‘I volunteer at home too!’
Gendering affective citizenship

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Abstract
This article argues for gendering affective citizenship and humanitarianism. Both of these ‘regimes of care’ are understood to work through benevolent affect, to mobilize citizens in the wake of the retrenchment of the welfare state. Ethnography with Italian-origin women volunteers at a Milanese association shows that the affect and motivations of affective citizens can starkly deviate from benevolence and ‘do-gooderism’. Analyses of post-Fordist affective citizenship focus on the shift from waged labour and state-mediated forms of social security to precarious labour and privatized responsibilities for welfare, implicitly centring the (male) breadwinner as the subject of these transformations. By contrast, this article seeks to call attention to the continuities in unwaged care. In so doing, it shows how the Fordist legacy of gendered citizenship ‘haunts’ its post-Fordist affective and humanitarian reconfigurations and highlights the contradictions and contestations that mark ongoing transformations of social citizenship in Europe.

Keywords
Affective citizenship, care, gender, humanitarianism, integration, Italy, migration, post-Fordism, volunteerism, welfare

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Introduction

There were two things that I was sure I would not do in life: volunteering and teaching, and I had to rethink both. I always thought of volunteerism in terms of the kind that is a bit pitiful, kind of Catholic, hospital-based, those environments. I never thought of it in broad terms. This is a bit because I honestly still think that volunteerism should not substitute itself for institutions or functions that should be someone else’s responsibility, which in reality is what’s happening. (Laura, in 2017)

Laura is a founding member of ParlaMa, a local, all-women volunteering organization based in an economically diverse and increasingly multicultural neighbourhood at the periphery of Milan. The organization emerged in the wake of reforms that decentralized governance, devolved responsibilities for social welfare to non-state entities, and weakened labour protections. Welfare states across the Global North have undergone similar transformations since the 1980s, reshaping the terms and forms of social citizenship (Rose, 1996, 2000). Such restructuring of the welfare state and devolution of its social responsibilities has been accompanied by the enrolling of ‘ordinary people’ (Clarke, 2013) in the production of public goods. This activation of ordinary citizens, who are understood to stand outside the domain of politics and expertise to solve social problems is, for Clarke, ‘the central device of new ways of governing the social’ (2013: 212). To her own surprise, Laura finds herself to be such a citizen, despite her own hesitations and doubts concerning the political and ethical effects of the marshalling of volunteers to substitute for institutional responsibilities.

A broad literature examines the shift from Fordism – characterized by the mass production of the assembly line and by state-mediated welfare – to the ‘flexible accumulation’ and lean government logics of post-Fordism. Social security has been reconfigured from its Marshallian ideal of state responsibility for the common welfare (Marshall and Bottomore, 1950) into the responsibilization of citizens (Newman and Tonkens, 2011). Inspired by Foucault’s concept of governmentality, this literature has traced the emergence of new forms of citizenship that have reconfigured the social contract. These analyses described the emergence of rational, autonomous, entrepreneurial subjects who could and should govern themselves (Foucault et al., 2008; Hyatt, 2001; Miller and Rose, 1990; Rose, 2000). A more recent literature has noted a crucial shift in this ideal subject, now addressed less as a rational entrepreneur of the self and more as a compassionate and other-oriented ‘affective subject’ (Caldwell, 2016; de Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016: 974; Fortier, 2010: 19; Johnson, 2010; Lasczczkowski and Reeves, 2015; Muehlebach, 2011, 2012; Vollebergh et al., forthcoming).

The scholarship on affective citizenship has highlighted ‘how governments and politicians draw on the register of emotions to define good citizenship’ (Fortier, 2010: 19) and work on subjects to ‘direct their feelings towards the public’ (Fortier, 2010: 25). ‘Governing through affect’ (Fortier, 2010) elicits
energies deemed desirable for their potential to produce new forms of social cohesion and social solidarity in the wake of welfare restructuring (Muehlebach, 2012). Examining care in the context of an intensifying rhetoric of compassion also shows how new actors, such as migrant care-workers, can recalibrate the ethics of care (Caldwell, 2007). Affective citizenship thus contributes to ‘destabiliz[ing] citizenship as a purely rational and administrative exercise of state authority’ (Di Gregorio and Merolli, 2016: 934), shedding light on negotiations of inclusion and exclusion in multicultural contexts that go beyond formal conceptualizations of citizenship (Di Gregorio and Morelli, 2016: 934; Fortier, 2010, 2013; Mookherjee, 2005).

The literatures on affective citizenship and humanitarianism show remarkable consistency across divergent social, political and cultural contexts in identifying love, compassion and empathy as desirable emotions for animating active, solidary citizens (Hoffman and St John, 2017; Muehlebach, 2013a, 2013b; Ticktin, 2011a: 3; Wielander, 2011). This devolving of solidarity from the state to citizens comes under criticism for replacing a politics of rights with a politics contingent on compassion (Ticktin, 2006: 42), thus ‘displa[cing] possibilities for larger forms of collective change, particularly for those most disenfranchised’ (Ticktin, 2011a: 3; see also Dean, 2015; Hyatt, 2001; Muehlebach, 2012).

