteers, who began with tasks such as welcoming, food supply, translation, and offering logistical information (Chtouris and Miller 2017; Oikonomakis 2018). I term the interlocutors in this chapter “informal volunteers”, as they arrived to Greece from abroad (mainly from Northern Europe and North America) and worked in pro-solidarity, informal associations. For example, non-hierarchy and group decision-making were cornerstones of many of these associations. These initiatives and organizations came to co-exist with national, international, and supranational governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that arrived to various regions around Greece to offer professional support, guidance, and targeted aid.

Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) describe aid landscapes as “humanitarian arenas,” in which competition between various international and local NGOs can lead to antagonism. In the humanitarian arena, state actors and large organizations, such as UHNCR, hold most legitimate decision-making power; they set up and run camps, organizing and implementing asylee registrations and decisions, housing, distribution of resources such as food, and allocation of funding, in the form of the “cash card”, which is a debit-like card filled to various amounts once a month. Their aid of border crossers is often seen by solidararians as conditional, as aid is given to those who can show they have suffered in specific ways (Fassin 2007; Ticktin 2011). Solidararians and informal volunteers frame this type of aid as “charity”, which is viewed negatively because it reproduces the hierarchy between a powerful (usually White) *savoir*, and a powerless (usually Brown/Black) victim (see Ticktin 2011). The charity trope also obfuscates the multiple, overlapping reasons that people cross borders in search of a better life and the agency that border crossers employ in various arenas (Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2011).

Boundary politics, as the creation and maintenance of one’s identity vis-à-vis the other, is not a new phenomenon between solidararians/informal volunteers and the state, nor even between informal volunteers and aid workers, nor is it contained to Greece. For example, in Hilhorst and Jansen’s (2010) research in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami and in a protracted refugee camp in Kenya, the authors found competition and a tension between volunteers, whom they term “non-governmental individuals (NGIs),” and

aid workers. Aid workers were viewed by NGOs as bureaucratic and overpriced, while NGOs were viewed by aid workers “as amateurs who get in the way of the professionals” (2010, 1131). An important finding was that each group actively worked to exclude others from the humanitarian landscape (ibid.). This is mirrored by Martin and Nolte’s research in the European Union (EU) which volunteers and aid workers viewed each other in a negative light (2019).

Scholarship exploring the humanitarian landscape in the EU has elucidated how informal volunteers opposed the type of aid offered by humanitarian and government organizations and how they used individual and collective agency to offer aid to those the government excluded (e.g. Castañeda 2013; Vandevordt and Verschraegen; Stock 2019; Sandri 2018). What has been missing from this research however, is how these discursive framings of ‘the other’ affect the dominant narrative, as they work to either reify or challenge the status quo. To understand this dynamic, it is useful to think with Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony. Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, questions how it is that dominant groups in society maintain power when the masses in the subordinate groups are relatively autonomous and therefore can be seen, at least partially, as complicit in their own domination (Lears 1985). The term cultural hegemony has been used to reconcile this contradiction; I employ it loosely as the domination by a ruling class of diverse peoples, in which the dominant group controls the culture—mores, values, rituals, taboos, norms, etc.—so that the status quo appears natural and so well institutionalized and internalized that it is not questioned and seen as the norm. The root of the word comes from ancient Greece, *hegemonia*, and has been variably translated as “to rule over” or “to lead”. In ancient times hegemons were states that ruled over other states by force. Gramsci, who favoured employing existing terminology to creating new ones, saw the need for this word to evolve for modern use; no longer did states always rule by force, but rather they controlled populations by creating the cultural parameters for their citizens to live within and navigate (Ives 2004; Lears 1985).

