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Article

The political economy of unredeemable social debt: Superexploiting the labor and networks of refugees who aspire to "give back"

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Abstract

According to anthropological theories of the gift, recipients of social benefits such as refugees in Europe are engaged in relations of social debt. Here I argue that, within the framework of capitalist societies, concepts of social debt and repayment do not prove adequate in addressing social relations between powerful institutions and disempowered populations. This article demonstrates that existing studies of giving back in such relationships do not fully grasp the ambiguous and complex dynamics within neoliberal economies that grant rights to refugees such as social benefits while, as displaced people, also place their belonging to society under question mark. My argument is illustrated through the example of refugees who, having fled from Syria, are allocated a house in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Socially indebted, these permit holders "give back" by launching an "initiative" to help others, with the assumption that this will enable them to step out of their precarious and liminal position of social indebtedness and enter into the realm of sociality and exchange. However, this article shows that in a landscape of outsourced service provision, superexploited labor, and subcontracting arrangements, the social debts these permit holders allegedly collected do not get redeemed.

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Introduction

In 2015, Zahed[1] fled from his motherland Syria. When I met him during a period of extended field research in Rotterdam, he spent his time on starting a refugee support initiative. What motivates him to be an "initiator" (*initiatiefnemer*) is "to give something back," he told me more than once. Pitching his idea to a possible network partner one time, Zahed said: "We have arrived in a community that welcomed us, so we want to do something back" (Van der Veer, 2022). He often implied such logics of reciprocity: another time, he firmly expressed that he feels a "need" to "help the communities in Rotterdam." When I asked him why, he replied by asking a question: "You know how many jobs the Netherlands gives to us, refugees?" Before I could even try to answer, Zahed said: "A lot!." Apparently, this "giving" of jobs conditions the "need" to offer "help" to "communities in Rotterdam." And Tawfik—who fled to the Netherlands in 2014 and now provides training sessions in first aid and in company emergency response—said one time: "In 2014 I was helped by Dutch people, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), the Refugee Council. So now I am a little bit old in the Netherlands. I know a lot. And if Dutch people help (refugees), I have to help twice as much. I experience this as a duty" (Van der Veer, 2022).

The necessity of giving something back is particularly prevalent in the Netherlands. Research has shown that in this country "giving" is strongly associated with having "its reward" (Komter, 2005: 7) and that being seen as "giving" is necessary to receive something in return (Komter, 2005: 9–10). Policy documents about newcomer integration in Rotterdam have been quite straightforward about this *quid pro quo* logic. For example, a policy document specified that "using the facilities that the municipality offers is not without obligations," adding that "wherever possible, measures of enforcement will be used" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a: 17). Likewise, another policy document notes that "social and cultural integration is not without obligations" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015b: 5). Policy memoranda that address permit holders'[2] integration (*statushouderintegratie*) commonly evoke a punitive vocabulary. For instance, the City Council notes that "we expect [of] all Rotterdammers, including all migrants, who receive benefits, to do their utmost to increase their employability on the labor-market. Anyone who does not do that [...] will have their benefits cut" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015b: 8). Alongside these sanctions, the so-called "Taskforce Reciprocation" (*Taskforce Tegenprestatie*) ensures that "those seeking work give something back in return for receiving benefits" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a: 19). Reciprocation includes volunteer work, informal care, and "other useful social activities" that are "good for the city, the society, and those seeking work themselves" (Rotterdam

City Council, 2015a: 19). And "of course," the document remarks, "enforcement is applicable."

In Rotterdam, governing authorities have imposed a business model on the organization and delivery of refugee support services. They outsource public service delivery to organizations, organized as "nonprofits," that must comply with performance-based evaluations based on standardized outcome statistics. These "nonprofits" must compete for funding by responding to calls for tenders (aanbestedingen) by putting in a bid. Organizations that win the tender become contractors. In service delivery, these contractors often collaborate with subcontracted small-scale agencies (Van der Zwaard et al., 2018: 53)—including refugee-led support initiatives. This form of organization is in line with the administrative systems of new public management (NPM) and new public governance (NPG). NPM and NPG are both forms of public administration management. NPM gained traction in the late 1970s and 1980s and imposed neoliberal market-oriented business practices on service delivery by nonprofits (Moreno, Shields, and Drolet, 2018: 74). Funding in this system follows a hierarchical corporate model and decision-making about the performance of contractors is top-down and controlled by the funding agency. NPG became a dominant mode only over the last decade. This administrative technology claims to be more participatory, by seeking to involve the non-profit sector in collaborative public policy processes (Evans and Shields, 2018).

However, in the Netherlands, NPG supplements NPM in hybrid ways but has by no means replaced NPM and questions can be raised as to whether the changes are substantive rather than only performative (Kuitert, Volker, and Grandia, 2024: 366). Nonetheless, Rotterdam is proud of its hybrid NPM (market) and NPG (collaborative) arrangement. The City Council claims that it "smartly uses already existing contracted products" as well as "private initiatives for refugees and volunteer work" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a: 18). It explicitly "envisions a role for enterprises and employers" and "creative and innovative initiatives from volunteer organizations" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015b: 9). Claiming a consensus from below, the Council states that "we make solid agreements with civil society," in the formulation of "enforcement" of policies on "integration" and "reciprocation" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015c: 4). The Council implies that it is civil society organizations to which permit holders are obligated to reciprocate: having received the services of these civil society initiatives is "not without obligation" and "participants are expected to do something in return in the form of reciprocation or personal contribution" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015c: 15). Reciprocity is often understood as refugees providing volunteer labor—that is unpaid work—in exchange for services. Project evaluations to assess whether the organization is complying with its contract often data on the number of refugee volunteers and the amount of free labor they have contributed.

