

The White Management of ‘Volunteering’: Ethnographic Evidence from an Israeli NGO

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Abstract The article examines the recent emergence of ‘volunteering’ as a publicly significant notion and practice. Based on an extensive fieldwork in a prominent intermediary NGO in Israel, the article follows the efforts to promote and expand ‘volunteering’ pursued by the organization’s board and staff members. Affiliated with the privileged social strata of Ashkenazi (European) Jews, whose hegemonic position has been eroded during the neoliberal transformations in Israel, the NGO staff seek to retain their privileged status through a managerial activity in the field of ‘volunteering’. They promote a particular, liberally inspired construction of ‘volunteering’, while universalizing it as a professional, a-political and consensual realm. Inspired by critical studies of ‘whiteness’, the article describes how the privileged character of this managerial activity is being successfully obscured through the representation of ‘volunteering’ as an all-inclusive aspiration.

Résumé Cet article examine l’émergence récente du « bénévolat » en tant que notion et pratique publiquement importante. En se basant sur une vaste étude de terrain réalisée dans une importante ONG intermédiaire en Israël, l’article relate les efforts de promotion et de développement du « bénévolat » entrepris par le conseil d’administration et le personnel de l’organisation. Les membres du personnel de l’ONG, qui font partie de la couche sociale privilégiée des Juifs Ashkénazes (européens) dont la position hégémonique s’est érodée lors des transformations néolibérales en Israël, tentent de conserver leur statut privilégié au travers d’une activité de gestion dans le domaine du « bénévolat ». Ils promeuvent une interprétation particulière du « bénévolat », d’inspiration libérale, tout en l’universalisant et en le présentant comme un univers professionnel, apolitique et consensuel. Inspiré par les

To my mother, Lea Shachar (1955–2010), whom I miss so much.

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études critiques de « l'appartenance à la race blanche », cet article décrit comment le caractère privilégié de cette activité de gestion se trouve masqué par la représentation du « bénévolat » comme une aspiration globale.

Zusammenfassung Der Beitrag untersucht, wie sich das „ehrenamtliche Engagement“ seit kurzem als ein für die Öffentlichkeit bedeutendes Konzept und eine wichtige Praktik herausbildet. Beruhend auf einer umfangreichen Feldforschung in einer namhaften zwischengeschalteten nicht-staatlichen Organisation in Israel verfolgt der Beitrag die Bemühungen der Vorstandsmitglieder und Mitarbeiter dieser Organisation, das „ehrenamtliche Engagement“ zu fördern und auszuweiten. Die Mitarbeiter der nicht-staatlichen Organisation, die der privilegierten sozialen Schicht der aschkenasischen (europäischen) Juden angehören, deren Hegemonie während der neoliberalen Transformationen in Israel untergraben wurde, versuchen, ihren privilegierten Status durch eine Führungstätigkeit im „ehrenamtlichen Bereich“ zu wahren. Sie unterstützen ein spezielles, liberal inspiriertes Konstrukt des „ehrenamtlichen Engagements“, während sie es gleichzeitig als einen professionellen, apolitischen und einvernehmlichen Bereich verallgemeinern. Inspiriert von den kritischen Studien zur „Verschönerung“ beschreibt der Beitrag, wie der privilegierte Charakter dieser Führungstätigkeit erfolgreich getarnt wird, indem das „ehrenamtliche Engagement“ als ein allumfassendes Bestreben dargestellt wird.

Resumen El artículo examina la reciente emergencia del “voluntariado” como una noción y práctica significativas a nivel público. Basándose en un extenso trabajo de campo en una ONG intermediaria prominente en Israel, el artículo sigue los esfuerzos para fomentar y expandir el “voluntariado” perseguido por los miembros del personal y del consejo de la organización. Afiliado a los estratos sociales privilegiados de los judíos Ashkenazi (europeos), cuya posición hegemónica se ha visto erosionada durante las transformaciones neoliberales en Israel, el personal de la ONG trata de retener su estatus privilegiado mediante una actividad de gestión en el campo del “voluntariado”. Promueven una construcción particular, inspirada de manera liberal, del “voluntariado”, universalizándola al mismo tiempo como una esfera profesional, apolítica y consensual. Inspirado por estudios críticos sobre “whiteness” (identificación con el grupo social de blancos), el artículo describe cómo el carácter privilegiado de esta actividad de gestión está siendo satisfactoriamente oscurecido mediante la representación del “voluntariado” como una aspiración que lo incluye todo.

Keywords Volunteering · Whiteness · Neoliberalism · Ethnography · Israel

Introduction

On the 5th of April, 2011, roughly 140,000 Israelis participated in the fifth annual “Good Deeds Day”. They volunteered in around 2000 projects held throughout Israel, which included cleaning and recycling activities, gardening in community centers and disadvantaged neighborhoods, renovating houses of needy populations, as well as a wide range of educational activities and community gatherings.

The Good Deeds Day is the flagship project of “Good Spirit” (In Hebrew: *Ruach Tova*), an NGO that in its everyday activity “connects between volunteers and organizations that need volunteers in Israel” [*sic*].¹ Good Deeds Day was initiated in 2007, when 7000 Israelis took part in one-day ‘volunteering’ activities across the country. Each year, an increasing number of private firms, municipalities, military units, and other institutions have participated in the project, but also growing numbers of individual volunteers, attracted by the wide campaign that promoted the day. The day was gradually depicted by its organizers and in the mass media as an event that “became an Israeli tradition” (Roichman 2011).²

The unprecedented number of 140,000 volunteers appeared as a realization of the hope that had been regularly expressed by Good Spirit board members and senior workers: that the Good Deeds Day will become “a national day”.³ This aspiration was visualized through an online map of Israel, located in the webpages and Facebook page that promoted the day (see Image 1). On the map, all of the cities and local councils in which ‘volunteering’ activities were held throughout the day were indicated with the heart that appears in the day’s logo. A presenter in the public radio viewed this visualization as reflecting the state of the nation: “I’m looking at the map here, and there’s not enough space for this country. It’s all one big heart”.⁴

The expansion of the Good Deeds Day seems to reflect an ongoing growth in ‘volunteering’ rates among Israelis. Surveys indicate that 13 % of the Israeli population volunteered in formal organizations (mostly NGOs) in 1997, while 19 % and 25 % done so in 2006 and 2008, respectively (Shye et al. 1999; Katz et al. 2007; Haski-Leventhal et al. 2011).⁵ Since the early 1990s there has also been a tremendous growth in the number and public influence of NGOs (Gidron et al. 2002; Ben-Eliezer 2004)—the institutional framework in which ‘volunteering’ is practiced. This phenomenon is not unique to the Israeli context, but seems to be part of what a group of influential social scientists described as a “global associational revolution”—“a massive upsurge of organized private, voluntary activity in literally every corner of the world” (Salamon et al. 1999, p. 4). Their comparative study of 22 countries showed that 28 % among the overall population in these countries volunteered in non-profit organizations during 1995 (Salamon et al. 1999).

¹ The quote is taken from Good Spirit English motto, as appeared in the organization’s website in the period of the fieldwork: <http://www.ruachtova.org>. Similar expressions were regularly used by staff members when introducing the organization to others, including during their interviews with me.