For Gramsci, cultural hegemony is not only perpetuated by those in the dominant, or ruling group, but by everyone who fails to challenge it. When people act out of self-interest to get ahead in society, they unintentionally reify that system, because their actions help to maintain it. Gramsci, employing military metaphors, makes a distinction between the war of manoeuvre, as the outright fight for power, and the war of position, as the fight over the symbols and system that function to serve the war of manoeuvre (Gramsci 1971; Ives 2004; Holmes and Castañeda 2016). The ways in which people, institutions, governments,

concepts, etc., are discursively framed can further repression, maintain apathy, or conversely, mobilize revolution. Holmes and Castañeda (2016) expose the “shifting war of position” in the various discursive framings of border crossers in Europe during and after the 2015 “long summer of migration”. In official discourse, border crossers were framed as either undeserving criminals, potentially threatening to the safety of the citizenry and cultural fabric of the EU, or deserving refugees in need of saving (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). The authors argue that these discursive framings are “simultaneous symbolic, social, political, and legal categories of inclusion and exclusion with potentially fatal consequences”. In other words, the representations of border crossers are more than discourse; they relate to the “politics of life” in which some people are marked to be saved and others to perish (Fassin 2005).

Similarly, I employ the concept of the war of position to show the ways in which informal volunteers were discursively framed by the state and large aid organizations as opponents and potentially dangerous, in a bid to legitimize and maintain the status quo of the refugee camp and state-sanctioned aid delivery. I also show how these informal volunteers fight back within this war of position, by framing the state and aid organizations as oppressive and unhumanitarian. In the next section I explain my research methods.

Research Methods

During my ten months of ethnographic research, I conducted participant observation in camps, squatted settlements, NGOs, and spaces of solidarity as well as interviews with a range of different actors, from Greek and EU government employees to international and national aid workers and informal volunteers and solidarians. I also volunteered in Athens within a legal aid group and on Lesbos for an informal border-monitoring group and at Pikpa camp. My firsthand volunteering/solidarity work produced a deeper understanding of the complex relationship informal volunteers had with aid workers and government employees.

I conducted research on Lesbos with the inclusion of a few interviews from Athens. Interviews were semi-structured, ranging from thirty minutes to two and a half hours, during which interlocutors were asked about their work, challenges they faced, their conceptions of their own and other organizations, and the effects of different policies and practices on the border crossers, among other questions. I found participants through my own volunteer work, emails, networking, and attending meetings with NGOs and government actors, as well as through snowball sampling. Throughout my research and volunteering, it became apparent

that tensions between groups played a central role in the humanitarian landscape, and actors themselves often commented on the negative effects of these tensions. Therefore, I iteratively adapted part of the research to focus more narrowly on this aspect.

Participant observation mainly took place within Pikpa camp, which was organized and run by a small core staff, who were paid from donations, and a large group of unpaid international and local solidarians. Additional research was conducted within informal NGOs and associations in and around the capital city of Mytilene and public spaces on the outskirts of Moria camp. I share further findings from one biweekly inter-agency meeting bringing together volunteers and solidarians, aid workers, and government actors to discuss recent events.

My background and positionality granted me access to some spaces but not to others. I was a Canadian doctoral candidate in my early thirties, with a history of travel and volunteer work. Informal volunteers were mostly in their twenties and thirties, leaned Left politically, were mainly of European origin, and employed English as the main language of conduct. It was thus easy for me to slip in as a colleague, and for the solidarians to view me as one of their own—albeit one who took copious notes and asked many questions. This allowed for unfiltered access where volunteers largely let their guard down and treated me like I was a fellow volunteer, not just a researcher. However, their participation in this chapter has been requested again a second time due to the inclusion of the camp name.

Although this chapter explores tensions between three groups, it focuses on informal volunteers. They mostly operated independent from large structured organizations, offering care in a fluid, informal manner with considerable flexibility and autonomy. They viewed their solidarity and volunteer work as necessary because the state and aid organizations were unable to provide adequate care and resources to all border crossers. The aid workers under analysis had specific training and expertise, being from large organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Save the Children, and EuroRelief. I only analyzed organizations specifically mentioned by interlocutors. Others, such as Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), did not accept government funding, and although large, did not factor in to negative discursive framing by the interlocutors. Finally, government actors comprised police, border patrol, local and regional authorities, and civil servants. Informal volunteers often described them as “the state” and conceived of them as a single entity, which, because their actions reproduce state hegemony, is largely how they are termed here, although they were a heterogeneous body pursuing varying interests and actions.