This article explores how the normative logic of the gift both legitimates the public–private governance arrangements of reciprocation and motivates grassroots initiators with a forced migration background. I also ask how and whether the labor that the initiators invest in reciprocating is valued and recognized in the political economy of outsourced services. The analysis zooms in on the daily activities of four initiators with a forced migration background in particular—Zahed, Sahir, Tafwik, and Jamal—and brings

forward what it takes for them to shapeshift from someone who is framed as being on the receiving end of help into someone who helps others.

In doing so, the article takes seriously insights from studies that seek to deexceptionalize migration. These studies argue that social scientists should be wary of naturalizing concepts and logics of the nation-state in their research and encourage scholars in migration and mobility to study how binaries of migrant–nonmigrant, citizen and foreigners work to obscure shared social positionings of class, precarity, and dispossession (Anderson, 2019, 2021; Cağlar and Glick Schiller 2018; Dahinden, 2016; Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). In the fieldwork that underpins this article it has, for instance, been an ethnographic surprise in itself that in Rotterdam in the wake of the asylum governance crisis there were numerous refugee-led initiatives that emerged. In following these initiatives over time, I did not assume that migration and ethnicity were the relevant variables to explain these "city-making" social relations and I made sure to embed my research findings within theories about reciprocity, agency, and power (Anderson, 2021; Cağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018). For the purposes of this article, making visible the boundary work between intersecting policy fields (of migration/assimilation and welfare/labor) and public/private arrangements sheds light on how initiatives by and for recent refugees are contested in present-day arrangements.

The four protagonists in this article fled from their motherland Syria after war broke out. For years, none of them really spoke with me about their life in Syria. Sahir usually states that he tries to "look ahead." Jamal once stated that: "If I have time off, I immediately think about my country, and I feel I want to go back," and Zahed also said that: "I try to not look back too much." Zahed is the only one of them who would sometimes give a little insight into his life pre-exile. He grew up in a wealthy Syrian family. His father is a singer and Zahed recalls him singing songs from the Swedish pop band ABBA and the German disco band Boney M. Several times Zahed showed me pictures of his parents on his phone, mostly portrait pictures that were taken in the garden around their house. Zahed was in his last year of studying finance in Kuwait when he joined protests against the regime in Syria. He got detained, was released, and fled via Libya to the Netherlands. At the time I met him, Zahed was in the process of starting an initiative that "helps communities in Rotterdam." He envisioned combining workshops in Syrian music and crafts with a plan to start a hotel that recruits staff among permit holders in Rotterdam. In doing so, he hopes to "bring Syrian people and Dutch people together" and "helps refugees with difficulties."

Jamal, Sahir, and Tafwik have shared less biographical detail with me compared to Zahed. Jamal has worked for the NGO "White Helmets" in Syria, but after his family feared that these activities would put him and his family at risk, he fled, together with two good friends with whom he had grown up. When I met him, he was initiating a mentoring system at a summer school for first-generation long-term Dutch students to meet with students with a recent refugee background. Tawfik fled to the Netherlands through Egypt and when I met him, he lived with his wife and three daughters in the same neighborhood as Jamal. He started an initiative, which through a subcontract, was part of an organization's competitive tender. As a leader of the organization he initiated, Tawfik has participated in diverse projects—including giving courses in first

aid. Sometimes he carries his youngest, a toddler, in his arms while he's busy managing the day-to-day affairs of his initiative. He seems fluent at multitasking. "Just chatting," is how he characterizes his work.

Sahir had his own dressmaking company in Aleppo. He was the employer of 14 people before he and his four daughters fled through Iraq and Turkey. At one time, he told me in passing that: "My wife has died. My house is destroyed. I am ill. My daughters are ill. If I watch television, I cry a lot." "I need to keep myself busy," he once said to me about his motivation for starting an initiative. In addition to distributing a local newspaper and helping in a community center, Sahir was taking steps to open a textile shop, fix people's clothes, and give sewing classes.

From a perspective of anthropological theories of the gift, each of these refugees' attempts to start an initiative can be seen as a way of navigating multilevel unequal social structures in order to become part of the realm of reciprocal gift exchange. Based on ethnographic material, I suggest that these attempts could be seen as an effort to position themselves not as giver or receiver but as a point of exchange through which "gifts" are passed on and kept in motion without coming to a standstill. I ground this suggestion in the logics of reciprocal gift exchange, where the goal is not to reach an equilibrium, but, instead, to agree to alternating debt. But the point of the article, however, is that what can be defined by anthropological theories as "gifts," are embedded in market-based and neoliberal logics. Therefore theories of the gift do not adequately grasp the complex and ambiguous effects of neoliberal economies that consider the integration of refugees a process that requires government policy and intervention, thereby positioning refugees outside of the norms of sociality.