² The quotes from the Hebrew media items were translated by the author.

³ In the two Good Deeds Days that were held after my fieldwork had ended, on March 20, 2012, and March 5, 2013, the estimated number of participants culminated to roughly 250,000 volunteers and 370,000 volunteers accordingly. These numbers count to approximately 3.2 and 4.6 % of the Israeli population.

⁴ Michael Miro, “A Social Hour”, *Reshet Bet*, March 15, 2010. I have located the transcription of this radio broadcast in an internal file of media items relating to the Good Deeds Day, collected by Arison Group’s public relations office and stored in the group’s headquarters.

⁵ According to these surveys, roughly 15–20 % of the volunteering took place in public agencies (e.g., welfare institutions or the security forces). The rest volunteered in NGOs, mainly in the areas of welfare and health. The rates of informal volunteering (i.e., which is not conducted through a formal organization) demonstrate a similar, although more moderate, tendency of growth: 19 % in 1997, 26 % in 2006 and 23 % in 2008.

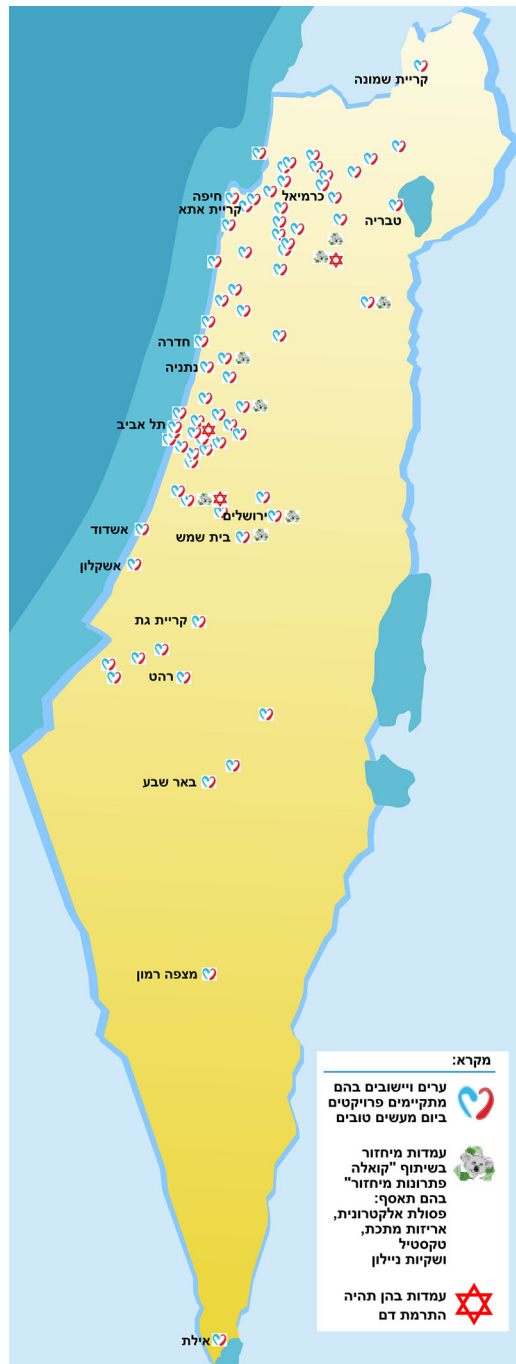


Image 1 Online map of the Good Deeds Day activities (Retrieved June 13, 2011 from <http://www.ynet.co.il/home/0,7340,L-4398,00.html>)

The narrative of growth and expansion of ‘volunteering’, shared by academics and NGO workers, relies on a particular definition of ‘volunteering’. This definition seems to be inspired by a liberal-Tocquevillian ideal of ‘civil society’: a public realm which is separated from other social spheres, such as the economic market, the state-related political system and the family.⁶ This depiction conforms to the liberal tendency “to enclave certain matters in specialized discursive arenas” (Fraser 1990, p. 73). Contemporary formations of non-profit sectors in various countries commonly constitute an institutional realization of this liberal, Anglo-Saxon idea of ‘civil society’, and serve as a main institutional arena where ‘volunteering’ takes place. Consequently, ‘volunteering’ is also portrayed by scholars and practitioners as an autonomous realm of practice distinguished from other spheres.⁷

Chambré (1989) demonstrated how the definition of ‘volunteering’ in American surveys from different periods was modified and maneuvered according to public policy needs. Following Chambré’s indication of the connection between public policy and surveying ‘volunteering’, it is important to notice that the figures presented above regarding the rate of volunteer participation in Israel have been collected only since 1997, in surveys conducted by the Israeli Center for Third Sector Research that was established in the same year.⁸ Figures regarding ‘volunteering’ have been collected by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics only since 2002 (Abu-Ahmed 2010). While we should therefore be careful in determining that ‘volunteering’ as a social practice is experiencing growth in Israel, we can nevertheless indicate that it was constituted relatively recently as an important object of knowledge production and political attention. The growing academic and political interest in ‘volunteering’ appears simultaneously with the increasing public visibility of this notion, created through public campaigns and enterprises such as the Good Deeds Day.

While the current academic writing on ‘volunteering’ tends to take this notion for granted, and concentrates on examining the antecedents, dynamics and consequences of ‘volunteering’,⁹ this article proposes to re-phrase the object of scholarly analysis by focusing on the recent emergence of ‘volunteering’ as a publicly significant notion and practice. The article strives to lay down some foundations for the study of this recent emergence in the Israeli context, through studying an organization that is intensively involved in increasing the public significance of the notion of ‘volunteering’. In order to achieve that, I will suggest in the following section a socio-historical context for analyzing the promotion of ‘volunteering’ in Israel, and I will highlight the relevance of the concept of ‘whiteness’ in this context. Then, I turn to a more detailed introduction of Good Spirit and its staff members, and I elaborate on the selection of this case study and the methods I have

⁶ This sense of ‘civil society’ was clearly articulated, for example, by Anheier et al. (2001). I do not intend to claim that this definition is more accurate than alternative conceptualizations of ‘civil society’ (e.g., Gramsci 1971), but that it underlines the current institutional formation of the formal third sector.

⁷ Consult Taylor (2005) and Simonet (2005) for a critical analysis of the distinction of ‘volunteering’ from its political-economic aspects, and Eliasoph (1998) for an account of its distinction from ‘politics’.

⁸ See <http://cmsprod.bgu.ac.il/Eng/Centers/ictr/Aboutus/>. Accessed 10 February, 2012.

⁹ See, for example, Wilson’s (2000, 2012) reviews of main trends in the scholarly work on ‘volunteering’.

used to explore it. In the following sections, I combine empirical evidence with theoretically informed analysis to demonstrate how ‘volunteering’ is constructed in Good Spirit in a way that corresponds to the liberal idea of civil society. I follow the efforts to spread, legitimize and as a result universalize this construction, and I show how these universalization efforts are used to retain white privilege. By providing this account, the article strives to ‘re-embed’ the notion of ‘volunteering’ (Hustinx 2010) and the efforts to promote and expand it in a broader socio-historical context. My hope is that such perspective could also be useful for understanding other cases and contexts, and lead to a wider discussion on the upsurge in the significance of ‘volunteering’.