According to Ellis and Adams, “concerns about research being an invasive and oppressive colonialist enterprise is directly connected with the ethics of researching and representing others” (2014, 11). Due to the ethical considerations in representing vulnerable populations and the possibility of re-traumatization, I chose not to interview border crossers. Representation, however, is important, especially of marginalized peoples. Spivak distinguishes between “speaking for” and “speaking about” (Quoted in Dhawan 2012, 52); the challenge, according to Dhawan is “how to ethically and imaginatively inhabit other people’s narrative – without appropriating it and without doing violence to it” (Ibid.). In attempting to meet this challenge, I have aimed to “speak about” rather than for, border crossers, and have kept the analysis close to the empirical material.

The other point I want to bring to the fore is my position as a scholar from the Global North, doing research in Greece. Anthropologists, like humanitarian actors, sometimes chase crises, and like aid work, scholarship is a business (Andersson 2014). This can lead to short-sighted funding applications, rapid ethnographies, and decontextualized research. As this research was part of a PhD in which I spent ten months in Greece, split between Athens and Lesbos, I admit that my understandings of displacement and especially solidarity in the Greek context are more limited than local scholars with years of expertise. This is further problematized by the fact that these local scholars often cannot get funding due to the economic precarity of academia in Greece (Cabot 2019). I have therefore aimed to contextualize my findings within the cannon of Greek scholars, specifically, in relation to “solidarity”.

Informed consent was gathered in writing, except for a few cases in which I recorded it verbally. All interlocutors are anonymized for their protection. Initially, I had agreed with interlocutors to keep the name of their organizations anonymous. However, as an incident that makes up the case study progressed, it became clear that I could not describe it without giving away the background or details of Pikpa camp. Therefore, an agreement was reached after much of the research and volunteering, in which I was given permission by the parties interviewed (including the organization contact of the camp). Although the data presented here shows that some solidarians had strong feelings of opposition toward government actors and large organizations, the analysis and conclusions in this chapter are my own and may not reflect the official views of the camp management.²⁰

²⁰ Ethical permission was granted by the University of Amsterdam and organizations and individuals who participated.

From Moria to Pikpa and Back

In 2016, with the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement, an “island restriction” stipulated that migrants entering Greece via one of the islands (Lesvos, Leros, Kos, Samos, or Chios) could not leave that island until the outcome of their asylum claim, which could take well over a year. In the meantime, they were confined mainly to dismal island camps such as Moria, with only those migrants categorized as “most vulnerable” eligible for transfer to the mainland.

In the summer of 2018, Moria camp, run by the Greek government and managed by the military and UNHCR, had nearly 8,000 residents yet a capacity of roughly 3,000. Resources including water, food, blankets, hygiene materials, and space were in short supply. Conditions were squalid with garbage and sewage overflowing on various occasions (MSF 2019). Medical staff were overwhelmed and turned away patients daily, resulting in some residents cutting their wrists outside clinics, desperate to prove they were in need. A variety of organizations worked inside this camp, providing medical, education, and protection services. They were run and operated by government employees, aid workers, and volunteers for organizations officially permitted to operate there, such as EuroRelief, the camp’s main housing organization. Informal volunteers offered aid at nearby locations outside the camp or in the capital city of Mytilene, accessible by a thirty-minute bus ride. They occasionally entered the camp via a hole in the fence to give services not offered or accessible to many camp residents.

On May 25, 2018, fights broke out in Moria between Kurdish border crossers and Arabic-speaking border crossers²¹. No one was killed, but many were stabbed and slashed with knives and makeshift weapons. The fighting resulted in roughly 1,000 Kurdish border crossers fleeing the camp. Police officers found forty Kurdish men, women, and children hiding in a park in the city center and brought them to Pikpa, hoping the camp could accommodate them safely. Run by the Greek NGO Lesvos Solidarity, this camp had been operating since 2015; its residents were border crossers transferred by UNHCR because they were considered “highly vulnerable.” Pikpa camp did not own the land it used, although negotiations to acquire it from the government were ongoing. It was set up to function

²¹ The Kurdish people who fled to Pikpa camp described themselves as “Kurds” and the others as “Arabs. I have used this terminology but aim to continually update the terms used, based on how these groups experience the categorizations and how they prefer to be named.