These neoliberal economies evoke the logics of the gift—by casting those who claim socioeconomic rights such as a residence permit and state benefits as "gift receivers" and force them to engage within sociality as a way to reciprocate—but at the same time put barriers to ultimately moving beyond the position of the beneficiary. What further naturalizes these forms of protracted and seemingly irredeemable forms of indebtedness are specific political-economic dynamics in which structurally marginalized groups like refugees who are motivated to "give back" are superexploited through subcontracted positions in which public-private organizations extract their time, labor and networks. This dispossessive process sets in motion a dynamic where gifting and reciprocity do not result in bonding relationships but rather in subordinate relationships that result in unredeemable debt, social exclusions, and labor market exploitation. I argue that these power dynamics point to the inapplicability of the theories of the gift to study refugees' complex relationship with attempts at integration in Western neoliberal societies and the unequal power dynamics that are at play between refugees, the state, societal institutions like migrant nonprofit organizations—within neoliberal orders.

This article is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Rotterdam, including a year of full-time field research in 2018 in which I joined in the daily activities of these grassroots initiators, who had a forced migration background. I accompanied them in their meetings with advisors, other grassroots initiatives and organizations, and civil servants. After advancing (and showing the limits of) anthropological theories of the gift, this article connects scholarship on neoliberal economies around migration and asylum—

such as studies on migration apparatuses (Feldman, 2011), migration industries (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen, 2013), migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) and the commodification of migrants and migrant services (Glick Schiller, 2023, 2024; Glick Schiller et al., 2023)—to scholarship on refugee-led organizing (Olliff, 2018; Rast, 2024; Rozakou, 2012; Schwertl, 2017). In doing so, it contributes to understanding the political economy of refugee subordination—in which hybrid NPM and NPG arrangements make nonprofits part of neoliberal economies. The fieldwork is set in the wake of what was politically narrated as an "asylum governance crisis" in Europe in 2015 and 2016. At that moment, refugee support activities emerged across Europe (De Jong and Atac, 2017; Feischmidt et al., 2019; Sinatti, 2019; Youkhana and Sutter, 2017) and in the Netherlands (Larruina et al., 2019; Rast, 2024).

The gift and social debt

The gift is a well-trodden anthropological theme. In the 1920s, Malinowski (1922) evoked systems of gift exchange among Kula people on the Melanesian islands, and Mauss (1925 [1967]) famously argued that the gift is a total social phenomenon. Much later, another major theorist of the gift, Gregory (1982), introduced a political economy perspective to elucidate the relationships between gifts and commodities—like labor and money—that has been foundational to economic anthropology. Graeber (2011, 2014) focused on debt as a foundational moral principle. Anthropologists working on debt/credit nexus (Peebles, 2010) and on forms of social exchange that underpin anthropologies of the otherwise (Povinelli, 2011, 2022) continued to work with the logics of the gift.

Regarding support to refugees specifically, several studies have demonstrated how this support has been governed by principles of gift exchange and reciprocity. McCluskey (2019) argues that logics around "the free gift" laid the basis for the articulation of the refugee as undesirable, while also justifying the disbanding of social support. The author shows how refugees who were "lucky" enough to be allowed in had to demonstrate greater and greater degrees of reciprocity and reveals how these dynamics gradually carve out an ever-wider area of acceptable conduct toward the refugees. On a more hopeful note, Alkan (2021) introduced how the "gift of hospitality" creates a space for reciprocity among strangers and how this gift catalyzes a cycle of returns that leads to long-term relationships.

Refugees' and migrants' "participation" is often seen as a mode of "giving back" (Weng and Lee, 2016). Rast and Ghorashi (2018) presented the narrative of a permit holder who felt that, in order to "feel more equal," he should "give back to the Dutch" (Rast and Ghorashi, 2018: 192). Implicit in such a narrative is an ontology of debt, in which people who have received state support are cast as debtors; giving back forgives their debt to the state and permits them to make a claim to ownership (Krinsky and Simonet, 2017: 190–194). As such, participation and community involvement carry the promise of restoring one's sense of entitlement to the community (Krinsky and Simonet, 2017: 199). In contrast to citizens, refugees' debt to the state is cast as more absolute, for their claim to ownership of territory and community is not grounded in a

form of participation that precedes this debt (Schinkel and Van Reekum, 2019). Importantly, the notion that one's debt necessitates desired forms of participation involves subscribing to this ontology of debt in the first place. As I will show later, particular governance dynamics in the Netherlands and in Rotterdam naturalize this ontology of debt.

In anthropological theories of the gift, giving is not only understood as a way of displaying sociality, but also is supposed to create it: in giving, people both demonstrate sociality and anticipate sociality to be given to them in return. Put differently: by virtue of giving a gift—including nonmaterial gifts like support—we throw our indebted selves along in the slipstream—and hope that our act will be reciprocated. Ideally, reciprocity occurs in a chain, where gifts are kept in motion and, by taking turns in being grateful, people bond. In the context of support initiatives for refugees specifically, however, this choreography of expectations that underpins gift-giving is commonly seen as suspicious or even harmful.

