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Gifts and Common Good (Bornstein's *Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi*)

Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi by Erica Bornstein

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lamic reformer (Ibn Abd al-Wahhab) and a local leader of a small oasis (Ibn Saud) in central Arabia. Through a combination of preaching and military campaigns, much of what is today Saudi Arabia was conquered, then lost in the nineteenth century, and finally brought back together in the twentieth century. Al-Rasheed cogently sees the Wahhabi religious movement as being co-opted by the Saudi state to meet changing political situations and agendas during different historical periods. For example, the teaching of Islam among tribal women (and men) historically not only taught religion but fostered the power of the state as opposed to the tribe. More recently, the opening of schools for women in the 1960s—though challenged by religious conservatives—was forced through by the state with the aim of creating a modern nation where religious nationalism and the state are fused.

The past public economic roles of women in market towns and the present activities of rural and Bedouin women outside of cities are recognized. Unlike their urban sisters, many rural and Bedouin women not only drive off the main roads but also manage major herding and farm work in the absence of husbands and sons working or studying in cities. However, the main discourse focuses on urban and especially (nonroyal) elite women. Arguments for and against educating women in the 1960s are juxtaposed. Debates about women working outside the home are elaborated while noting the anomaly of many modern educated women for whom no employment exists. A proliferation of religious decrees from multiple scholars in the 1980s are presented and analyzed alongside women's quest for modernity in a globalized world. A rich trove of women's writings about themselves in novels and essays reveals a vibrant and diverse community of people proud of their religion and society but often critical of power relations exerted against them. Secularist critique, cosmopolitan fantasy, and diversity among women preachers and Islamic activists are juxtaposed—suggesting a kaleidoscope of opinion and belief among Saudi Arabian women in a state powerfully dominated by men.

Madawi Al-Rasheed's lively, well-written, and informative discourse powerfully and laudably destroys stereotypes about Saudi Arabian women and their roles in society. Care must be taken that new stereotypes do not emerge. A more inside view of the state and its personnel is needed. The state exists largely as an opaque masculine entity in this work, but change is eminent—if only for biological reasons. A focus on Saudi men, as men, in a changing and uncertain environment is warranted. Study and analysis of class cry out for attention: most voices here are from upper-middle statuses while those of the masses of middle- and lower-income Saudis are silent along with the high royal elite. Saudi Arabia's mass of expatriates is also absent. Yet the knowledge Al-Rasheed communicates in *A Most Masculine State* provides an illuminating background for future in-depth ethnographic research on the diverse and dynamic components that constitute Saudi Arabian gender, society, polity, culture, and belief in a rapidly changing and globalizing world.

Gifts and Common Good

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Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi. By Erica Bornstein. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.

In this evocative ethnography of the multifaceted nature of the gift, set in New Delhi but ramifying through sacred and secular contexts both locally and globally, Erica Bornstein unpacks giving through the realms of development and philanthropy (“humanitarianism as a transnational form”) to reveal its motivations and consequences, many of which prove to have been unanticipated. She begins with the standard provocative challenge to Mauss's assumption of the reciprocal nature of the gift and generalizes the implications of this challenge for the informal and ad hoc humanitarian work ongoing in New Delhi. These forms are the most socially and economically significant types of donation in India. She uses local conceptions of social service (*samaj seva*), donation (*dān*), and volunteerism as key analytic constructs in her interpretation of the mechanics and outcomes of humanitarianism.

The account is structured in an effective fashion. Most chapters begin with a thesis that the author subsequently illustrates with a set of specific ethnographic cases or portraits. Each of these vignettes is an extended story that functions, in the author's word, as a parable, and each allegory delivers a moral lesson. She builds her holistic interpretation of the antecedents and consequences of humanitarianism along five dimensions: philanthropy, trust, orphans, experience, and empathy. In successive chapters, she explores the regulation of the giving impulse, the search for suitable recipients, wardship as an alternative to adoption, volunteerism as a transformative (and increasingly commodified and globalized) rite, and philanthropic alternatives to liberal altruism.

Bornstein sets the tone in the prologue that she maintains throughout the book, meditating both on the varied roles the ethnographer assumes in the course of fieldwork and on the improvisational skills necessary for successful inquiry. The reader is given access to the interior dialogue between the clinician and the dweller as the anthropologist negotiates the emotional consequences of contingent membership in groups that determine the outcome of any particular study. The logistics of fieldwork demand constant adaptation of every carefully considered plan and cultivation of opportunism in guiding an investigation in fruitful directions. The limits to intimacy posed by context and self in the course of inquiry require the ethnographer to endure significant discomfort, ambivalence, and pain in physical, emotional, and intellectual realms. Bornstein repeatedly calls attention to her own straits, and the learning they occasion, in her account.