differently than other refugee camps, emphasizing collective decision-making between paid staff, unpaid solidarians and informal volunteers, and border crossers—referred to as “residents.” Residents shared a common kitchen, cooked and cleaned for themselves, gardened, and engaged in many other activities as part of a community. Although Pikpa had housed close to 30,000 individuals (with a maximum of about a thousand at any one time) since its inception as a refugee camp, its official capacity was only 120 people. It therefore came to be seen, above all, as a symbol of solidarity rather than a viable solution for hosting thousands of border crossers (Lesvos Solidarity 2018; personal communication with Pikpa staff).

Over the next few days, roughly 350 new residents arrived. The staff leading the camp and the volunteers, myself among them, worked around the clock erecting tents, making and distributing food, distributing hygiene items and other resources, and addressing medical and legal issues. During this period, many organizations came to offer services. Solidarians and volunteers from a number of them as well as on an individual basis arrived to help however they could—whether it be interpretation, building tents, moving, cleaning, engaging the children, or coordinating logistics.

A couple weeks later, tensions surfaced among local business owners, hotels, government bodies, and larger organizations, as questions about a long-term solution abounded. Pikpa faced a lawsuit from local hotel owners and individuals for being over capacity; the hotels claimed it affected their business. Interestingly, these hotel owners did not appear to be concerned with the capacity of Moria camp, some 12 km away, which, at 8,000 people, was almost three times its capacity. Pikpa camp was geographically much bigger than its limited capacity maximum of 120, and it was not overcrowded nor, in my experience, did it feel unsafe at this time. We can therefore, infer that this discursive framing by local hotel owners of Pikpa being “over capacity” was an attempt to maintain the status quo of how border crossers were housed—further away and out of sight in the overcrowded Moria camp, to the detriment of the border crossers’ mental and physical well-being.

In conversations with locals, I heard complaints of increased garbage at the local beach, and that men were walking the neighborhood in groups, possibly scaring nearby hotel guests. The framing of these border crossers as unclean is reminiscent of colonial attitudes towards the “uncivilized masses” of the Global South, in need of saving. More problematic is the representation of border crossers as potential dangers which reinforces a culture that sees border crossers as “‘pre-emptive suspects,’ always already untrustworthy” (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, 19).

Furthermore, government actors from the Region of the North Aegean sent inspectors to Pikpa during this time. Including forestry and hygiene inspectors, they took issue with a few small deficiencies—a “broken net in the food distribution area, [a] leak in a water tank for the laundry machines and deficiencies in the common kitchen”—but still declared that Pikpa was “dangerous to public health and the environment” (Lesvos Solidarity 2018). The Region of the North Aegean called for Pikpa’s closure within fifteen days, meaning that new and old residents would have to find somewhere else to live.

The framing of Pikpa as “dangerous to public health and the environment” was an attempt to discredit the camp and those who ran it. Although the government had the power to close the camp at any point, they used this discourse as a way to legitimize the continued housing of border crossers at Moria camp. I argue that this discursive framing is an attempt by the state to “win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order” through the war of position (Lears 1985, 569). The Greek state did not need this consent to close Pikpa, nor to house border crossers in Moria, but by gaining legitimacy, they would ultimately maintain cultural hegemony among the Greek population, and more widely, as Moria camp was continuously in international news during this time for its crowded and unsafe conditions.

However, Pikpa staff quickly fixed the hygiene issues and used public discourse themselves to win better standing in the war of position when Lesvos Solidary published the following on its website:

We are puzzled by the fact that the Hygiene Service—although it was aware of the emergency situation in the island those days—refers to the 350 Kurdish refugees and refers to “crowded living accommodation” in PIKPA, whereas there is no reference or report about the exposure of these people to the dangers and extreme overcrowding in Moria hotspot. (Lesvos Solidarity 2018)

According to Gramsci, it is not only the ruling class that has the power over the symbols, values, rituals, and attitudes of society. Rather, power is exercised by diverse individuals and groups, all who have the ability to challenge the status quo (Gramsci 1971; Ives 2004). Another example of this was through the #SavePikpa campaign, which was mobilized by solidararians and informal volunteers at Pikpa to save the camp from closure. Through existing social networks such as WhatsApp chat groups, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the campaign spread; eventually solidararians, volunteers, and even aid workers in Lesvos, Greece, and beyond, posted photos of themselves holding up “#SavePikpa” signs. The campaign was reported by MSF, Oxfam, and Amnesty International (MSF Sea 2018; Oxfam 2018; Amnesty International 2018b).