For instance, in the context of residents of Greece who try to help refugees, Rozakou draws attention to the "gift taboo" where gifts are "potentially dangerous" and the circle of reciprocity is "vicious" because it "places the giver in a hierarchically higher position" (Rozakou, 2016: 193). I am contributing to this analysis by noting that we must go further than observing that refugees, such as the initiators with whom I worked, are situated in a hierarchically lower position because they are cast as temporarily indebted after having received (what is framed as) a gift. Instead, we must draw attention to the political-economic dynamics which cast the initiators as persons with unredeemable debt, who cannot enter into the realm of reciprocal gift exchange in the first place. I argue that this unredeemable debt is sustained not only by the intersecting policy fields of migration/assimilation and of welfare/labor, but also by contemporary public/private arrangements in the Netherlands in which volunteer labor of refugees is exploited and their subcontracting is normalized. Anthropological theories of the gift have difficulty grasping the power dynamics within such a political-economic context. Instead, given the prominence of the trope of "giving back" (and its associated language of social indebtedness, gratitude, reciprocity, obligations, and sociality) theories of the gift have become the intuitive framework of ethnographic analysis of the refugee situation.

Recent studies of permit holders in the Netherlands generally and in Rotterdam specifically highlight how permit holders generally feel "thankful": for "the help they are given" (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2020); for "being allowed to stay"; and for "being given a house" (Damen et al., 2019). In theories of gift exchange, "a lack of gratitude" is "something to be avoided by all means," because this would dissolve "social ties" (Komter, 2005: 57). Gratitude is seen as nothing less than "the basis of a system of mutual obligations among people" and the "moral cement of human society and culture," and thereby secures "the continuity of social life" (Komter, 2005: 67). In restoring—but not resolving—the equilibrium of interexchanged debt, gratitude becomes a tipping point: where a person acknowledges that they have been on the receiving end of assistance, admits to being cast as temporarily indebted, and prepares themselves for this situation to change. Next to the acceptance of this debt, gratitude is the "driving force behind the return gifts" (Komter, 2005: 73). For the purposes of my

analysis—and in the face of integration policies—gratitude's pivotal function in establishing and maintaining social ties shows us something important. Contacts between permit holders and long-term Dutch residents are cherished as a critical constituent of integration. Connectivity is required in order to set in motion an undoing of social debt.

In scholarly attempts to connect marginalization to logics of the gift, the thought that "[p]eople who are not in the position to give much themselves … prove to be the lowest receivers" (Komter, 2005: 138) is common. But would it really be so that some people cannot give much? Or do political-economic dynamics fail to recognize their gifts—or their capacity to be giving? If this is the case for the initiators in this article, they do not pay the "price" of "not being able to do good" (Komter, 2005: 139). Their alleged debts to society will just "stay bad" anyway (Harney and Moten, 2013: 61). Along these lines, a recent sociological study has argued that migration is enacted as a form of debt and that this logic of debt underwrites the economy of migration (Schinkel and Van Reekum, 2024). In this article, I give the relationship between debt and sociality within neoliberal economies a more specific and contextualized meaning. I do so by situating the efforts of initiators with a refugee background—who are committed to "give back" but end up in contexts of superexploited labor (Tsing 2009)—in the political-economic context of reciprocation in the Netherlands and in Rotterdam.

The political economy of reciprocation in Rotterdam and the Netherlands

Before turning to the ethnographic material, it is useful to get an insight into how particular governance dynamics in the Netherlands and in Rotterdam have naturalized the idea that being granted particular rights creates a social debt that necessitates forms of giving back. To review this structural and historical context, this section traces the notion of "giving back" as policy-instantiated idea in the intersecting policy fields of migration/assimilation and of welfare/labor, explains how the logics of "giving back" affect (discourses about) socioeconomic rights for forced migrants in the Netherlands, and zooms in on contemporary public/private arrangements that structure the refugee support business.

Municipalities in the Netherlands receive a quota (*taakstelling*) from the national government stipulating how many permit holders will be allocated housing. In Rotterdam in 2015, the quota was 1142 permit holders. In 2016, the quota was 2039, followed by 1096 in 2017 and 824 in 2018 (Rotterdam City Council, 2019). When permit holders are allocated to a Dutch municipality, the integration law (*Wet Inburgering*) obliges them to participate in the "civic integration trajectory" and to find a language school.[3] From the turn of the millennium onwards such trajectories are compulsory—while sanctions in the form of welfare cuts and fines were introduced if people did not attend (Vasta, 2007). From 2010 onwards one's residence permit can be revoked when "the duty to integrate" (*inburgeringsplicht*) is not fulfilled (De Lange et al., 2017). People having been granted asylum came to be referred to as "those duty-bound to integration" (*inburgeringsplichtigen*): they have the duty to invest effort (*inspanningsverplichtingen*) and a to duty achieve results

(*resultaatverplichtingen*). Permit holders pay for their integration trajectory themselves, though they can access a 10,000 euro loan to cover costs. This loan is a gift only if the permit holder passes the integration exam within three years.

To understand why such trajectories are compulsory, why assimilation is seen as a duty, and why non-participation is sanctioned, we have to go back to policy changes from the late 1970s onward. In 1978, Rotterdam was the first Dutch city that came up with a policy memorandum on immigrant integration. This memorandum even *preceded* the first national report that recognized integration as a policy issue. As such, Rotterdam is said to be the first city to turn particular populations—that is, those characterized as low-income and ethnically diverse—into "fundamental problems, for which many solutions have to be devised" (Schinkel and Van den Berg, 2011: 1917). In 1983, the Netherlands was one of the first countries within Europe with an explicit integration policy. This policy was aimed at (and thereby created) "low-status immigrant groups" (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2011: 143) who were granted (new) rights.[4] In the late 1980s, however, the idea that these rights—and particularly access to state benefits— had made minorities overtly dependent, gained traction. Whereas until 1987 asylum seekers would receive social benefits equal to the amount received by unemployed Dutch citizens (Ghorashi, 2005), the Dutch government restricted access to social benefits for asylum seekers, limited their access to social housing, and offered reception in centralized government-owned refugee shelters (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2007).