The all-women volunteers at ParlaMa are precisely the kind of actors whom policy makers seek to mobilize into caring for their neighbours: ‘ordinary citizens’ motivated to improve their neighbourhoods by volunteering their time and expertise. What is striking, however, is that ParlaMa volunteers’ activation is not solely or primarily expressed in terms of love, compassion and empathy. Alongside intense expressions of love for the children they cared for, volunteers also consistently expressed anger, resentment and disappointment. In taking seriously the intense and often ‘negative’ affect that circulated among the volunteers at ParlaMa, this article seeks to ethnographically interrogate the assumed congruence (in policy agendas as well as in the literature) between discourses of love and compassion aimed at mobilizing citizens into caring for others and how this care is actually enacted (see Aulino, 2016: 93; Johnson, 2010: 496). Such congruence has recently come into question in ethnographically informed scholarship that shows the ‘unruliness’ of volunteering, for example by documenting shifts in identity from volunteer to activist (Fleischmann, 2019; see also Feischmidt and Zakariás, 2019; Sinatti, 2019).

The ‘improper’ affect of the volunteers suggests that the effectiveness of the summoning of compassionate, humanitarian citizens to ‘do the work of government’ through benevolent care (Ticktin, 2011a: 3) cannot be taken for granted. Not only was discontent and frustration a common disposition, leadership figures in the association also explicitly rejected the moralization of volunteering as ‘doing good’ (Fisher, 1997). Taking as its starting point this divergence between the affect circulating at ParlaMa and the affect assumed to mobilize citizens into caring for others, the article asks how can we make sense of discontented but committed humanitarians? Answering this question hinges on theorizing transformations in
citizen–state relations beyond a flattened dichotomy of Fordist/post-Fordist citizenship regimes by accounting for the gendered legacy of exclusion of Fordist citizenship.

Analyses of post-Fordist citizenship tend to foreground the transformation of secure waged labour and state-mediated forms of social security into precarious labour and privatized responsibilities for welfare. In so doing, they implicitly centre the (male) breadwinner at the expense of the affective and caring (female) subjects that many welfare regimes depended upon. Post-Fordist affect (Berlant, 2007) has also been described in terms of the ‘afterlife’ of Fordism – the melancholic loss of the ‘dream’ of security, ‘stability and belonging’ that ‘haunts’ post-Fordist ‘attachments, commitments, investments, and aspirations’ (Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012: 318). Ethnography with the all-women volunteers of ParlaMa makes visible and legible another aspect of this ‘affective afterlife’, one that haunts the attachments and aspirations of subjects whose position in relation to wage labour was always precarious and secondary to their role as carers.

Much of the theorizing about the summoning and directing of affective citizens has relied upon experts’ and policy makers’ discourses and policy documents (see, for example, Fortier 2010). Such an approach has tended to overestimate the effect of pedagogies that aim to cultivate ‘good feelings’ and to mobilize citizens into disinterested, other-oriented and unremunerated action. As Laura’s reflection on her surprising participation in volunteerism suggests, citizen activation is also marked by ambivalence about ‘do-gooderism’ and concerns that volunteerism enables the retreat of the state from its responsibilities (see also Muehlebach, 2009).

In contrast to the focus on the waged labourer as the paradigmatic subject of transformations in social citizenship, this article foregrounds the unwaged carer’s negotiations of new and old forms of citizenship. In focusing upon the affect, motivations and biographies of volunteers, it builds upon recent work in humanitarianism that recognizes the ‘non-universality of the humanitarian benefactor – the giver who, no less than the receiver, always sets out from a social and existential position both specific and precarious’ (Malkki, 2015: 8). This recognition of the situatedness of ‘benefactors’ complicates our readings of the ethical and affective mobilization of citizens as well as of what these emergent forms of citizenship produce.

The argument is organized as follows: the first section situates the work of ParlaMa in the local context from which it emerged and in which it operates. This is followed by a discussion on gendering affective citizenship, which draws from a diverse range of literature on affective citizenship, humanitarianism, and gender and welfare. The next sections examine, respectively, the continuities between new and old responsibilities for care and the ‘improper affect’, relative to that cultivated by affective citizenship, of some ParlaMa volunteers. These discussions are followed by an examination of emancipation as an aspiration of the volunteers, one that is not just other-directed, at Muslim migrant women, but also, in a mirroring dynamic, is simultaneously directed at transforming the self. The last section examines the explicit rejection of the ethics of do-gooderism that
pervade discussions of affective citizenship in Milan. It suggests that, like the ‘improper’ affect displayed by ParlaMa volunteers, this positioning can be understood as a way of negotiating the contradictions of extending care from the domain of private responsibilities to the public.

The article is informed by nine months of ethnographic research in 2016 and 2017 in local volunteer organizations in marginalized Milanese neighbourhoods. At the centre of this analysis is ParlaMa, a 10-year-old association, founded and run by a group of middle-class Italian-origin women. ParlaMa provides free Italian language classes and childcare to migrant mothers two mornings a week throughout the academic year. In the decade since its founding, the association has grown to about 40 volunteers, 80–100 students, and 30 children. I participated in the organization’s activities by volunteering in the children’s room, observing Italian classes, and attending meetings and social events. I lived on the same block as the elementary school in which the association ran its programmes, and just a few doors down from its president, a proximity that allowed me to get to know the neighbourhood and to socialize with some of the volunteers. By contrast, my location in the children’s room limited my contact with the migrant women taking Italian classes to the drop-off and pick-up of children. Thus, the experiences of the receivers of the services provided by ParlaMa volunteers is beyond the scope of this article, which is concerned with the subjectivities and motivations that animate the enrolling of affective subjects.