Contextualizing the Emergence of ‘Volunteering’ in Israel

Salamon argued that the global “increase in organized voluntary action” is a result of a multi-faced crisis in “the hold of the state”: the crisis of the Western welfare state, the economic crisis in developing countries that led to “an aid strategy that stressed the engagement of grassroots energies and enthusiasms”, the global environmental crisis, and the crisis “of socialism” (1994, pp. 115–117). In a later publication, Salamon and his associates pointed out that this transformation in the modalities of political participation has its roots in the corrective attempts of political leaders to balance neoliberal economic policies with “broader social protections” (Salamon et al. 1999, p. 5). A similar transformation occurred in Israel during the 1990s and the 2000s, when the public legitimacy of the voluntary-based, non-governmental sector has been tremendously growing on the expense of the traditional, state-affiliated, political structures, such as the political parties and the trade unions. While this process could be interpreted as a limited change in the power balance between state and society (Ben-Eliezer 2004), an alternative approach views it as a component of the transition from a Keynesian/Fordist political-economic model to a neoliberal/post-Fordist model (Filc 2006).

Israel’s economy had been managed according to Keynesian/Fordist principles since the establishment of the state in 1948; the economic activity had been mainly generated through public capital, regulated by state agencies and accompanied by strong welfare mechanisms (Shafir and Peled 2002). This political-economic model was mainly promoted by a particular segment of the Jewish-Israeli society: the *Ashkenazi* Jews, who immigrated to Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century from eastern and central Europe.¹⁰ The political elites among these migrants established a national labor movement that gained immense support.

¹⁰ The term *Ashkenazim* (plural; singular and adj.: *Ashkenazi*) relates to Jews of European origin (including their Anglo-Saxon descendants). In Israel, the term is widespread in academic and non-academic discourses, and is usually opposed to the category of *Mizrahim*—Jews of Asian and African origin. The influential Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling (2001) suggested coining this group *Ahusalim*, the Hebrew initials for Ashkenazi-Secular-Socialist-National, as an attempt to create a Hebrew-Israeli equivalent to the American ‘WASP’. The term was not widely accepted, however, and this dominant group is commonly referred to simply as *Askenazim*, or *Ashkenazi* Jews. I will adopt these two prevailing terms throughout this text.

The movement's goal was to constitute in Palestine a Jewish national entity that will be separated from the Arab-Palestinian indigenous community. As part of this effort it developed trade union activity, public economic enterprises and welfare services, all of which were ethnically segregated. Through this powerful labor movement—composed of a dominating labor party, a few affiliated smaller parties and a single and powerful union (the *Histadrut*)—the political elites succeeded in constituting the nation-building project, and later on the consolidation of the newly established nation-state, as a general national aspiration. After 1948, the new institutional mechanisms provided by the welfare state enabled the political elites to consolidate differential distribution of rights and resources. Ashkenazi Jews, especially their men, were granted a preferential position that was legitimized by their alleged contribution to the nation-building project, while other groups—mainly *Mizrahi* Jews (of Asian and African origin), ultra-orthodox Jews and especially Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel—were differentially excluded (Shafir and Peled 2002; cf. Rosenfeld 1978; Svirsky and Bernstein 1980; Shenhav 2006).

The 'neoliberal regime shift' (to adopt Jessop's (2002) conceptualization) implemented in Israel since the mid-1980s has gradually eroded this social order. This shift included radical transformation from a Fordist mode of production to a de-regularized economy, which is dominated by knowledge-based industries and a powerful financial sector. This transformation was realized by privatizing public assets, weakening unionized labor and commodifying welfare services, and resulted in growing socio-economic gaps (Filc 2006; Shafir and Peled 2002). The neoliberal regime shift in Israel was part of the global transition to neoliberalism (cf. Harvey 2005), but was promoted locally by growing segments within the core of the (Ashkenazi-based) labor movement (Shafir and Peled 2002). As part of the neoliberalization processes, a small number of individuals and families, mainly of Ashkenazi origin, immensely expanded their private assets (often by purchasing privatized companies) and gained extraordinary economic and political power. Other Ashkenazi individuals achieved leading positions in the different realms of the neoliberal order, and they constitute the vast majority in firms' executives and boards, political institutions, the senior civil service, the technocracy of the business sector (law and consultancy firms) and the marketing, media, and advertisement sector. However, growing segments of this former ruling group have found themselves in different positions within the precarious neoliberal labor market, and experience growing difficulties in gaining remunerative and secure positions.

This fragmentation within the Ashkenazi group was accompanied by an erosion of the group's cultural-ideological hegemony, and its gradual transformation into a particular sector that has to compete with other social groups on recognition, resources and domination (Kimmerling 2004). Although the cultural-ideological character of Israel became a subject for intensive political contentions, a neoliberal/post-Fordist hegemony was consolidated in the realm of political economy. This neoliberal hegemony is sustained due to its versatile articulation with the contesting cultural projects of the different groups (Filc 2006). The discrepancy between these two realms explains why even economically privileged Ashkenazi Jews express dissatisfaction, often accompanied by a sense of disempowerment, regarding the cultural-ideological transitions in Israel. These anxieties have been implicitly and

explicitly articulated by Ashkenazi writers in Israeli newspapers (Yonah et al. 2010), and were also expressed by powerful Ashkenazi business persons when describing their motivation to engage in philanthropic activity (Barkay 2008; Shimoni 2008).

‘Volunteering’ is being gradually constituted as one of the social domains through which Ashkenazi Jews come to grips with these changes in their social status. Existing figures indicate that the voluntary-based sector is heavily populated by Ashkenazim: they constitute a majority in NGO boards (Iecovich 2005), and they are more likely to serve as volunteers than members of other ethnic groups (Shafransky 2007; Haski-Leventhal et al. 2011). A recent study demonstrated that Israeli-born Jews are overrepresented in the workforce of the Israeli third sector, while Jewish migrants are roughly equally represented relatively to their percentage in the overall population, and Palestinian citizens of Israel are underrepresented; the report did not examine the ethnic divisions among the Jewish, Israeli-born employees (Katz and Yogev-Keren 2013). In Good Spirit, most of the senior staff and board members are Ashkenazim, and this article explores their professional and personal investment in promoting ‘volunteering’ as a desired social practice. My interpretation of the Ashkenazi dominance in the voluntary-based sector is inspired by pioneering studies that imported theoretical notions from the field of ‘whiteness’ studies to the Israeli context, and constituted the Ashkenazi group as a legitimate object of scholarship (Chinski 2002; Sasson-Levy 2008; Shadmi 2003).