It is in this governance context that, in response to having received *rights,* increasing emphasis was placed on *obligations*: "obligations of migrants should be more balanced with the extended rights," a government report declared (Scientific Council for Government Policy, 1989). From the early 2000s onwards, it became commonplace to construct "the Dutch state" as "benevolent in *providing* funding and resources" and "*offer[ing]* immigrants encompassing rights including unrestricted access to the full panoply of the welfare benefits without demanding anything in *return*" (Vasta, 2007, italics added). The "duty to integrate" can be seen as "return" (counter-gift) after "rights" and "benefits" were "provided" and "offered." Again, Rotterdam's local politics led the way: an important catalyst of the populist right discourse was Pim Fortuyn, who published a book entitled *Against the Islamisation of Our Culture*. His party started as a local party based in Rotterdam but also proved a massive success in national elections.

Changes in the governance of welfare/labor, too, are key to understanding the political-economic context of "giving back." From the 1970s onward the government started to promote so-called "active citizenship" and encouraged self-responsibility as a form of moral subjecthood (Schinkel and Van Houdt, 2010; Van der Veer, 2020, 2022). In Rotterdam more than anywhere else in the Netherlands, it is noted that this appeal to citizens to be "active" produces a "negative other" who is not active and therefore irresponsible and immoral (Van Houdt and Schinkel, 2019).[5] This production of the "negative other" legitimizes the narrative that some people are not fully "integrated" in the "moral community" and that targeting them by repressive interventions is permissive (Schinkel, 2017). Among these repressive interventions is the Participation Law (*participatiewet*) that was implemented in 2015. This law prescribes that people who receive social benefits "are forced to do unrewarded societally useful activities" (De Lange

et al., 2017). This principle that puts pressure on people to engage in such activities is called the Reciprocation Act (*tegenprestatie*).[6] For the interlocutors in this study, the Participation Law prescribed that they had to be "active in society for at least four days a week or more with education, work, or voluntary work" (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a: 16–17).

These changes in the intersecting policy fields of migration/assimilation and of welfare/labor cannot be separated from a restructuring of the market. The Dutch welfare state has transitioned from a corporatist model to a neoliberal one—in which New Public Management arrangements imposed neoliberal market-oriented business practices on service delivery by nonprofits.[7] Whereas civil society actors such as churches, labor unions and employers' unions used to be actively involved in welfare provisions, these organizations became increasingly marginalized in new government arrangements (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2011). For migrants, this meant that they became "more exposed to market forces" (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2011: 29). In Rotterdam specifically, people who work in "urban networks of diversity and inclusion" criticized the "tendering system" and the "fierce competition for funds" (Schiller et al., 2023: 6) and characterized the refugee support industry in particular as "big business" (Van der Veer, 2022: 88). As explained elsewhere (Van der Veer, 2024), in competitive tendering, the municipality in Rotterdam sets targets and organizes a competitive procedure amongst service provisioners. The service provisioner that "wins" the tender will be paid market fees by the municipality, which means that service provisioning has a for-profit character and that the municipality measures success by key performance indicators (KPIs)—that is, the number of migrants helped. In Rotterdam, competitive tendering is said to have severely disrupted public services (Van der Zwaard et al., 2018: 18).

In the wake of the asylum governance crisis of 2015, when the Dutch government struggled to grant rights to asylum seekers and refugees, organizations supported by public–private funding streams entered into new forms of collaboration with government actors (Larruina, 2023; Rast, 2024; Van der Veer, 2024). Many of the initiatives that emerged during that time were so-called social enterprises: "socially responsible" market-oriented businesses that seek to make a "social impact" while securing financial returns and that rely on subsidies as well as on profit-making (Larruina, 2023: 141). In this landscape, small initiatives like that of the initiators in this study face what is called "the tender trap" (Van der Veer, 2024: 2): their initiative is considered unsuited for competitive tenders and subsidies and the initiators experience pressure to enter into subcontracting constructions with organizations that do have a competitive tender.

Why are people at home?

"Sewing lessons to do something back," is the header of a newspaper article in which Sahir makes a case for reciprocation. Since he was allocated a house in Rotterdam, doing something back takes many shapes, including fixing people's clothes. He fled from Syria in 2015 with his family, and has now joined a wide range of neighborhood initiatives. Not only does he do volunteer work in a community center, he also takes part in a work that upgrades a local park, and helps delivering a local magazine "Nice

Nice Neighbourhood" (*Mooi Mooi Middelland*). More than once, he proudly showed pictures of him shaking hands with the mayor and of his daughters as they helped him deliver the local magazine. Once, during a fast-breaking meal organized by a newcomer support organization, he presented himself to the audience by saying: "I am Sahir. I do volunteer work." When I later complimented him for his speech, he said to me: "I have to say that! I do it for other people! I don't forget that these people try to help me! So I know that I have to also help them" (Van der Veer, 2022: 88). Sahir thus emphasized the numerous activities he engages in, repeatedly highlighting that he does so "voluntarily" (*vrijwillig*) and, by virtue of doing so on the celebratory night of a particular community organization, associated these successes with this organization. What motivated him to do so was to pay tribute to these initiatives in exchange for the support they provided to him. To give something back.