A ‘schizophrenic neighbourhood’

ParlaMa operates in a Milanese neighbourhood with a reputation for being a problematic and even dangerous immigrant enclave. Stretched across a network of streets radiating from a central piazza, a vast public housing complex dating to the fascist era sits at the heart of the neighbourhood, offering a stark contrast to the elite and upper middle-class residential areas that surround it. Against a backdrop of prolonged economic crisis and austerity measures, a political rhetoric of institutional abandonment (Grassi, 2018) fans resentment and conflict, often pitting long-term residents against immigrant newcomers. The sense of institutional neglect is reinforced by the dilapidated state of some of the public housing buildings and a chronic problem with rubbish in the streets cross-cutting the public housing complex. A mural warns of the dangers of such neglect: ‘Take away our dreams and we’ll be your nightmare’ (‘toglieteci i nostri sogni e saremo il vostro incubo’). Media coverage contributes to representations of the neighbourhood as abandoned by the state and beyond the reach of the law.

Migrant-origin families make up about half of the residents of the neighbourhood, with a majority originating from Egypt and Morocco. Other residents include low-income elderly Italians, many of southern background, and a significant psychiatric population. Public housing residents reported that arguments would flare up in the fenced-in courtyards, often over noise and children’s play in the common areas. I witnessed numerous incidents revealing such tensions: at
the supermarket check-out line and, often, at the weekly outdoor market. A number of these conflicts centred on the right to services and housing and on the proper use of public space, particularly the use of strollers by migrant women at the open market and on public transportation.\(^5\)

In the early 2000s, reforms of the Italian welfare state decentralized responsibility for social services and health care to the regional and municipal levels, often devolving it to non-profit and private entities (Maino and Neri, 2011; Naldini and Saraceno, 2008). Two decades of conservative-Catholic government of Milan and the region of Lombardy enabled the rise of a moralized form of community welfare (Ferrera and Maino, 2011; Muehlebach, 2012). For the past few years, the city’s now centre-left administration has made welfare a priority as it confronted the ongoing effects of economic recession and the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees at Milan’s central station beginning in 2014. Through reforms of municipal welfare, such as the ‘Welfare For/Of All’ (Welfare di tutti) project, the current administration claims to want to retain a commitment to welfare as a right while cultivating participation in community-based solidarity and further shifting services to the non-profit third sector (Marchesi, 2020). Since 2008, the municipality has participated in a national programme that militarizes Italian streets in the name of security. Military jeeps and armed patrols are a common sight in the neighbourhood, a move that for many residents had the effect of heightening instead of alleviating perceptions of insecurity and crisis.\(^6\) Laura, for example, complained that the patrols made the neighbourhood ‘seem like Beirut’.

A number of local associations have emerged over the past 10 years, imagining and enacting projects and interventions with broad aspirations. These initiatives aim to build ties across different communities, improve the conditions of the public housing area, and reshape dominant narratives and representations of the neighbourhood. ParlaMa and other local grassroots initiatives are part of this ‘paradigm shift’ ‘toward participation or activation’ (Van Berkel and Møller, 2002: 214). Volunteers hoped that teaching Italian to migrant women would enable them to become more autonomous, help to advance their integration while decreasing Italian-origin residents’ suspicions and fears of Muslim migrants.

Sara, the founder of ParlaMa, described how the entrenchment of inequality and separation in the neighbourhood where she had lived her entire life motivated her to ‘do something’. Speaking with the mothers of her children’s schoolmates, she found ‘there was a common feeling in this fairly schizophrenic neighbourhood divided into three parts: the wealthy on the other side of the tram tracks, the ‘normal ones’ here in the middle, the ghetto around the corner’. This mapping of the class and ethnic composition of the neighbourhood was offered as an orienting shorthand to newcomers like me, doubling also as a warning as to which areas to avoid.\(^7\) The common feeling that Sara referenced was the sense of an unbridgeable divide between Italian and migrant residents. For Sara, this segregation and securitization of the neighbourhood was an important motivation for starting the association, a motivation that was linked to aspirations for her children:
for me, the idea that my children would grow up, ‘here are the Europeans and there are the Arabs’. They [the city’s then conservative administration] had started to close the streets and put up security cameras. It was something, really, just disgusting. So, it was my way of reacting. So, if my idea found success so quickly, it’s because it was a fairly common feeling.

To address these concerns, Sara founded ParlaMa, along with, as she often put it when describing the association’s origin, ‘seven other crazy women from the neighbourhood’.

**Gendering affective citizenship**

On a grey and chilly November morning I was sitting cross-legged on the floor of an elementary school classroom wrapped in an oversized scarf to keep warm. The heating in the neighbourhood’s elementary school classrooms that ParlaMa used for its activities was broken again. Two-year-old Mariam had settled herself on my lap with a picture book. Seven other children, all younger than three, were playing with volunteers in this classroom-turned playroom, building towers out of colourful bricks or pretending to make elaborate meals out of plastic vegetables in the toy kitchen. Across the hall, another classroom had been adapted into a nursery for babies three months to one year old. Two mornings a week, I joined volunteers in welcoming children into these makeshift playrooms and nurseries. Volunteers kept the children occupied for the two hours during which their mothers squeezed into elementary school-sized chairs and desks in nearby classrooms to learn Italian from volunteer teachers.