Following Frankenberg’s (1993) work, I refer to ‘whiteness’ as “a relational category, one that is constructed with a range of other racial and cultural categories, with class and with gender. [...] [It] signals the production and reproduction of dominance” (p. 273). Such an understanding of ‘whiteness’ appears as highly useful for forming a theoretical grounding that conjoins ethno-racial and political-economic dimensions, and contributes for analyzing the connection between the historical moment of neoliberal rising and the emergence and intensive promotion of ‘volunteering’. Furthermore, a relational concept of ‘whiteness’ is more suitable to the Israeli case, in which what constitutes the whiteness of the Ashkenazi group is not necessarily their skin color (cf. Kaplan 2002), but their privileged social position. The Ashkenazi whiteness is further consolidated by its ‘absence’ (Garner 2006): the ability of Ashkenazi individuals to maintain the transparency of their distinctive identity, and to obscure the privileges that are attached to it (Sasson-Levy 2008).¹¹ While the few scholars of whiteness in Israel were mainly concerned with depicting the consolidation and reproduction of Ashkenazi structural privilege, this study complements their work by paying attention to the gradual erosion of

¹¹ Yanow (1998) demonstrated how this transparency mechanism is dominant in the domain of public policy in Israel. In a way, my methodological approach aspires to bridge the gap between phenomenological study of personal narratives such as the one conducted by Sasson-Levy, and the study of public policy discourse such as the one conducted by Yanow. As the power of the non-profit sector in Israel is growing, the people who are active within this sector are becoming significant figures in the shaping the Israeli public realm. Therefore, when studying not only their personal narratives but also their everyday work I endeavor to trace the role of individual actors in the institutionalization of public discourse and in policy implementation, while taking into account the role that their unique identities play in their cultivation of the public realm.

Ashkenazi hegemonic status, and by describing one of the paths through which Ashkenazi individuals tackle this decline.

Setting and Methodology

Shifting the analytical focus from the dynamics of ‘volunteering’ to the emergence and promotion of this notion, requires an equivalent empirical shift from the traditional focus on NGOs in which the voluntary activity itself takes place to the work of umbrella and intermediary NGOs that promote and expand ‘volunteering’ in various ways. The latter type facilitates the work of volunteer-based NGOs through recruiting and placing volunteers, training volunteer managers, and carrying out public campaigns that encourage ‘volunteering’. The umbrella and intermediary NGOs which are engaged in such activities seem to have a substantial influence over the construction, implementation and ongoing cultivation of ‘volunteering’, and significantly contribute to its expansion. Nevertheless, the work of such NGOs was rarely studied.¹²

In Israel, there are several nationwide NGOs that dedicate themselves to promote voluntary participation of citizens and to support volunteer-based organizations. After an exploratory phase of reviewing media items, as well as publications and activity reports issued by these NGOs, I decided to focus my empirical study on a nationwide intermediary organization—Good Spirit—where I conducted an extensive ethnographic fieldwork. A main reason for selecting the case of Good Spirit was its relatively high visibility to the Israeli public, mainly due to the wide exposure of its annual Good Deeds Day. A second reason was its material and organizational stability: the ongoing financial support of the Arison Group (see below) means that the organization is likely to continue to play a central role in the promotion of ‘volunteering’ in Israel also in the future. The other NGOs dedicated to the promotion of ‘volunteering’ seemed to be a less promising choice as a main fieldwork site: some tend to concentrate on facilitating the volunteer recruitment and management capacities of NGOs and are less visible to the wider public, while others have experienced a major decline in their financial resources that hampered their routine activity and public influence. However, this study may indeed be complemented in the future by a more comprehensive exploration of other umbrella and intermediary NGOs, and by better assessing the influence they have on the rest of the third sector.

As my ethnographic study was primarily focused on Good Spirit staff and board members, I will focus in this article on the ways in which they have constructed and shaped ‘volunteering’. These ways, however, were often developed through the interactions of the staff with state representatives and politicians, business persons, other NGO workers, volunteers, and workers in the media and advertising sector. Therefore, Good Spirit cultivation of ‘volunteering’ simultaneously relied upon and shaped the wider public understanding of this notion. Furthermore, I hope that

¹² An exception is a pilot exploratory study on umbrella NGOs conducted in Israel, in which the deficiency of literature on this type of organizations was also indicated (Katz et al. 2009).

although this paper relies on a particular case study, some of its analytical propositions will provoke future empirical explorations and theoretical debates, and in this way the case presented here could make a “contribution to ‘reconstructing’ theory” (Burawoy 1998, p. 16).

Good Spirit, formally registered as NGO in 1996, was operated solely by volunteers in its first years, and had only episodic activity. In 2003, the Ted Arison Family Foundation began to provide financial support to the organization, and the first employee, Oded,¹³ was hired as Good Spirit executive director and held this position until May 2013. In 2008, Good Spirit became an official part of the “Arison Group”, which was then able to present itself as a business and philanthropic group. The group’s main assets are privatized public companies, such as Israel’s largest bank (“the workers bank”—*Bank HaPoalim*) and a real-estate corporation (*Shikun & Binui*), both formerly owned by the *Histadrut* (the General Federation of Workers in Israel). The group is headed by Shari Arison, an Israeli-American billionaire and one of Israel’s richest persons, who inherited her business empire from her father Ted.¹⁴ As an official part of the Arison Group, Good Spirit receives its entire budget from the Ted Arison Family Foundation, and unlike other NGOs does not need to invest intensive efforts in fundraising. Oded, as Good Spirit executive director, is responsible for reporting on the budget expenditure to the foundation’s familial board, and for presenting future plans and budgetary requests. The family seems to be satisfied with Good Spirit work, as its budget is raised annually, enabling the organization to recruit more workers and increase its scope of activity. Arison Group representatives also dominate Good Spirit board, which also includes Hadas, the founder of the organization, and Ilan,¹⁵ the current chairperson—a businessman and a former parliament member for the Israeli labor party.

Good Spirit offices are located in the same luxurious office complex that hosts the Arison Group headquarters, in the midst of Israel’s economic and cultural center—the city of Tel-Aviv. At the time of my fieldwork, Good Spirit team included ten senior workers, six of them are women, who mainly resided in the upper-middle class neighborhoods of Tel-Aviv or in the affluent suburbs of the city. The senior staff coordinated the Good Deeds Day and other projects, and supervised

¹³ The names of Good Spirit staff members have been changed. Three prominent staff members have agreed to be mentioned in their real names, and although I chose to use pseudonyms I indicated their positions in the organization. In the case of the other staff members, I changed in several instances also their position, gender or other characteristics, in order to avoid identification.

¹⁴ On March 2011, Shari Arison was ranked as 200 in Forbes list of the world’s billionaires, and as the third richest person in Israel. See <http://www.forbes.com/profile/shari-arison>.

¹⁵ Ilan was the only person among Good Spirit board and senior staff who was of Mizrahi origin. However, his affiliation with the Ashkenazi-dominated labor party, and his successful business career, located him in a prominent position within the mostly Ashkenazi economic and political elite of Israel. His Mizrahi origin was never explicitly discussed in Good Spirit, and Ilan himself contributed regularly to obscuring the homogenous ethnic composition of Israel’s elite, for example by declaring in an interview to a daily newspaper that “it is very easy to say that there is an ethnic problem in Israel. [...] But I don’t feel there is any problem here. The best example is me” (Lis 2011). As this article analyses ‘whiteness’ as a relational category, it can be argued that Ilan’s figure reinforced rather than challenged the white character of Good Spirit activity.