   The conditionality of acceptance that is premised on participation is constantly confirmed among the initiators and in the conversations they have with their advisors. These white advisors are residents in their 70s with a track record in educational institutions, local and national politics, foundations, trust funds, welfare organizations, and funding organizations (Van der Veer, 2024). One time, for instance, I heard a prominent advisor in refugee advocacy say to Zahed that "When Dutch people see that you're doing your utmost, most people will welcome you." The advocate thus connects being industrious and committed to eventually being accepted by long-term Dutch people. Incited by such promises, the initiators imagine a future in which citizenship—and the possibility of being considered virtuous—is finally actualized (Schinkel, 2013). By taking the future into the present they dream of being ultimately settled and at home in the Netherlands.[8]

   At first sight, the trope of "giving back" seems empowering. It carries the promise of undoing the disciplinary power put in motion by being cast on the receiving end of support. To illustrate this point, another initiator with a refugee background, regularly reminded me that—as she once put it—"refugees now want to do something back" because they are "tired of help." On the other hand, the trope of "giving back" subscribes to an ontology of debt that inactivity and a lack of participation would also presume. The normative template of debt encourages refugees who can live up to this template to position themselves at the expense of refugees with less effective public personas. In their attempts to be recognized as "active," initiators I worked with often seemed keen to distance themselves from their "negative other." After the speech he delivered at the fast-breaking meal, for instance, Sahir rhetorically asked me, just after stepping off the stage: "Why are people at home?" Whispering and raising his eyebrows, he explained to me: "I have six children. But I am here. A lot of people are at home. That's not good. I don't like it. You need contact with people."

   Just like Sahir, Zahed would also regularly compare his own routines with that of other permit holders. When pitching his initiative to someone one time, for instance, I heard Zahed saying: "A lot of people, refugees, are just sitting in the house, doing nothing." Zahed continued by saying, "We want people to participate"—"we" referring to him and his friend. In doing so, Zahed seemed to align himself with the figure of the active citizen who empowers others and who constructs this self-identification in contrast to the passive—and thereby immoral and irresponsible—citizen. In doing so, he stages

himself as a person perfectly suited to carrying out the job of disciplining *others*. In the Dutch discourse on immigration, this derogative speech is ubiquitous. Zahed is very aware of this discourse, and I have seen him experiment with using this discourse for his own benefit. One time, for instance, I heard Zahed say that: "The system here just wants to make you lazy. Just to get the money from the government. They just want people to have an *uitkering*." Although Zahed speaks English, he adds the word for "benefits" in Dutch.

Next to casting those allegedly in need of activation as indebted, another way in which the potential of giving back comes to a closure is that the initiators' efforts to reciprocate are not always recognized and accepted. As the following vignettes show, the voluntary participation that the initiators are summoned into—which functions as a vehicle for giving back—seems to prevent them from entering into the realm of reciprocal gift exchange in the first place, and keeps them in a position of protracted indebtedness that excludes them from sociality.

Shall we do something together?

Jamal's commitment to work as a volunteer has been applauded in Dutch newspapers. "Syrian refugee fanatically volunteers" starts the title of a newspaper article about his activities. He had met with the founder of the tendered organization "Refugees UP"— a foundation that, years later, became legally charged for "self-enrichment" because it had invested public money in a private company. The founder proposed to help him with developing his idea for a mentoring system at a summer school. I asked them: "shall we do something together?," Jamal recounts his proposed collaboration with this organization. The organization decided to get two young women who were students in business administration—one of them a good friend of the founder's own daughter. They joined the meetings on how to give shape to Jamal's plan, together with Jamal, and Evelyn, an employee who works for the tendered organization, and me. In these meetings, however, Jamal felt palmed off: the organization proved most interested in using Jamal's social network for their business development and kept on positioning Jamal as recipient of assistance.

To his annoyance, Jamal was asked what his "impressions" were, from his "perspective," about aspects of the summer school—which was, in fact, his idea. For instance, when one of the young women said, "We heard that, in other countries, it is not normal to interact," the employee asked Jamal: "Is that so?" Generally, Jamal's ideas were responded to with suspicion. For instance, when Jamal said that he knows someone who can play the role of facilitator during the weekend, the employee responded: "Well. Do you think that works? Is that your experience?" Jamal, sensitive to his offer being reduced to a personal experience again, responded politely: "For me, personally, yes, this would work."

The disregard of Jamal's ideas was quite conspicuous in the face of his relentless efforts. He often arrived late to work when the meetings with the tendered organization would take longer than expected. Also, Jamal secured support from the University of Applied Sciences in Rotterdam and from a national foundation that helps refugees

with matters related to their study and education. Also, Jamal had the administrators of several study-related Facebook pages that are popular among young refugees to do publicity for the summer school and mobilized his own network of peers. Despite these efforts, it was striking how Jamal was sometimes framed as somehow helpless. At one point, for instance, the two young women offered Jamal the made-up position of "permit holder recruiter," and motivated this offer by saying that "we want to help people" (in response, Jamal then mumbled, "No, I don't think you do," but nobody heard him).