While this campaign was happening, the lawsuit and shutdown threat pressured Pikpa staff to close the main gate and bar new border crossers from entering—a move informal volunteers described as “heart-breaking,” “unhumanitarian,” and “antithetical to Pikpa’s core values.” During this time, the governing actors of Moria camp attempted to make a safe corridor for Kurdish border crossers to return to Moria without fear, which was essentially through increased security and surveillance in the camp. The governing bodies and large government agencies tried to coerce the population to move back to Moria by threatening to withhold their monthly allowance of cash (via the UNHCR-led “cash card”), and threatening to delist those who were in line to be transferred to the mainland. In Lear’s reading of Gramsci, “consent and force nearly always coexist, though one or the other predominates” (Lear 1985, 567). In this example, consent (in giving the Kurdish border crossers the time to make their own choice of camp) devolved into coercion to return to Moria. These threats, though not enacted, created tensions between informal volunteers—pronouncing the threats unethical—and larger NGOs and government actors operating in Moria, who desperately wanted to control the situation.

Roughly three weeks after their arrival to Pikpa, the Kurdish border crossers returned to Moria. They did so willingly—a main reason for their return was so that their temporary stay in Pikpa would not be the reason (or scapegoat) for Pikpa’s closure. It is unclear whether the #SavePikpa campaign affected the decision of the Region of the North Aegean, but Pikpa camp continued to run until evictions in late October 2020. The exodus of Kurdish border crossers out of Moria camp, their settlement in Pikpa, and ultimate return to Moria exposes instances of both informal volunteers and state actors engaging in a war of position to either challenge or maintain the status quo of the state-sanctioned refugee camp.

The next section explores how discursive practices were used by various actors in a public meeting on Lesbos to discredit the other, and later, how boundary-making tactics furthered each actor’s own standing in the war of position.

Discursive Practices and the War of Position

A Bridge to Nowhere

Convened by a UNHCR spokesperson, biweekly meetings on Lesbos aimed to bring together all actors on the island interested in collaborating or discussing the main issues concerning the hosting of border crossers. For analytical purposes, I expand on one meeting that took

place during Pikpa's hosting of the Kurdish border crossers. The meeting began with a Pikpa representative, Polly, explaining the difficulties informal volunteers faced through hosting many hundreds of border crossers with few resources. She asked what plans UNHCR and government actors were enacting to find a solution. No one answered her question. Instead, one man yelled out, "You always like to play the hero. You are inviting people in for your own gain!" Polly then pointed out that it was government actors (police) who brought the first group of Kurds to Pikpa, thereby asking the volunteers to take responsibility for these people. The contradiction in this revelation is that the police, who in part make up the state, chose to bring border crossers to a camp that the state had, many times previous, framed as illegitimate, and dangerous. And only weeks after this incident, the state again made these claims and threatened Pikpa's closure. The discursive framing of Pikpa as "dangerous to public health and environment" confers illegitimacy, exposing the shifting war of position, even within the state itself.

Rather than arrive at a solution, the conversation devolved into individuals yelling accusations aimed at solidarians/informal volunteers, aid workers, and government actors. In turn, each actor shifted responsibility to another. For example, the European Commission representative made clear that he was not affiliated with the Greek government. He lamented the Greek government's inability to properly use the hundreds of millions of euros given to Greece by the EU to help with the refugee crisis. He blamed the appalling conditions and violence in Moria camp on the Greek government. This boundary-making tactic did little to rectify the situation at hand; it only shifted the blame. Similarly, a Greek government actor who was responsible for much of Moria camp's operation blamed the persisting situation on the Kurdish people themselves, stating that they were exploiting the opportunity: in refusing to return to Moria, they sought to be moved to the mainland, thereby evading the island restriction. By representing these Kurdish border crossers as culpable, this state actor was able to legitimize their continued subjugation in Moria camp. Holmes and Castañeda, in discussing the framing of border crossers in media, political, and popular narratives, state that these "discursive frames...can help us learn a great deal about how the responsibility for suffering is shifted; how fears of cultural, ethnic, and religious difference are mobilized; and how boundaries of social categories are made and unmade" (2016, 13). In the latter case, one could argue that this state actor was remaking the category of the Kurdish border crossers from "deserving refugee" to "undeserving" or "untrustworthy" migrant.