a changing number of temporary workers recruited to implement these projects. One worker supervised a team of about seven youth servers,¹⁶ who were mainly responsible for operating the Good Spirit call center, through which individuals seek volunteering placements. Each server is responsible for a specific geographic region, in which s/he maintains regular contacts with a wide range of volunteer-based organizations. When a potential volunteer contacts Good Spirit, s/he is directed to the server responsible for the geographical region where s/he resides. The server refers the volunteer to potential placements according to the volunteer's interests and availability, and accompanies her/him during the placement process. A similar, although more complex, process takes place when senior workers coordinate volunteering projects for groups (such as corporations, military and police units, students, families). This "Volunteer Management System" enables Good Spirit to fulfill its aims: connecting "volunteers and organizations that need volunteers" and "developing volunteerism in Israel".¹⁷

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between the end of July 2010 and the end of December that year. The fieldwork included participant observation in Good Spirit offices: my participation included assistance in Good Spirit routine work of placing volunteers; being present in meetings, training sessions and the rest of the office activities; and accompanying staff members to meetings and activities outside the office. Complementary participant observation was conducted between March 28 and April 7, 2011, during the last week of intensive preparations towards the Good Deeds Day, the day itself and its immediate aftermath.¹⁸ Taking a regular part in these professional activities also granted me various opportunities for informal interactions with the staff members that led to a deeper acquaintance. During the fieldwork period I also conducted 20 in-depth interviews with most of Good Spirit staff and board members, which usually lasted about 1.5 h. In addition, I collected various documents, publications, media items, and quantitative data from the organization's archives and database. Several complementary in-depth interviews, supported by a few observations, were conducted with volunteers who were placed by Good Spirit in other NGOs, and with a few other professionals in the Israeli field of 'volunteering'. The scope of this article did not permit to incorporate an analysis of these complementary interviews, although they generally reinforce the arguments that will be presented hereby.

¹⁶ In Israel, the law entitles the army an authority to conscript all men and women at the age of 18. The 'national service' is a non-obligatory route available to high-school graduates, most of them are women, who were exempted from military service due to religious, medical or personal reasons. They serve roughly 40 h per week for 1 or 2 years in a welfare institution, state agency or NGO, and receive a monthly allowance.

¹⁷ <http://www.ruachtova.org/about>. Accessed 26 February 2012.

¹⁸ Regev Nathansohn and Noa Shauer agreed to participate as volunteers in the Good Deeds Day, and shared their ethnographic insights with me. I am grateful for their help, which gave me an idea on how the day was experienced by the volunteers themselves, while I observed it mainly from the perspective of Good Spirit staff.

The Managerial Position: Professionalism and Whiteness in the Field of ‘Volunteering’

Volunteer-based projects in Israel are increasingly organized according to corporate-oriented managerial logic. The prevalence of this logic in the Israeli field of ‘volunteering’ can be mainly recognized in two expanding institutional arenas: the domain of ‘social responsibility’ within the corporate world, which often includes projects of employee volunteering,¹⁹ and the non-profit sector that increasingly adopts corporate-inspired techniques of management. In the second case, these techniques are not only implemented in managing the paid workforce and the overall organizational development, but they are increasingly implemented in managing the organizations’ volunteer workforce. The aspiration to ‘professionalize’ the techniques of volunteer management is promoted by various actors who hold leading and authoritative positions in the field of ‘volunteering’, such as umbrella and intermediary NGOs, as well as academics (e.g., Haski-Leventhal 2007).

The origin of the managerial ideology and techniques was traced by critical management scholars to the late nineteenth US industrial sector, when heightening workers’ struggles raised the need to pacify and discipline the workforce (Shenhav 1999; Jacoby 2004). To achieve this aim, an emerging class of professional managers presented the newly developed management techniques as a remedy to this unrest. These techniques conflated scientific positivism and progressivism (Shenhav 1999), while implicitly implementing methods that have been developed during colonial encounters (Frenkel and Shenhav 2006). The emerging managerial class was composed of more than one segment: along industrial engineers influenced by the Taylorist scientific management, it also included ‘welfare workers’ who saw their professional calling as a realization of the progressive aspiration “to promote social justice and order” (Jacoby 2004, p. 95). This mixture enabled the emerging class of managers to position themselves simultaneously as impartial professionals and promoters of social progress: the systematization and bureaucratization of the firm’s work conducted by the new managers was depicted as beneficial for all the parties involved.

The powerful legitimization of the managerial ideology as objective and all-benefiting enabled to impose new discursive boundaries on workers’ discontent, while its promoters and implementers served as a buffer between the firm owners and the workers. Thus, managers were gradually able to demand higher material and symbolic remunerations for their work, in the form of growing wages and professional autonomy (Shenhav 1999). The later rise of neoliberalism was accompanied by an escalation in the power of corporate managerial elites (Harvey 2005), but also by an expansion of the managerial ideology and its techniques to domains that were earlier considered to be subject to different logics, such as the

¹⁹ Barkay (2008) demonstrated how the expanding realm of corporate social responsibility in Israel is an arena through which the Ashkenazi-dominated business community is trying to convert its economic power into a symbolic one, which will enable it to play a preferential role in socio-political processes. Shimoni’s (2008) study of Israeli philanthropists showed that models from the world of business management were central in their philanthropic perceptions and initiatives.

public and the non-governmental sectors (Connell et al. 2009; Roberts et al. 2005). Furthermore, the managerial values and methods became a central tool in consolidating the economic and cultural hegemony of the West in the neocolonial era, which reinvigorated their representation as universally valid (Frenkel and Shenhav 2006).

The relations between managerial practices and the neocolonial order can also be traced in everyday manifestations of managerial aspirations, as suggested in Hassan Hage's (1998) analysis of contemporary White nationalism in Australia. Hage depicts the "image of the nationalist as someone with a managerial capacity over th[e] national space", who perceives "the 'other' as an object to be managed" (1998, p. 42). This 'managerial capacity' is embedded in a 'governmental belonging to the nation', which "involves the belief in one's possession of the right to contribute [...] to its [i.e., the national space—I.S.] management such that it remains 'one's home'", and in one's ability "to inhabit what is often referred to as the *national will*" (1998, p. 46). Similarly to the White Australians that Hage has been studying, a 'governmental belonging to the nation' can also be discerned in contemporary personal narratives of Ashkenazim, as those collected by the Israeli sociologist Orna Sasson-Levy (2008): one of her respondents depicts the Ashkenazi group as an active historical subject that worked to establish the Israeli state, and therefore allegedly possesses the right to continue and manage the state and the nation.²⁰

As I demonstrate in this section, the two fundamental axes of the managerial ideology—the positivist axis and the progressive axis—appear as highly efficient for legitimizing managerial practices in the field of 'volunteering', and for obscuring their political-economic and (neo-)colonial dimensions. These two axes become mutually connected: the positivist-oriented forms of volunteering management are perceived as promoting undisputed common good; they construct 'volunteering' as an uncontested realm while legitimizing the work of its 'professional' managers. Managing 'volunteering', as understood and enacted by Good Spirit Ashkenazi staff, re-affirms the managerial aspirations of the Ashkenazi group, by conjoining corporate-oriented managerial techniques with a progressive-inclusive management of the national ethno-political space, while enabling Ashkenazi managers to obscure and universalize the particular character of their activity.