In the end, the summer school fell through because their approval for funding was denied. The implications for two women and their future career as social entrepreneurs received all the attention from Refugees UP's founders, while nobody attended to Jamal. Only when the people from Refugees Up shifted into discussing whether they would want to do a funding application for a summer school again next year and wondered how they might reach participants did they turn to Jamal again to ask how his network could be "reached." Jamal responded generously, saying that he'll keep his list of 150 e-mail addresses and promised that 15 of his friends would still be up for the summer school next year. The founders of Refugees Up looked at Jamal eagerly. One of them asked: "Are there aspiring entrepreneurs among your friends?" Apparently, they were rolling out an entrepreneurship program and they were looking for participants. Again seeking to escape from the position of "receiving assistance," Jamal asked in response: "Who will provide the training?" The founders assured Jamal they would contact him the moment they are looking for trainers. They never contacted him.

When I met up with Jamal some days later, he said that he was "a little bit angry" at the organization. He also said that it struck him how much the people of this organization prioritize "what's in it for them." The reason the municipality declined their approval for funding was that the project didn't focus enough on "vulnerable permit holders." When I asked Jamal what he thought about this decision, he said: "This is ridiculous! Please write that down." He laughs, but looks sad. "Why [do they focus only on vulnerable permit holders]? Because we [Jamal and other permit holders that will enroll on a university class] are not waiting for someone else's help?"

It's a done deal

Back in 2015, the founder of "Refugees UP" told me that he "wanted to do something with newcomers," "with refugees." "But we were frustrated about not finding them," he said. You need to have addresses. We found that difficult. But slowly, we have managed to get together a decent group in our network." When I asked the founder how he had managed to build this network, he explained to me that he had subcontracted Syrian permit holders in Rotterdam with large networks. "It's a done deal," the founder said about the subcontracted agreement with one permit holder in particular, Tafwik, and encouraged me to get in touch with him.

When I asked Tafwik about his perspective of their "deal," he explained to me: "I believe this organization needed newcomers to give their classes to." […] "And I have a large network. I have started a group on Facebook that 37,000 Syrians in the

Netherlands have subscribed to." Before his collaboration with this tendered organization, he had first turned to the municipality for assistance with starting his initiative. "I went to the department of Work and Income. But they said: "We don't work with small organizations." They only give money to big organizations. So, they said: "You should go to a big organization and tell them about your plan, they may like it." And so Tafwik did, resulting in their collaboration being secured through subcontracting.

"Small initiatives may end up between a rock and a hard place," a policy advisor—who had been involved with the subcontracting deal between "Refugees UP"—and Tawfik told me when I asked her about subcontracting. She told me that at times she advises small initiatives to "become a piece of the puzzle through parties with a competitive tender." And in the agenda of a meeting of initiators that I attended I once saw that "how to get subcontractorship" featured. When I asked the host of this meeting what she meant by this agenda item, she said plainly, "The municipality does not like to work with small parties. They like big contractors, that in turn have subcontractors."

What I often was told was that the advantage of such subcontracting arrangements, both for contracted organizations and for smaller organizations, was that both partners can help each other to "reach" participants. One small initiative for instance had worked with the Dutch Refugee Council for some time. "We recruited people (permit holders)," one of the employees of the Refugee Council had explained to me. During a staff meeting of this small organization that I attended, "reaching the target group," "finding volunteers," and "approaching organizations" were the key topics. One staff member suggested that they to "drop by" a specific grassroots library in the city "because there are a lot of volunteers walking around there." The staff member continued: "We could ask them how they'd feel about contributing something to our organization as well." A colleague nodded, and in addition suggested another organization to add to the overview. She explained that she, herself, did that organization a favor in the past, adding: "It's tit for tat."

These logics of reciprocity, in which organizations enter into mutual exchanges of people who provide volunteer labor, while seeming to structure collaborations between organizations, actually proved to be a system that not only commodifies people but also superexploits their volunteer labor. This perspective on enforced volunteering was shared by some of my interlocutors. One interlocutor who works for an organization that is subcontracted by an organization with a competitive tendering contract told me for instance that in her experience, subcontracting is "not a fair deal." In characterizing the position of organizations with a competitive tendering contract toward smaller organizations, another interlocutor told me that: They are like: "you provide support (to beneficiaries), we cash all money, you get nothing." The issue at stake is thus that contracted organizations, by virtue of working with smaller organizations, are seen to get their "scores" quicker—by exploiting the labor of subcontracted (refugee-led) initiatives that are staffed by volunteers.

Displacement, social debt, and superexploitated labor

Up until recently, scholars in migration and mobility knew very little about tendered organizations that are contracted by municipalities to provide services to displaced people in

New Public Governance arrangements. Based on long-term fieldwork with migrant service organizations in Halle (Germany), Nina Glick Schiller (2023; see also 2024) has shown that service providers in local integration businesses commodify migrants "as inventories who are counted, recorded, accumulated, stored, and moved." Few studies however address how, within neoliberal management systems, *refugee-led initiatives in their start-up phase* are positioned in this landscape. The material unfolded in this article confirms that permit holders in local support infrastructure are turned into commodities. It builds on existing scholarship by showing how initiators with a refugee background who are in the process of starting a refugee support initiative are expected to move these commodities around. In the material above I demonstrated this by zooming in on the appeal of permit holders who nurture a large network as nodes who channel participants to tendered organizations, on the pressure to "find" and "reach" enough migrants in order to live up to KPIs, on the allure of subcontracting agreements in which initiatives would "recruit" permit holders for tendered organizations, and on the pull of places in the city that are seen as frequented by plentiful potential volunteers.