I had settled into the rhythm of reading when the door suddenly opened and Sara walked in holding one-year-old Mohammed, who was crying hard. Looking frustrated Sara exclaimed: ‘This jerk (*stronzo*) won’t quit crying! I’m bringing him here for a change of air.’ Mohammed’s face and hair, which were soaked with tears and sweat, attested to his prolonged crying bout. Sara continued to bounce him as she walked around the room, alternately complaining to us and trying to soothe him. Addressing the other volunteers as much as Mohammed, she asked: ‘But does your mother always hold you? I’m putting you down in the stroller. It will do you some good.’ Once in the stroller, Mohammed’s cries only grew more intense. After a couple of minutes, Sara picked him up again and, walking around the room, tried to calm him down.

The rhetoric of affective citizenship links its potential to produce a better, more cohesive society to the cultivation of benevolence, compassion and empathy in citizens. While the care of young, migrant children would seem to be an ideal site for the enactment of benevolent and compassionate humanitarianism, Sara’s frustration and anger directed at a crying child suggest that rather than ‘deriving great pleasure from unwaged work’ (Muehlebach, 2012: 48), volunteering can also be associated with anger, frustration and resentment. This ‘improper affect’ of otherwise committed and invested volunteers suggests that affective citizenship
needs to account more centrally for how differently situated citizens are interpellated.

Feminist scholarship has long probed the relationship between gender, care and the welfare state (Agnew, 1996; Lister, 1997), asking how gender, and particularly the gendered domestic ‘sphere’, is implicated in citizenship and welfare regimes. This literature serves as a counterpoint to the unrealized universality of Marshallian citizenship, instead forming a reminder of the exclusions that undergirded it. Feminist scholars questioned ‘whether “citizenship” is so imbued with gender specific assumptions related to the public sphere and the nexus of the market and the state that it is necessarily only a partial rather than a universalist project’ (Walby, 1994: 379; see also Fraser, 1987; Kymlicka, 1995; Pateman, 1992). In questioning whether the role of ‘being a carer [is] compatible with being a full citizen’ (Walby, 1994: 386), this literature reminds us that the privatization of welfare that characterizes transformations in social citizenship reworks rather than invents the politics and practices of care along gendered, classed and racialized lines (Balbo, 1987; Fraser, 2009; Tronto, 1993; see also Andall, 2000; Read, 2007). It is thus not surprising that gendered welfare regimes would give way to gendered post-welfare ones in which women in particular are mobilized into unreminated care-work and in which the care-work of migrant women is dismissed in moralized accounts of solidary citizens (Muehlebach, 2012).

Scholars working in post-socialist contexts have foregrounded gender dynamics in their analyses of transformations of political orders, social security, and care (Gal and Kligman, 2000; Hemment, 2007; Read and Thelen, 2007; Thelen, 2015). Some have argued that ‘the gendered division of care work, more often unpaid than paid, is crucial to understanding the gendered nature of welfare state change’ (Lewis, 2002), showing that a retrenchment to ‘traditional’ gender roles tends to accompany privatization through ‘a revival of the old association between women, the family, and care’ (de Lima, 2016: 90; see also Gal and Kligman, 2000). Gender also ‘haunts humanitarianism’ as justification for intervention (Abu-Lughod, 2002) and in the tension that obtains between its de-polititicizing deployment and its potential ‘to bring the political to the fore’ (Ticktin, 2011b: 257).

‘I volunteer at home too!’: public and private care

One morning I arrived at the association to find Adriana, one of the regular and most dependable volunteers in the children’s room, sitting on a chair, her head resting mournfully in her hands. Adriana could usually be found energetically setting up the room in anticipation of the arrival of the children, so I knew something was wrong. After settling in, I asked if she was ok. ‘I’m all right’, she replied softly, ‘it’s just that sometimes it would be nice to be appreciated. You give and give and give, which I don’t mind. But they don’t even say thank you.’ Given the setting, I assumed Adriana’s dejected state and her comments about giving without appreciation were occasioned by feeling unappreciated as a volunteer. As she
continued on, however, it became clear that her concern was more personal: ‘The husband takes too much; the nephew squeezes you dry.’

In her early 60s, Adriana was married to her high school boyfriend. Though they didn’t have children, the couple were devoted to their extended family and had an active social life. Adriana was the one responsible for hosting the large gatherings of family and friends, at times with little or no warning. On this particular morning she was upset with her husband’s lack of appreciation for her cooking. The previous night she had cooked dinner for him, as usual. According to Adriana, he had complained about everything: the rabbit meat had been too tough, he wasn’t in the mood for eating polenta, the strawberries were too acidic. Exasperated, Adriana told him: ‘There’s a restaurant downstairs, you know?’

Patrizia, who was a few years older than Adriana, had been setting up the baby’s room. When she stopped by the toddler room to drop off the register, she joined our conversation. Patrizia regularly complained about her husband and elderly mother; she was frustrated by having to care for her husband’s various health ailments, especially because he continued to smoke despite his health issues. Yet, on other occasions, she could be brought to tears by talking about how much she loved him. Both women had been involved with their husbands since they were teenagers. Consoling Adriana, Patrizia commented that she understood why couples separate in very old age.