The Professional Ethos in the Management of 'Volunteering'

We have here a compan—ehh, an NGO that deals with volunteers but is very serious—one can trust our word [...] People have in mind [regarding volunteers] that... they don't have to, they might do something and they might

²⁰ Hage's theorization of nationalism has been used to gain notions on the Israeli society mainly by Kalir (2010), who adopted Hage's concept of 'practical national belonging' to depict the ways in which undocumented migrants in Israel strive to improve their marginal social location within the national field. The study of the managers of volunteering illuminates the other end of the national field, which is populated by those who hold relatively dominant positions within it.

not do it. [In our organization] there's no such a thing. We are checking ourselves constantly to make sure that we will do what we promised.²¹

This quote of Ilan, Good Spirit chairperson, reflects a prevailing way in which the organization's board members and senior employees perceive their work and represent it to others. They aspire to adhere to professional and efficient working methods that will distinguish the organization from other actors in the non-profit sector, and will locate it closer to the corporate world. This professional ethos is perceived as directly serving the organization's aims, as one senior worker told me: "as our service will become more professional, a higher rate of the people who contact us will start to volunteer". This perception was also conveyed to the youth servers: some explicitly mentioned that it was important for them to be "professional" in their work, while most of them expressed it implicitly by describing their personal satisfaction when completing their work successfully and efficiently.

The corporate world seems to constitute for Oded, Good Spirit executive director, a main source of inspiration and comparison. He explained during an interview that "my managerial perception says that when there is an idea—you need to promote it, and not to set your sight to the sides... as happens many times in companies—we'll do this and this and also this". When reviewing Good Spirit activities in 2010 to the Arison foundation board, Oded demonstrated the efficiency of the organization by indicating that an average of 0.05\$ was invested in the placement of each volunteer. On the other hand, Oded indicated that his professional training and experience as a social worker is significant when working with other NGOs or welfare institutions: "in some of the places you are, like, respected, it's like—you are one of our guys, you are not just someone who studied, I don't know what, [business] management and came to manage Good Spirit, but you are like one of the family".

Oded's figure, which oscillates between the 'social' and the corporate worlds, resembles the situation of Good Spirit as an NGO which is also part of a business group. As part of the group, Good Spirit activity is being measured in terms of efficiency; it adopted a red version of the Arison Group logo (instead of its former logo); and its workers, including the youth servers, have to adhere to the group's codes of conduct and even to its business-style dress-code. Nevertheless, my interviews indicated that most of Good Spirit workers perceived themselves first and foremost as belonging to the non-profit sector. This ambiguous position enabled them to serve as advocates of the non-profit sector 'social' vision in the corporate world, and to simultaneously consolidate for themselves a preferential position in the non-profit sector because of their affinity with the corporate world and its professional working methods.

²¹ The quotes from the interviews were translated from Hebrew by the author. Most of my interlocutors used various slang expressions during the interviews, and as many Hebrew speakers they did not always use accurate grammatical constructions while speaking. It was particularly prevalent among the younger staff members and youth servers, but also among the more senior ones. I tried to convey this in the English translation of the quotes by intentionally including grammatical mistakes or using what may be seen as awkward language constructions.



Image 2 The Israeli flag (*on the left*) adjacent to the Good Deeds Day logo

‘Volunteering’ and the Management of the Nation

I think it was in 1993 [...] when suddenly all kinds of questions came to me: what is actually our role here? Each of us, as a human being, we as a nation [...] and then I started to think a bit about the history of the Jewish people,²² about all the separations, the detachments, the *antagonism*²³ that there is between us [...] what bothers me the most is the separation between us and the lack of *communicative* abilities between us, so what I aspire for is that there will be more unity here, more connections, more collaborations [...] the result of this topic of unity and connections was basically volunteering.

Hadas, the founder of Good Spirit and currently a board member of the organization, described to me in these words how she started to think of establishing Good Spirit. At that time, in the beginning of the 1990s, she worked as the deputy of the Israeli military spokesperson. Her ideas of fostering “national unity” through ‘volunteering’ were incarnated in the logo she chose for Good Spirit (see Image 2), which later on became the logo of the Good Deeds Day. Oded interpreted the logo as visually expressing the aspiration for national unity: “...the different colors—it’s like the difference conjoins into a heart, and into like the Israeli flag, to make it something national”. “A great logo”, he added.

Good Spirit staff imagined the nation in a particular way, and aspired to manage the nation according to this vision. Oded expressed it in one of the preparation meetings towards the Good Deeds Day: “we regularly see things that split [the nation], and we aspire for something good in this unity”. Those “things that split” were identified by Good Spirit staff with ‘politics’—a notion from which they have aspired to distinguish themselves personally and to distance Good Spirit as an organization. During my fieldwork, political issues or views were rarely a topic for informal conversation in lunchtime or in other occasions. In interviews, many staff members tried to refrain from answering questions such as “what are the changes you would like to see in Israel?” When answers have been given it was in a hesitant manner, often accompanied by giggles out of embarrassment or by sighs. One worker replied to the question in this way:

²² Hadas used here the biblical term *Am Israel* that is still commonly used in Hebrew.

²³ The Italic English words within the quotes were said in English by the respondent, during the Hebrew interview.

As one person to change things it's... it's... problematic. What kind of problems there are... and these are such big problems, that exist, I mean it's not- I think that... I don't know... I can only say that through the way of making and giving—the society can improve.

The ending of this answer also represents a quite common strategy of answering the question: shifting the conversation back to Good Spirit activities, to 'volunteering' or 'giving' or the overall work of NGOs, as the way to promote social change.

The attitude to 'politics' that characterized Good Spirit staff resembles the positions of workers and funders in the related field of CSR in Israel, as described by Shamir (2005) and Barkay (2008). This approach also corresponds, however, with wider social trends: a recent series of survey-based studies suggested that 'anti-political sentiments' became a widespread trend among Israelis from all social groups during the 1990s, and peaked in the most recent years (Arian et al. 2008; Herman 2010). Although the negation of 'politics' seems to be a wide and salient phenomenon in Israel, Eliasoph's claim that it "takes work to produce" indifference to politics (1998, p. 6) suggests that groups like Good Spirit do play an active role in the constant cultivation of this widespread attitude. When suggesting optional volunteering placements to individuals or groups, for example, Good Spirit workers have carefully and quickly moved the conversation to other directions if they felt that a specific area of activity raised unrest in their 'customer'.²⁴ However, they have never interpreted the rejection of a placement by a volunteer as ideological, as related to a disagreement of the volunteer with the organization's aims or type of activity: they almost always framed such a rejection as a matter of personal preferences, connected to issues of availability, skills or personal attachment to the purposed activity, and tried to find a new 'offer' that will suit the 'taste' of their 'customer' better. This "desire to avoid discussion of discouraging political issues in frontstage settings" was also traced by Eliasoph in her study of American volunteers: it stemmed from an aspiration "to inspire good feelings in the community and show that regular people can 'accomplish a lot'" (1999, pp. 493–494). Good Spirit—as an institutionalized organization, even if it was not the intention of many of its workers—became an active actor in creating a context in which discussing and actively pursuing 'politics' became devalued and delegitimized, while engaging in 'volunteering' is being perceived as a positive, consensual, and accessible option.