During a lull in conversation, a man yelled out, "You aren't listening to the locals!" This ignited a chaotic debate between all parties involved. Before the meeting adjourned with

no definitive answers and increased tension between the groups present, a number of people stated that their organizations were helping the situation for the local people by taking the border crossers “out of sight” and caring for them so Greek people would not have to; they were frustrated at the way this help was received by the state, which was largely through tactics of delegitimization and criminalization. For example, many small organizations were being shut down by the government and solidarians and informal volunteers were being increasingly criminalized although they offered valuable services and they wanted to know why. In chapter 5 I argued that the criminalization of solidarity is a response to civil society challenging and interfering with state policies and practices of hostile hospitality. The Greek state and the organizations that run Moria camp offer a conditional, or hostile, form of hospitality, that usually necessitates refugeeness. Solidarians, by contrast, offer unconditional hospitality, to all border crossers and they arguably offer better, more dignified housing.

Although I aim to focus this chapter on the discursive practices that make up the war of position, actions such as criminalization, also work in tandem with discursive framing, to delegitimize solidarity. Shortly after the conceptualization of the EU-Turkey agreement, criminalizing solidarity became increasingly common. For example, in early 2016, five Search and Rescuers (SAR) operating in Greece were arrested and charged with smuggling. A month later a law was passed that allowed the prosecution of those who offered food or shelter outside of official state-sanctioned avenues (Maccanico et al. 2018). And, since the EU-Turkey agreement came into effect, more than fifty investigations and prosecutions have been levied against solidarians (Vosyliūtė and Conte 2019). Whether or not these have had the consequence of delegitimizing solidarity in the eyes of the public, the majority have resulted in decreased SAR operations, as many informal volunteers and solidarians have been afraid to continue operations.

Boundary Making and Discursive Practices

In speaking about UNHCR, Clara, the informal volunteer whose quote opened this chapter, called attention to the boundary-making dynamic that was also keenly experienced by those who worked for UNHCR. Kasey, a long-term international UNHCR employee in Athens, relayed to me how a volunteer accused her of being “on the other side.” She responded: “What side is that, aren’t we both here to help refugees?”. The solidarians and informal volunteers generally did not agree; they considered themselves to be helping border crossers

and UNHCR and government actors to be hindering border crossers' movements and rights. I heard informal volunteers repeatedly criticize how UNHCR was helping the government and it supported the EU-Turkey Agreement, which were both actions they considered detrimental to the health and well-being of border crossers. Informal volunteers saw the government as enacting increasingly restrictive measures to keep border crossers contained and out of sight, for example, by forcing them to stay in extremely overcrowded camps, such as Moria. Informal volunteers denounced the EU-Turkey Agreement as “violent,” “against human rights,” and “illegal” due to its resulting island restriction, which kept border crossers in overcrowded camps, and on the basis that Turkey had not signed the 1967 Protocol so was therefore not legally bound to confer rights to refugees.

On the other side, a UNHCR representative on Lesbos told me that some volunteers were “dangerous” in their SAR operations because they lacked proper training. In this case, he framed the volunteers as untrained and lacking expertise in contrast to those who were mandated to patrol the borders and ostensibly had more training. This representative also maintained that some solidarians and volunteer groups were “using the crisis to exploit and make money” from funders.