For ParlaMa volunteers, particularly those who worked in the childcare room, participation in the association came on top of the gendered burden of a ‘culture of responsibility’ that invests Italian women, particularly mothers (Krause, 2005; Saraceno, 1994). Some complained of grown children who still lived at home, coming and going ‘like it was a hotel’. Such ingratitude, as Jessaca Leinaweaver (2013: 554) argues, ‘reveals the edges and fault lines of kinship, as well as closely related expectations about what should be given, how it should be given, and how it should be received’. Post-Fordist citizenship’s reconfiguring of what should be given, and how, intersects with these negotiations of care in the volunteers’ own lives. These complaints about ungrateful children or husbands are, of course, not unique to the volunteers of ParlaMa. The way these complaints punctuated the care-work of volunteers, however, and the affective states with which they were associated, point to overlaps and resonances between the responsibilization of new forms of citizenship and new and old gendered responsibilities of care. As Sara Ahmed (2004: 25) notes, emotions, including anger, are shaped by their history, ‘bound up with what we already know’: ParlaMa’s volunteers ‘already knew’ and recognized the work of caring for others.

In addition to a substantial commitment to ParlaMa, Patrizia also volunteered at a refugee reception centre, with HIV-positive youth, and was involved in other initiatives. One morning, as we were walking down the steps of the school carrying toys to be stored at a volunteer’s garage over the summer break, I asked her: ‘But at just how many places do you actually volunteer?’ Patrizia laughed and winking at me replied: ‘I volunteer at home too, you know?’ Patrizia’s quip suggests that she recognized the care-work and emotional labour she performed at the...
association and in her other volunteering ventures as being of a piece with her care responsibilities toward her husband and elderly mother.

Adriana, Patrizia’s and Sara’s frustrations could be interpreted as cases of compassion and ‘volunteer fatigue’ (Caldwell, 2013). Writing about the intimate care of the elderly in Russia, increasingly provided by strangers, Caldwell notes the emergence of concerns about the potential detrimental effects of volunteering. She cites a Russian minister warning that excessive volunteering could affect the wellbeing of volunteers and their families (Caldwell, 2013: 103). What is striking about Adriana and Patrizia’s comments, however, is how volunteering and caring for family members are not experienced as distinct domains of care, which can detract from each other. Rather, volunteering and domestic responsibilities are experienced as being contiguous, if not overlapping.

One incident brings this into sharp relief. The president of ParlaMa invited an observer to evaluate the volunteers’ work with the children. Adriana, who had been visibly disturbed by the observer’s presence, immediately commented afterward that the volunteers had been working with the children for years and knew them better than any outsider or expert. She warned that she would simply ‘quit’ if this observation led to requirements for further volunteer training. Sofia, who in her 40s was one of the younger women in the association, chimed in: ‘We’re not professionals, I always say it. We have to trust our experience as mothers and aunts and grandmothers.’ Unlike the volunteer language teachers, who understood their role in more professional terms and were often eager to obtain further credentials, the volunteers in the childcare rooms tended to resist such efforts. The childcare volunteers instead aligned their volunteering work with their own experiences as caretakers of kin, linking private and public forms of care. This connection between private and public resonates with policy and expert discourses that contrast the care provided by the non-profit sector – the warmth of the gift – with the cold and impersonal care of the state (Marchesi, 2013: 28; Muehlebach, 2013a). In reasserting the kin-like and non-professional nature of the care they provided for the children, then, the volunteers positioned the value of the service they provide in an emerging moral economy that celebrates the mobilization of intimacy into the public sphere (see Read and Thelen, 2007).

The assertion of caregiving experience suggests that this positioning, however, may be fraught for women. Volunteers’ participation in the association is contradictory: at once an extension of domestic responsibilities and an escape from them – a desire that Malkki (2015) also finds among Finnish international aid workers. The latter dynamic was evident during various outings with ParlaMa volunteers. These socializing moments were always marked by jokes about the benefit of being away from home at dinner time, leaving husbands and children to fend for themselves, for once. One evening, following the celebration of the conclusion of the academic year, Laura lobbied for going out for drinks, joking that she wanted to stay out late enough to avoid the kitchen clean-up.

The line between emancipation from private responsibilities and the claiming of a more public role is thus marked by tensions and contradictions related to the
volunteers’ trading one form of unwaged care and emotional labour – one confined to the ‘private’ domain of the home and the family – for another, more public iteration of it. Under such conditions, resisting demands for professionalization and further demands of unremunerated labour through the positioning of one’s care as personal and kin-like also means doubling down on the association of women with care. As I show in the next section, escaping this association is precisely what motivated many ParlaMa volunteers to participate in the association in the first place.

From housewife to affective citizen

It all started with me, and it was Marco’s fault, in the sense that with four children, I thought, I will never go back to work. I have a university degree in classic literature because I wanted to teach, but then I didn’t teach because I felt inadequate. So then, with four children, I thought, they’ll never call me back to work.

It was Sara’s worrying about being permanently excluded from waged labour because of her status as a mother, in addition to her concerns for the neighbourhood’s ethnic divisions, that led her to found ParlaMa. In Sara’s account, starting an association was an alternative to the work that she feared she would no longer be able to obtain. Thus, for Sara, as well as for other volunteers, answering the call of activation to address local problems was a way to participate in a public sphere from which they had felt excluded by gender discrimination.

