

Malkki, Liisa H. 2015. *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. x+270 pp. Pb.: \$24.95. ISBN: 9780822359326.

Ethnographic enquiries into the motivations of international aid workers habitually link humanitarian endeavours with values of cosmopolitanism, the ethical obligation to help, selflessness and self-sacrifice. Less often, the debate on the rationales behind helping others brings forth the notions of self-escape and alleviation of the neediness of the *helpers themselves*. Lisa Malkki takes an exploratory trip down that road. Based on the extensive and demanding research with the international Finnish Red Cross aid workers and Finns involved in humanitarian and charitable activities from home, she provides a compelling and convincing argumentation that helping others stems from the crisis of ordinariness, i.e. from a need to escape the mundaneness, loneliness, the emotionally cold Finnish welfare state, and the experiences of social and sensorial deprivation (p. 8). She argues that the need to help is induced by a profound neediness to be part of something meaningful, important, exciting and unpredictable. In this sense, *The Need to Help* can be read as a critique of the impersonal Finnish society and impoverished culture (p. 144) that is prompting a desire to escape.

The book begins with a remarkable introduction on the notions of “need”, “imagination” and the “care of the self”, and continues with the discussion on the international aid workers’ motivations to work abroad. The inclusion of a selection of the most relevant aid workers’ narratives significantly contributes to reinforcing Malkki’s argument that a sense of deprivation experienced at home propels engagement in international humanitarianism. Aid workers’ needs, fears, desires to travel and get lost in work, the overwhelming drive to do something challenging, energetic and personally enriching are illustrative of the lack of warmth, sociability, and professional challenges in Finland. By all means, engaging in humanitarian activities is by definition demanding, traumatic and often frustrating. The aid workers’ ‘heart monologues’ (p. 59–68), the intimate portrayals of the impossible ethical dilemmas they are confronted with in the field, are heart-breaking. Yet, as Malkki argues, the drive to take part in humanitarian missions and continuous reluctance to return home despite the emotionally and physically draining nature of the job is profoundly evident. She points out that many interviewees in fact experienced a sense of fulfilment by losing themselves in the demanding nature of their work. The intense personal and professional engagement with the world, she argues, has become a way of losing themselves while paradoxically staying vitally alive. Aid workers are thus not portrayed as self-sacrificing individuals performing heroic acts but rather as persons seeking to alleviate their own need to travel, give, help and be part of something bigger than themselves.

The experience of such a ‘pleasurable loss of self’ (p. 42) is palpable also in the case of the elderly Finns who are involved in humanitarian activities from the confines of their home. Knitting trauma teddies, aid bunnies and blankets, especially for children in need (imagined as the embodiments of a ‘basic human goodness and innocence’ (p. 80)) alleviates loneliness of the elderly and evokes feelings of usefulness, helpfulness and regained dignity. Knitted blankets become, Malkki argues, ‘a gift of the self to an imagined other,

but also a gift to the self' (p. 10). It is through their handicrafts that many knitters manage to escape solitude and loneliness, a condition most oppressive, painful and overwhelmingly widespread. The chapters on the neediness of the elderly knitters to belong, connect and escape social isolation are written with tremendous finesse and a palpable undertone of sadness, as they set out to illuminate the continuous processes of alienation of the elderly from society. Further anthropological reflection on knitting for "the needy" as sociality and therapy for the elderly knitters is just as heady and captivating.

The Need to Help is a remarkable read that challenges the one-directional delivery of help from the self-sacrificing aid workers from rich Western states to the needy recipients of aid in impoverished and war-torn zones. It convincingly argues that aid work not only serves the needs of those who receive help but also of those who provide it. Importantly, Malkki does not question the devotedness, highly developed sense of ethical obligation and professionalism of international aid workers. Indeed, a commitment to aid work and neediness to engage in aid work are not mutually exclusive.

MOJCA VAH JEVŠNIK

Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Slovenia)