This discursive boundary-making tactic was frequently expressed by informal volunteers, government actors, and on occasion, UNHCR. They often felt that they were on opposing sides, and that the other side did not fully understand its mandates or limitations. This was not only about ideology and values but also about how aid was carried out. For example, many border crossers often went without blankets and were left freezing in Moria camp over the winter. Some solidarians fundraised to buy new blankets and wash used ones because as Suzanna, a Dutch volunteer, told me with exasperation: “Winter comes every year. It’s not a surprise.” I heard informal volunteers continually lament how UNHCR was unprepared, and that as the world’s major refugee protection agency, the organization should have the money and technical knowledge to ensure enough blankets go around. However, when I spoke with UNHCR employees, they explained that their funding was earmarked for particular things, and that sometimes they simply did not have the funds to purchase blankets—circumstances they felt solidarians and informal volunteers did not always understand. Kasey noted that UNHCR “sometimes feels like a supermarket, where we are expected to have a constant supply of materials.” Informal volunteers felt that it was UNHCR’s job to protect people, including by providing blankets.

It was not only UNHCR that informal volunteers took issue with, but often large NGOs, such as Save the Children and EuroRelief. Most organizations that worked at Moria

were by and large considered by the informal volunteers to be legitimizing the camp. Yet, many of the same volunteers entered the camp through a hole in the fence to offer services, as they were rarely permitted to enter through the main gate unless coming on “official business”. Furthermore, these organizations were considered too slow to respond to border crossers’ changing needs because of the heavy bureaucracy with which they contended. As explained in chapter 4, informal volunteers in Athens lamented that Save the Children could not help a majority of the homeless unaccompanied minors they brought to the organization in the immediate term; informal volunteers sometimes ended up hosting the minors in their personal apartments so they would not be left on the streets, where they faced multiple risks. These cases show that the informal volunteers’ use of discursive framing and boundary-making were related to ideas about accountability, and when an organization was not living up to its supposed mandate, informal volunteers might deem it inefficient if not superfluous.

Government actors such as the European Border Security Agency (Frontex), Greek border patrol, police, camp governance actors, and policymakers were also conceptualized as an enemy by many informal volunteers and solidararians. While volunteer SAR groups collaborated with border guards and Frontex, they often lamented how poorly they treated border crossers when rescued at sea: in one informal volunteer’s words, Frontex, “leaves [border crossers] for hours freezing on the deck of the boat without giving them blankets or water, while they search among them for human traffickers. They don’t seem to care about people’s health or well-being”.

These oppositional social boundaries were also drawn by government actors. For example, Jared, a legal aid volunteer on Lesbos, had a similar story to Kasey’s from when he met a government actor working for the European Asylum Support Office (EASO, which helps with asylum decisions) at the beach. On realizing they were both foreigners, they struck up a conversation. When Jared explained to the EASO employee that he was a volunteer lawyer helping border crossers with the asylum process, the man replied, “So then we are opponents.”

The final section analyzes the deeper intent and power struggles behind these discursive utterances.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the literature and my own ethnographic data, I have shown that considerable tensions existed between informal volunteers and state actors as well as between the volunteers and aid workers. The informal volunteers were discursively delegitimized in the war of position through being framed as dangerous or untrained. However, as agents with cultural capital, informal volunteers also engaged in the war of position, framing state actors and large aid organizations as unhumanitarian and harmful to the health and well-being of border crossers. In the discussion I aim to expand upon the war of position to think about how these shifting power dynamics affect conceptions of the border regime and citizenship more broadly.

Claims of apolitical neutrality allow humanitarian practices to operate in contested conflict zones and spaces of exclusion, but in reality, humanitarian organizations often uphold the sovereign rhetoric of the states within which they work (Kalir and Wissink 2016). Kalir and Wissink (2016) call attention to the deportation continuum in that some NGOs no longer question the apparatus of deportation; rather, they work within these oppressive systems (in part due to their funding from the EU). Solidarians and informal volunteers, by contrast, problematize this as a reification of violent policies, and they aim to work outside, and often contrary to, this continuum. These tactics aim to help border crossers in the immediate but are simultaneously political acts, as they destabilize dominant forms of offering aid and doing citizenship.