The Italian welfare system, like other familist forms of welfare, privileged the entitlements and rights of the male head of the family while relying on women as the principal caretakers (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008; Saraceno, 1994). As Chiara Saraceno, an Italian sociologist of the family, has argued ‘[t]he family, with its gendered and generational division of responsibility and labor, as well as its asymmetrical structure of interdependencies, is therefore the explicit partner of the Italian welfare state’ (1994: 61). Social benefits, under both Fordist and post-Fordist welfare, have been heavily tilted toward cash transfers, the bulk of which consists of pensions. This provision of social benefits comes at the expense of services, such as childcare. In a cultural context in which childcare and housework largely remain women’s responsibilities, reconciling motherhood and employment is challenging.8

In the 1970s, Italian feminism mounted a strong critique of the conflation of womanhood with motherhood (Hajek, 2014). Part of this critique included demands for the recognition of the economic nature of reproductive labour, including through demands for wages for housework. Proponents of the wages for housework campaign, such as Marxist feminist Silvia Federici, identified ‘housework as the crucial factor in the definition of the exploitation of women in capitalism’ (Federici, 2012: 6). Federici also famously deemed being a housewife
‘a fate worse than death’ (2012: 2), calling for the ‘refusal of housework as women’s natural destiny’ (2012: 6).

Although ParlaMa volunteers did not identify with radical feminist critiques of housework, their struggles to balance domestic duties with other aspirations were a common topic of conversation. While they did not complain of this outcome in the dramatic terms of Federici’s radical critique, a number of volunteers expressed self-consciousness about being ‘just a housewife’, which they repeatedly articulated in terms of how their own children perceived them. Most of the ParlaMa volunteers were in their 50s and 60s. Their availability to volunteer was due to either being recently retired from positions in traditionally feminized professions such as teaching, nursing and retail or having been unable to reconcile motherhood and work—from increasing freedom from childcare responsibilities as their children grew older. The life histories of a number of ParlaMa volunteers shared this common trajectory of youthful academic preparation followed, after the birth of their children, by the struggle to reconcile the responsibilities of motherhood and work. While the welfarist state had prioritized their domestic care, post-Fordist citizenship opened up new opportunities, and new duties, for participation. These new opportunities, however, centred on forms of care that in some ways diverged from and in others replicated domestic duties.

Writing about the rise of ethical citizenship in Milan, Andrea Muehlebach argues that the ‘redeploy[ment of affective labour across public and private domains] leads to a transfer in responsibility away from women as the sole presumed affective laborers in the domestic sphere’ (Muehlebach, 2011: 60). As the ParlaMa volunteers show, however, this redistribution of affective labour outside of the domestic sphere does not automatically shed gendered associations of care.9 For women—who are over-represented in the non-profit sector, in some surveys at a rate of 2:1 compared to men (IlSole24ore, 2018)10—the re-deployment of affective labour can entangle them in new care responsibilities.

The biographies of ParlaMa members thus fit awkwardly in analyses of volunteerism that explain its draw in terms of the status it affords to newly dispossessed masses of Fordist labourers (Muehlebach, 2011). ParlaMa volunteers were not drawn to a facsimile replacement of a lost Fordist sociality and status. The emancipatory move from what is imagined as the private sphere of the oikos into the public sphere of political rights that Fordism afforded to workers (Muehlebach, 2011: 71) had not been available in the first place to many women under conditions of welfare familism.11 Instead, many looked to volunteering as a way to recuperate an identity as something other than ‘just a housewife’, to recover self-esteem and claim their place in a public sphere that was denied not by post-Fordist transformations but by Fordist welfare arrangements and cultural expectations of care. The discontented dispositions of ParlaMa volunteers suggest that affect is not overdetermined by policy agendas. Rather, affect’s analytical relevance to understanding transformations in social citizenship is tied to ‘the continuity of government between the self, the family, and the state that is characteristic of modern polities’ (Richard and Rudnyckyj, 2009: 59).
Emancipating care

The migrant women attending ParlaMa’s courses predominantly originated from Egypt and Morocco. ‘Helping’ these women become more autonomous and freeing them from reliance on their husbands through learning Italian informed the work of ParlaMa and other similar projects I followed. These projects aimed to draw women outside of a domestic sphere that is imagined as inherently oppressive, as well as antithetical to integration (Marchesi, 2020).

These concerns proliferate in a European-wide discourse with colonial roots that ties racial and cultural others to gender oppression and violence (Ticktin, 2011b; Van den Berg and Duyvendak, 2012). Migrant women, especially Muslim women, are assumed to be particularly vulnerable and constrained in their movement and, through a combination of a patriarchal culture and the isolating effects of migration, to be relegated to the home. These culturalized politics of gender and sexuality in Europe have been the subject of critical and insightful examination (Mepschen et al., 2010; Petzen, 2012). However, what has been less examined is how the culturalized politics that view Muslim women as needing emancipation from the home and the family are shaped by and shape the experiences of the women who provide volunteer services. Unlike the ‘civilizing offensives’ (Van den Berg and Duyvendak, 2012: 557) of similar projects in European countries where a sense of cultural and national superiority linked to the evolution of gender roles prevails, Italy’s modernity is always in question (Agnew, 1996; Giordano, 2014 ). What we see, then, is an intertwining of an emancipatory project directed at migrant women and one directed at the self, which is exemplified by how Sara chose to convey to me the impact of ParlaMa’s activities:

I remember our first student, she had come because we had shared the flyer with her son, in Italian. And this child, in third grade, for two weeks he told his mother that she should show up on this day. And she came, with a friend, and she never looked up, she never looked us in the eyes, but at the end of the school year she was another woman. It was maybe the biggest satisfaction. A friend who lives nearby told me: there’s an Egyptian lady near us, really nice, she doesn’t speak Italian that well, but really great, she is always socializing. I have to tell her to come to your school, not so much to learn but because she seems like the right kind for volunteering. What’s her name, I asked her? ‘Manal.’ I told her: ‘Our big success story!’ We pulled her out of a shyness…poor thing.