The argument begins in earnest as the author explores the complications that arise when the impulse to give is harnessed by state, NGO, and private concerns and channeled into a rationalized, regulated enterprise of philanthropy. Bornstein details the pluses and minuses of impulse (e.g., donor liberation at the cost of perpetuating inequality) versus regulation (e.g., recipient empowerment at the cost of ignoring urgent needs of specific others) in her examination of the ways in which traditional and instrumental giving interrelate. Of particular relevance is her discussion of the potentially poisonous consequences of administering gifts through NGOs, both to local populations and to the organizations themselves. Ethical dilemmas are rife within both indigenous and philanthropic giving, prompting the author to advocate for retaining and organizing ways of maintaining both systems to augment one another. She reaches this conclusion through a meticulous comparison of the cultural dynamics of *dān*, Indian philanthropy, and diasporic giving in the service of Indian development, demonstrating abundantly that the gift is not a monolithic practice.

The hegemony of audit culture (and the researcher's imbrication in it) is challenged by Bornstein's analysis of the endemic distrust of NGOs by New Delhi stakeholders in a country where a million voluntary associations operate in the largely unregulated space of charitable donation and are massively funded by foreign capital. Exacerbating this climate of suspicion are the cross-cultural differences in conceptions both of giving and accountability, making Western practices of transparency, for example, difficult to implement at the local level. She compares suspicion in India to witchcraft in Africa as a moral language of evaluation under conditions of increasing income inequality. The author argues for consideration of audit forms that are not bureaucratic (i.e., rational or economic) but rather more suited to local norms, such as the close observation of the kind occurring within and between tightly knit social groups.

Bornstein's discussion of orphans and wardship—the nexus of her opportunistic fieldwork and the centerpiece of her book—is an intricate analysis of the moral economy of adoption. Orphanages are sacred sites for giving, where *dān*, *samaj seva*, and volunteerism coincide in complex ways. This is especially true when a climate of extreme poverty makes child abandonment a viable alternative for caring parents. Over 12 million orphans are currently wards of the state, an exceptional status. Regulating adoption in a way that insures the “transformation” of an orphan as a member of the “family of humanity” (the Indian child's legal status) to a member of a “particular family” in a ritually appropriate way (that honors the spirit of *dān*) is a preoccupation of the Indian

government. Orphanages can also become sites of a “predatory geopolitics of desire” where the consumption of indigenous children by wealthy foreign families may be facilitated by competing NGOs.

One of the author's most intriguing dissections of orphanage life is her bracketing of the local outcomes of volunteering in favor of a focus on the lived experience of volunteers, which she reveals to be a “gift of experience from the recipient to the donor.” Volunteering serves both to reinforce and efface social distinctions between groups and is a fertile ground for cross-cultural misunderstanding. However, whether the practice of volunteering is considered to be a selfless act of caring or a manifestation either of “charity tourism” or “postmodern pilgrimage,” the transformative effect (either transient or enduring) upon indigenous and foreign volunteers is remarkable.

Bornstein's unpacking of this moment of transformative experience, and the cultural differences she observes in the performance of “moral good,” lead her to a consideration of relational empathy, a kinship-based model of action that she offers as a challenge to our conventional concept of liberal altruism as a driver of humanitarianism. Whereas practitioners of liberal altruism turn to “abstract others” in need, practitioners of relational empathy turn “strangers into kin”: the latter collapse the distance the former maintain by understanding and treating subjects not as rights-bearers but as family.

The author tells her story as an embedded researcher, weaving her personal experience into the narrative in a way that helps the reader better understand the tactical choices she makes, the interpretations she forges, and the critical perspective that she adopts. She grounds her reading of the many cross-cultural disconnects she observes among her informants in her own history of local enculturation, rendering the accounts more visceral as a result. Of the many personalizing stories or soliloquies delivered by the author, I especially enjoyed her reaction to a particular UNICEF direct-mail marketing campaign, a critical incident compelling her to consider the ethical engagement enjoined upon us by the gift. Beyond the substantive insights to be gleaned from the book, the reader emerges with a good sense of the lived experience of doing fieldwork, which is a valuable takeaway.

This book is a solid contribution to the revisionist literature on gift giving. As this literature expands beyond the critique of reciprocity, let's hope that we see renewed attention to other such fundamental issues as sacrifice and reception as well. These topics are latent in Bornstein's data, and I suspect, in many of our own studies. It's time to ramp up our rethinking of one of our discipline's focal concerns.