Other scholarship that has explored civil society initiatives within Europe illuminates their alternative or subversive quality. In Germany, for example, Castañeda (2013) has shown how civil society actors engage in “acts of citizenship” as volunteer medical personnel offer medical care to non-citizens, therefore including people in services who would otherwise be excluded. Vandevordt and Verschraegen (2019) have shown how political activism throughout Europe can be thought of as “subversive humanitarianism” in that it aims to include people into the polity that even humanitarian organizations largely exclude, such as undocumented migrants. And Stock describes informal volunteers who help border crossers slated for deportation as enacting “a certain kind of civil disobedience” (2019, 129). Here we see that informal volunteers are embedded within the dominant culture but act in ways that subvert cultural hegemony: they aim to include border crossers who would normally be

excluded from the states within which they work, while simultaneously excluding various normative structures of these states, such as laws relating to citizenship.

In chapter 2 I described how informal volunteers use discretionary power, which I call informal state-level bureaucracy, to help border crossers in various ways. For example, the informal volunteers in Greece often challenged and subverted the state-sanctioned categorizations of “refugee” and “vulnerable person”, both discursively and through their actions. They considered *all* border crossers to be deserving of the right to cross borders and settle, and through diverse actions of solidarity, these informal volunteers helped border crossers attain basic rights and a fair asylum determination.

This chapter has continued this line of reasoning, but has delved into how groups’ discursive practices challenge or maintain these regimes of power. Foucault describes “the statement” as a “function”, with a “special mode of existence” (1972, 98); Graham extends this to this to argue that statements are invested “with particular relations of power” (2005, 7). Foucault argues that categorizations and descriptions “enable [the object] to appear...to be placed in a field of exteriority” (Foucault 1972, 50).²² In other words, statements can bring “objects of discourse” into being. Hacking, likewise, argues that the act of classifying brings into reality a new type of person (1986). Put differently, through statements, people or groups are made into “objects of discourse” and “through the [discursive] process of objectification, individuals not only come to occupy *spaces* in the social hierarchy but, through the continued subjugation, come to know and accept their *place*” (Graham 2005, 19).

Graham, following Foucault, maintains that through repeated statements and dispersion, a “discursive field” is created, along with the “knowledge and practices through which that object is disciplined” (2005, 19). In attempting to analyze the statements *by* and *about* each group—informal volunteers, state actors, and aid workers—we can consider each of them as inhabiting the object position at one time or another. They are each then simultaneously objects in the war of position, interacting with the categorizations and discourse imposed upon them, and also agents of discourse, with the power to transform the perceptions and attitudes of diverse peoples about the other.

I argue that the state and state-sanctioned aid organizations aim to keep up appearances as it were, to continually legitimize themselves in public and political-economic spheres of Greece. This legitimization is especially important within the wider EU, at the expense of informal volunteers and border crossers, the latter whose continued subjugation

²² Foucault says this in regard to mental illness categories in the DSM.

marks them as the “deserving refugee [or] the undeserving immigrant, both always being other, potentially threatening, and suspicious” (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, 19). The informal volunteers, through both subversive actions and discourse, remind us that there is nothing “normal” or inevitable about the current border regime. This comes into sharper focus when we consider that border crossers are “differentially included” into Greece and the EU through cheap undocumented labor (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012). On one hand migrant labor (and exploitation) is normalized while at the same time migrant “illegality” is fetishized to the point at which the border is considered sacrosanct and its crossing by “undesirables” constitutes a deep transgression (De Genova 2013, 1185).

The discursive tactics discussed in this chapter and employed on the ground by informal volunteers and solidararians, are in fact emblematic of a larger, lengthy fight—that to challenge the dominant narrative of the border regime. Solidarity itself is non-national; the majority of its proponents desire open borders and many have protested in Brussels and around the EU in campaigns such as “No Borders” and “No one is Illegal”. As I argued in chapter 5, through solidarity, divisions between guest and host, between insider and outsider, are continuously rejected; solidarity, therefore, challenges the dominant cultural viewpoint that sees statehood and citizenship as the correct or inevitable political system. Therefore, these discursive tactics, while on the face of it might seem like mere identity politics, are in fact deep ideologies that deal with how we ought to live and be human in the world.