Sara’s quote evokes the trope of the Muslim woman in need of saving (Abu-Lughod, 2002), in this case by being drawn out of her meekness and shyness. Yet, it also recognizes a similar dynamic for Italian-origin volunteers, as Sara’s recounting of Francesca’s path through the association shows. In her early 60s, Francesca had joined the association after the death of her mother, for whom she had quit her job in order to become the main caretaker.
I remember that Francesca had started by working with the children and then we moved her to teaching because we needed her and she would say ‘But I don’t know how, give me some books to prepare!’ And at a certain point, she was sitting in a doctor’s waiting room with her son while reading a book to learn to teach Italian as a second language and her son said to her: ‘Ah, but it’s not a recipe book?’ Francesca was so offended: ‘Do you think that I just read recipe books? I’m also capable of doing other things.’ This teaching path lead her to reacquire a lot of self-esteem. The same transformation as Manal.

For Sara, Francesca’s story mirrors Manal’s. In the telling of these two stories, she emphasized how both volunteer (Francesca) and student (Manal) had undergone a similar process through their participation in the association. Laura had similarly described her motivations for being active in ParlaMa in terms of her children, whom she wanted to grow up seeing that she didn’t just sit at home ‘dusting’.

Sara’s realization of a parallel emancipatory project linking volunteers and participants, and Laura’s desire to not be seen as ‘just a housewife’ show that humanitarian interventions are not just other-oriented but also directed at transformations of the self (see Malkki, 2015; Mittermaier, 2014: 527). In examining the motivation of Finnish Red Cross aid workers, Liisa Malkki recognizes the ‘neediness of the helper, the giver’ (2015: 8). She argues that ‘the benefactor’s own need to help those in need may generate actions that in fact help the benefactor him/herself in surprising and vital ways’ (Malkki, 2015: 8). Malkki’s aid workers help themselves to escape a mostly lonely domesticity through the opportunities for sociality and for feeling useful that such work provides (Malkki, 2015). For a number of key ParlaMa volunteers, the work of the self on the self was concerned with an emancipation from gendered identities and private care responsibilities.

As we saw with Laura, ParlaMa volunteers could be critical of the way their unpaid labour ultimately let the state off the hook. This critique adds to other contradictions of volunteering discussed earlier: such as how participation in the association was a form of emancipation from domestic roles and identities, while it also simultaneously extended unpaid care responsibilities from the family to the neighbourhood. Becoming enrolled in new forms of citizenship through volunteering can thus be understood as an emancipatory, if contradictory, project directed at both the self and at the other, or it could be experienced, as in Patrizia’s quip about also volunteering at home, as yet another instantiation of carework. As such, it risked folding volunteering back into the very domestic sphere that a number of the volunteers sought to break out of.

‘What’s this “doing good”’?

During a lull in the childcare room, Francesca, who was in charge of new volunteers, complained that men who inquired about volunteering at ParlaMa were not interested in working in the childcare room, only in teaching. ‘If you wanted to do some good, why would it matter?’ she asked as we were setting up the children’s
mid-morning snack. Sara, looking surprised by this comment, waved the notion of doing good away: ‘But what’s this “doing good”? Volunteering should be fun.’ In denying the impetus ‘to do good’ that permeates moralized forms of citizenship, and in dismissing the notion that volunteering should be a self-effacing, sacrificial project, Sara’s comment reframes volunteering away from moral mandates and toward sociality and pleasure. The rejection of ‘do-gooderism’ in volunteering and the gruffness that some volunteers at times displayed toward the children, could thus be understood as a way of distancing oneself from moralized, benevolent expectations of volunteerism and motherhood. This interpretation is bolstered by the no-nonsense attitude with which some volunteers talked about their own children and mothering, despite being clearly devoted to their care. For example, during a conversation about ever-changing expert claims about childrearing, Patrizia interjected that when her children were babies she ignored her paediatrician’s advice to put them to sleep on their back: ‘If they were going to croak, they would have croaked anyway.’

Conclusion

A growing literature examines how good citizenship has come to hinge on reconfiguring public and private affects, practices and responsibilities, and on the harnessing of private sentiments and energies for the public good. Yet, the sentimental and relational alchemy of these emergent ‘regimes of care’ does not shape or work upon abstract citizen-subjects with equal relationships to productive and reproductive labour. Rather, it works through and is worked on by citizens with situated relationships to the state. As citizenship and work have transformed in the post-Fordist era, women who have straddled both forms of citizenship, often finding themselves unable to participate in the labour market, find new opportunities and responsibilities in state-mediated incitements to extend caretaking into the public sphere.