The distinction between 'volunteering' and 'politics' is constructed in Good Spirit as overlapping with the boundary between social consensus and contention. The organization's staff and board members portray 'volunteering' as a harmonious realm, where there is no need for dispute, and where there is a benefit for all the actors involved. It is depicted as the salient 'other' of the negative, conflictual and disempowering realm of 'politics'. This distinction is both aesthetic and thematic: it is aimed to leave beyond the boundaries of Good Spirit any activity characterized by a contentious style or concerned with topics that are considered to be under public

²⁴ As I have elaborated elsewhere (Shachar 2011), Good Spirit staff members regularly depicted the (potential) volunteer as a "customer", framing volunteering as a consumerist activity.

dispute. Yet, when the political system becomes irrelevant and delegitimized, there is still a need to fill in this vacuum with other points of collective reference. This is where the ‘national will’ is suggested as an expression of the desired social consensus. As I have demonstrated, Good Spirit constitutes ‘volunteering’ as an enterprise that transcends ‘politics’ and represents the entire nation. Those who promote it—Good Spirit staff—are thus perceived as enacting the ‘national will’, and in this way the particular political positions and managerial aspirations embedded in their activity become transparent. They deploy in the national arena one of the constitutive and powerful mechanisms of white privilege: the ability of white people to “speak for whites while claiming—and sometimes sincerely aiming—to speak for humanity” (Dyer 1997, p. 3).

Re-managing the Nation: Promoting ‘Volunteering’ in an Era of White Decline

The ability of Ashkenazi Jews to deploy managerial practices in the national field, while naturalizing their activities as representing a ‘national will’ and not a particular sector, constitutes the Ashkenazi group as a ‘national aristocracy’, to use another term developed by Ghassan Hage:

It is those national aristocrats that assume that it is their very natural right to take up the position of governmentality within the nation and become the national managers they are ‘destined’ to be: subject whose rich possession and deployment of the dominant national capital appears as an intrinsic natural disposition rather than as something socially and historically acquired. (1998, p. 62)

As indicated above, the neoliberal regime shift in Israel led to a decline in the Ashkenazi group’s ability to preserve its traditional aristocratic status. The erosion of their hegemonic status, as described by Kimmerling (2001, 2004) and Shafir and Peled (2002), entails a gradual loss of their ability to universalize their managerial practices as representing the ‘national will’, hence restricting their ability to deploy such practices. This gradual loss of control even leads to an “Ashkenazi self-representation as a disempowered and oppressed minority” (Sasson-Levy 2008, p. 119).²⁵

Apart from the evidence brought by Sasson-Levy (2008) and Yonah et al. (2010), also in the course of my interviews with Good Spirit senior staff I could trace expressions of alienation, disempowerment and loss of control. When Hadas heard the name of the neighborhood in which I lived during the fieldwork, which used to be an affluent neighborhood populated by Ashkenazi elitist strata affiliated with the labor movement, she told me in response that she visited a “good friend” there several times in the last years, “and the neighborhood is so different from how I remembered it [...]. It is not easy [for my friend] to live there, there are almost no Hebrew speakers, everybody are foreigners...”. Hadas’ identification with her

²⁵ The quote from the Hebrew article of Sasson-Levy was translated by me—I.S.

friend's feelings of socio-spatial disorientation exemplifies the Ashkenazi "rendition of [...] the myth of the fall" (Yonah et al. 2010, p. 204).

These experiences of decline lead to an aspiration to regain control over the national space, which is strongly represented, for example, in the map presented in the opening of this paper (Image 1) that incarnates the geographic expansion of the 'good deeds' throughout the Israeli territory. This expansion was imagined by some of Good Spirit workers as a centrifugal movement from the center to the periphery, as reflected in one of the ideas they developed for the Good Deeds Day. They suggested exporting to the periphery an initiative that started in several cafés in Tel-Aviv, where a second-hand library is operated by people with mental disabilities. The books will be placed on a sort of bus, which will "go into neighborhoods around the country", as one worker described it, and "spread out the message". In that way, the worker hoped, "we [Good Spirit] help them [the NGO that operate these libraries] to enter other cities [than Tel-Aviv]". But the expansion of the 'good' also encompasses temporal aspects, as the movement of the library-bus throughout the country also symbolizes the restoration of a mythical past: "it'll also bring back a bit the... [...] I also wasn't familiar with that, but I know that in the past there was a mobile library that used to arrive in the neighborhood [...] so there is something quite nice about it". The longing for an idealized past returned in many of the interviews I held with the senior staff and the board members of Good Spirit, expressed in phrases such as "going back to our values", "these are things that are missing today", "going back to look at each other's eyes".

Hage interpreted the white longing to restore "the nation [...] 'back to what it was like'" as "a spatial-affective *aspiration* [that] helps to orientate the nationalist's practices", which are aimed "to construct and to help make true the imaginary nation" (1998, p. 41–42; emphasis in original). In this sense, the longing of Good Spirit staff for the past is not only nostalgic, but constitute a contemporary political project. And indeed, after declaring that "I don't like the personality this country develops and the directions it takes", a senior worker added that by doing her everyday work in Good Spirit "in my mind I am fighting on the character of our society". However, this worker understood that in order to keep her position she has to conform to the a-political representation of Good Spirit work and to refrain from exposing her political aspirations in official settings. Promoting 'national unity' through 'volunteering' constitutes a useful track for balancing these tensions.²⁶ Managing and promoting the national, all-inclusive enterprise of 'volunteering' provides Ashkenazi individuals, such as Good Spirit workers and board members, opportunities to regain a sense of control over the national space and its population and to re-position themselves as the natural enactors of the 'national will'.

²⁶ The work of Yanay and Lifshitz-Oron (2003), on dialogue groups of secular and orthodox Ashkenazim that flourished in the late 1990s, also indicates the aspiration for 'national unity' and the nostalgic yearning for the harmonious past as a way to deal with contemporary tensions and uncertainties. Indeed, one of the first activities of Good Spirit in the early 1990s was a series of dialogue meetings between secular and religious Jews, but the organization quickly turned to different ways of action. The aspiration for unity, however, remained.

Inclusion and Exclusion in the Field of ‘Volunteering’

The mechanisms of legitimacy deployed by Good Spirit staff were effective in their social surroundings, which were marked by a consensus on the importance and the positive value of ‘volunteering’. When I asked some of the workers what kind of responses they receive on their work from family members and friends, one of the typical answers was: “It’s enough that they hear about [Good Spirit activities with] the Holocaust survivors and everyone has a tear in their eye, umm, definitely, there’s no person who will respond in a non-positive way”. The positive reactions the workers received seemed to reaffirm their social analysis, which indicated that there is a total social consensus around ‘volunteering’.

However, during their work the staff had to face social groups that could not be incorporated into the ‘volunteering’ enterprise that easily. Encounters of this type were sometimes the result of a deliberate attempt of Good Spirit staff to expand its activity to new social sectors, and sometimes imposed on the staff, when individuals from non-dominant sectors approached the organization. Only following these encounters, the homogenous ethnic composition of the staff became noticeable, and attempts have been made to better adhere to the perception that ‘volunteering’ is an activity that can and has to include ‘everyone’, as was regularly emphasized by Oded and the board members. Therefore, a Palestinian worker was recruited when the incorporation of the ‘Arab sector’ in the Good Deeds Day was defined as an organizational aim; migrants from the former Soviet Union were hired when a boost of Russian-speaking elderly people started to call the office, following a media item on Good Spirit activities with holocaust survivors.