ParlaMa volunteers engaged with young migrant mothers with a set of aspirations and expectations about public and private care, gender roles, and citizenship norms. They sought to generate sociality by contributing to the integration and emancipation of migrant women and to the social cohesion of their neighbourhood and city at the same time that they claimed new forms of participation and emancipation for themselves. In the reconfiguring of Fordist citizenship into affective citizenship and humanitarianism, gender remains a central factor. It informs assessments of needs and who is considered deserving of services and is a resource for integration through the widespread assumption that women are both a uniquely vulnerable population and particularly effective integrators of their families and communities of origin (Farris, 2012; Van den Berg and Duyvendak, 2012).

At ParlaMa, the domains of volunteering and home at times emerged as distinct, and even oppositional sites and activities, and at times as iterations of the same practices of unremunerated caretaking. Volunteering could simultaneously be a form of self-emancipation that helped women leave the middle-class home and do something other than ‘read recipe books’ and ‘dust’, a way to avoid gendered
domestic responsibilities, and a recapitulation of gendered roles. While affective citizenship affords emotional labour – previously confined to the home – a new social and public status (Muehlebach, 2011), it does not erase gendered dynamics of care that animate the gendered “afterlife” of Fordism. Accounting for the affect that transformations in citizenship and humanitarianism actually engender – rather than only what they incite and attempt to harness – brings into relief gendered negotiations of citizenship that span both its Fordist and post-Fordist configurations. Such negotiations reaffirm the centrality of gender to transformations of social citizenship in Europe.

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Notes
1. Following anthropological convention, I use pseudonyms in the text for the names of individuals and organizations.
2. Humanitarianism and affective citizenship, while distinct concepts, overlap in that both refer to forms of collective action understood to stand outside of the scope of the state. While humanitarianism is usually invoked to describe interventions by international non-governmental organization (NGOs) in the Global South in response to emergencies, affective citizenship is more commonly invoked to understand new ‘citizenship agendas’ (de Koning et al., 2015) in former welfare states. These agendas are often concerned with summoning active citizens who can help secure the social by contributing to social cohesion (Fortier, 2010). Yet, in European post-welfare states, the ongoing devolution of the social state to non-governmental and private actors has dovetailed with ‘crises’, such as austerity and refugee arrivals, that have also called forth humanitarian responses (Fassin, 2001, 2005; Rozakou 2012; Ticktin 2006), including by international NGOs. ParlaMa, with its local ambition to address the problem of a divided multicultural neighbourhood can be understood as part of this trend for the activation of ‘affective subjects’ in a time of ‘crisis’ linked to migration and austerity.
3. Much has been written about an affective turn in anthropology. Yet anthropology has a long track record of being attentive to the social life of emotions that has served as a counterpoint to psychological approaches. A key debate in the theorization of affect has centred on delineating the difference between affect and emotion around these questions of the individuality and interiority of emotions versus the sociality of affect, as well as on the relation of affect and emotion to signification and intentionality (see Ahmed, 2004: 207). In this article I align myself with feminist scholars of affect/emotion who refuse these distinctions in favour of recognizing long-standing feminist contributions to the theorization of emotions in social, cultural and political terms (Ahmed, 2004; Fortier, 2010, 2016; Skoggard and Waterson, 2015) and who recognize affect as ‘at once deeply felt and embodied and social and public’ (Fortier, 2016: 1039).

4. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who helped me draw out this point.

5. Recent media reports show that these conflicts over strollers in public space have turned into violent attacks toward migrant mothers (Melley, 2019).

6. Operazione strade sicure (Operation Safe Streets) charges the military with patrolling strategic sites, such as monuments, and ‘problem’ neighbourhoods. According to the Italian military, ‘strade sicure’ is ‘the most onerous commitment of the Armed Forces in terms of men, vehicles and materials’ (http://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_nazionali/Pagine/Operazione-Strade-Sicure.aspx).

7. This spatialization, however, is not an entirely new phenomenon. The original residents of the public housing section included a significant proportion of southern Italians who migrated to northern cities following the Second World War.

8. Italy has long had a lower employment rate for women than comparable countries (Addis, 1999; Lombardo and Sangiuliano, 2009). Although women entered the labour market in large numbers in the 1970s as a broad women’s movement remade Italian family law and norms, even at the height of universal welfarism the state still assumed and relied upon women’s caretaking duties within the family. The transformation of the welfare state that took place in the 1990s and 2000s reconfigured some of these dynamics.

9. The primacy of women as caretakers, particularly of children, still holds. During my field research, my husband was often the primary caretaker for our then kindergarten-aged son, an arrangement that elicited numerous comments from the mothers of our son’s schoolmates. Some expressed their surprise to me at encountering such a man, with one asking me whether I had found him ‘on Mars’. Eventually, the mothers took to calling him ‘mammo’, a nonsensical word in Italian, as a way to include him in the otherwise feminine world of afterschool activities.

10. Migrant women’s care is also an important feature of the new welfare, much of it being paid care-work for elderly and disabled Italians, which, as Muehlebach (2012) argues, locates them outside of the disinterestedness that should invest ethical citizenship. Increasingly, however, migrant women are also invested by active citizenship logics, including volunteerism.

11. Feminist scholars have shown how the very notion of distinct private and public ‘spheres’ is a product of cultural, social and linguistic processes, and not a reflection of their actual essence (see Gal, 2002). The reworking of the meaning of public and private that accompanies reconfigurations of governance in post-Fordist and post-socialist contexts (Gal and Kligman, 2000; Muehlebach, 2012; Read and Thelen, 2007; Thelen et al., 2014) underscore the constructedness and political nature of such definitions.
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