However, in the time of my fieldwork, the work of the recent migrants and the Palestinian employee was perceived as a sort of instrumental mediation between ‘their sector’ and the senior staff. When meeting Palestinian-Israeli municipal officials, Oded regarded potential hardships in their participation in the Good Deeds Day as deriving mainly from the language difference, and described the recruitment of the Palestinian worker to the organization as aimed “to enable you to communicate with us in your own language”. Discourses on ‘volunteering’ were now translated to Arabic from the Hebrew origin, but the already determined structure and scope of the Good Deeds Day limited the ability of potential Palestinian partners to propose more fundamental changes that could better serve their particular needs. Challenging the structural power relations between the two national communities was perceived as external to Good Spirit legitimate scope of activity: when a staff member reported on expressions of racism towards Palestinians by Jewish volunteer managers in other NGOs, the reactions within Good Spirit were that this behavior is unjust, but “there’s nothing we can do about it”.

Bypassing race and class hierarchies was also dominant in the working atmosphere within Good Spirit. During my fieldwork, the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi divide in the Israeli society became present within Good Spirit staff only when the veteran Ashkenazi senior workers had to adjust to a new team of youth servers, which was mainly constituted of Mizrahi youth. These ethnic identities have not been named explicitly by the senior staff, and were interpreted as deep cultural and

ideological differences. Only the Mizrahi youth sometimes acknowledged the differences between them and the senior staff as having an ethnic component. In that sense, the working atmosphere that the senior staff aspired to create within Good Spirit reflected the a-political image they have been striving to project outwards; the silence over issues such as ethnic and class differences reflected the necessity to maintain ‘volunteering’ as a consensual and harmonious domain.

These strategies of bypassing difference enabled Good Spirit staff to refrain from seriously challenging existing social hierarchies. At the same time, they aspired to represent ‘volunteering’ as a multi-cultural and inclusive sphere, where “people from different sectors, different religions and different background” come together “to do good”, as Good Spirit funder wrote in an album concluding the 2012 Good Deeds Day. The construction of ‘volunteering’ as open for ‘everyone’ equated it simultaneously with ‘being an Israeli’, and posited engagement in ‘volunteering’ as a possible path of integration to which minority groups are expected to adhere. Some members of minority groups that I have interviewed internalized this expectation, like a Russian-speaking worker in Good Spirit who told me that:

I think that the Russian [volunteers] in the project are [...] those who did integrate, and it is really different from most of the [Russian] population that experiences difficulties to integrate in the country [...] but you should know that we speak Hebrew with the volunteers who are Russian speakers, because they are the most Israeli one can find. [...] I’m the same; it’s more comfortable for me that way [to speak Hebrew—I.S.].

The opportunity to become an ‘Israeli’ through ‘volunteering’ grants individuals from excluded groups a hope to improve their social location, but only by conforming to the a-political character of ‘volunteering’ that praises ‘national unity’ and delegitimizes class-based or ethnic-based grievances. As demonstrated earlier, this a-political character has been designed by Ashkenazi Jews and represents their views and interests; therefore, adherence of various groups to this character asserts the Ashkenazi position that ‘volunteering’ represents the national will and increases their legitimacy to deploy managerial positions. This tension corresponds to Hage’s (1998) claim that inclusionary positions enable preferential white groups to enjoy the material and symbolic benefits of economic liberalism and cultural cosmopolitanism, while maintaining their ability to design and manage the mechanisms that qualify individuals to become a part of the nation. Although the model of inclusion presented by Good Spirit leaves less space for multicultural expressions than the liberal Australian perception of multiculturalism, the principle mechanism that is described by Hage remains similar: the white multicultural position retains the ability to define the multicultural space and to determine who may enter it. In this sense, it constitutes a strategy of economically privileged white people to continue and manage the nation when facing a multicultural reality, in which their aristocratic status is declining.

However, the white character of ‘volunteering’ seems to be tacitly recognized by the groups that this project aspires to absorb, such as the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the Mizrahi Jews and the migrants from the former Soviet Union. Skeptical attitudes expressed by members of these groups were occasionally indicated by

some of Good Spirit workers, and might be interpreted as forms of resentment to the structural power differences embedded in the attempts to promote ‘volunteering’. This issue deserves wider exploration that will combine the perspectives of ‘volunteering’ promoters with those of the subjects of their activity. What the current study can bring into attention is the exclusionary character of the inclusive vision of ‘volunteering’; a character that will keep excluding most social groups as long as ‘volunteering’ is constructed, promoted and managed as a ‘white’ project.

Concluding Remarks

As their public visibility and legitimacy increases, organizations such as Good Spirit are able to claim for themselves a greater authority in shaping ‘volunteering’ and its boundaries. Good Spirit board and staff members aspire to constitute ‘volunteering’ as an all-inclusive national project that transcends political, class and ethnic differences, and constantly attempt to promote and expand this notion. As demonstrated throughout the article, through these promotional efforts the Ashkenazi staff members of Good Spirit strive to re-claim for themselves a managerial and aristocratic position in the national field—a position that was eroded during the neoliberal transition in Israel. This aspiration is enhanced through a reliance on professional, corporate-oriented managerial techniques. The professional, inclusive and ‘a-political’ construction of ‘volunteering’ sets it as a national project in which everyone can and should participate: the particular character of ‘volunteering’ is thus universalized, while obscuring its intrinsic exclusionary mechanisms, through the simultaneous representation of this practice as professional and all-inclusive.

The analysis suggested in this paper mainly focuses on the prominent ‘decision makers’ in Good Spirit: workers in prominent positions and board members, who possess more power to set the boundaries and define the aims of Good Spirit work, and through that affect the more general shaping of the notion of ‘volunteering’ in Israel. The interesting dynamics within Good Spirit staff, related to factors such as ethnicity and organizational location, have only been briefly addressed in the last section of the paper. An issue that has been overlooked in this paper is the contradictory influence of the public emergence of ‘volunteering’ on the social position of women: on the one hand, the high representation of women in this field and their ability to reach prominent positions within it enables them to improve their social location; on the other hand, these improved professional positions are mainly populated by white women, who even then remain subjugated to their traditional roles as responsible for the realm of welfare and care. The scope of the paper also forbade a wider discussion in the significant effect of American ideas of ‘volunteering’ on the ways in which this notion is constructed in the Israeli context, in particular by Good Spirit staff. These issues deserve deeper analysis in future papers.

A central aspiration of the current paper was to demonstrate that the sociological analysis of ‘volunteering’, including the discussion on the adequate definition of ‘volunteering’, should also take into account why this phenomenon and its definition

became important: it should examine when, why, how and by whom ‘volunteering’ was constituted as a significant object of public interest. The exploration of ‘volunteering’ as a relational field of discourse and institutionalized practice, and not as a bounded concept, enables to depict the construction of this field and its ongoing cultivation and extension. In this analysis it is crucial to notice the attempts to universalize particular constructions of ‘volunteering’ and to re-contextualize them. This ethnographic case study is certainly not sufficient for fulfilling this aim, but my hope is that it may contribute to the emerging critical discussions on ‘volunteering’ among academics, professionals, activists, and other citizens.

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