What the material I unfolded also showed is that permit holders who aspire to be a social entrepreneur remain stuck in a position of unpaid labor while their networks are exploited. Previous research has shown that marginalized populations often bear the burden of providing superexploited labor—a burden that labor regimes often repackage as an empowering feel-good activity that functions as an act of citizenship (Harvey and Krohn Hansen, 2018; Muehlebach, 2011). In their journey toward stability and certainty, they are particularly "summoned into accruing recognition" through "unwaged participation" in "affective voluntary action" (Muehlebach, 2011: 67). In light of the fact that in Rotterdam these forms of participation and actions are framed (and sanctioned) as legal obligation and even as moral duty, I am compelled to ask if the register of "voluntariness" is even useful to make sense of these labor regimes. These dynamics point to an underlying mechanism of superexploitation. Anna Tsing (2009) defines superexploitation as exploitation that depends on performances of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, and citizenship status (Tsing, 2009: 158). Such forms of exploitation are at the heart of capitalism and are associated with subcontracting.

Previous studies have shown that such repackaging of superexploited labor as something emancipatory and hopeful may happen through the figure of the "entrepreneurial self," who is promoted as a means of escaping "the shame of depending on state benefits" in the face of declining wage employment opportunities (Narotzky, 2018: 39). And in the context of refugee assistance specifically, it is observed that the figure of the self-entrepreneur is linked to the activating state and practices of active citizenship (Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020). The self-entrepreneur seems a way to render oneself recognizable to neoliberal ways of understanding the value that underpins one's labor and to not risk having this labor remain unrecognized and, therefore, consigned to cycles of unremunerated labor. In contrast, my research adds a more concrete and contextualized understanding of how volunteer labor by self-entrepreneurial permit holders is exploited within the political-economic dynamics of the refugee support business. What becomes visible are particular forms of exploitation in which not only people,

time and labor, but also their networks of social relations are commodities to be accumulated.

On a more conceptual level, what the situated ethnographic encounters I presented made clear is that the policy-instantiated idea of "giving back" through volunteer labor seems not to redeem the debt of being granted specific rights such as access to social benefits. Instead, I suggest that this debt is maintained by hegemonic ideas that imagine welfare claimants and refugees outside of sociality and by neoliberal economic dynamics that legitimize superexploited volunteer labor through subcontracting arrangements. This proposition adds to existing literature on refugees' pathways from client to service provider that shows how refugees in migrant support and advocacy organizations run into barriers because their competencies and capital are undervalued and naturalized (De Jong, 2019). Thinking with the trope of "giving back" I push this point further. The initiators I worked with are *not only* cast in an inferior position because nobody scouts their talents and *not just* temporarily indebted after having "received" rights (such as a residence permit, social benefits, and access to markets of social housing and jobs). What I argue is that hegemonic ideas about social debt, which are thoroughly embedded in neoliberal economies, cast people as indebted in protracted ways that go beyond the failure to recognize their talents.

Even those who are conspicuously dedicated to the community they want to be part of, who demonstrate that they do not need to be helped themselves, and who are invested in supporting those with whom they live, feel rejected and dismissed. Indeed, all the initiators offer their volunteer labor not only to people with a forced migration background but also to long-term residents of Rotterdam. But as theories of the gift have shown, sociality is a necessary condition for reciprocity to take place. Because taking part in social networks is a *precondition* to participation in gift exchange (Komter, 2005: 137), there must *first* be sociality *before* a person can participate in gift exchange.[9] Building on sociological insights on "bad debt" (Harney and Moten, 2013; Schinkel and Van Reekum, 2024), my fieldwork suggests that "giving back" does not reverse the roles of debtor and creditor. This can be explained by hegemonic ideas in the intersecting policy fields of migration/assimilation and welfare/labor and in public/private arrangements that naturalize an ontology of social debt. Whereas within bounded sociality there is a "continuing balance of debt—now in favor of one member, now in favor of the other" (Schwartz, 1967: 8)—the initiators seem to have sedimented in pockets of indebtedness in which their position in relation to gift and debt does not alternate.

Conclusion

In NPM and NPG arrangements that give shape to what I call the refugee support business, the policy-instantiated trope of "giving back" intersects with market dynamics that regularize subcontracting arrangements. Tendered organizations have become a locus where "giving back" takes place: having received "help" from these organizations, permit holders are pressured to help these organizations in return by "doing things voluntarily." Public–private organizations exploit the initiators by taking their time, labor

and networks to fulfill KPIs. I have argued that this neoliberal exploitation intersects with structural, historical governance arrangements in migration/assimilation and welfare/labor that cloak certain rights as gifts that have to then be reciprocated. And because this political-economic context at the same time naturalizes an ontology of social debt in which refugees are positioned as outside of sociality, it is impossible for them to ultimately shake off the social debts they allegedly collected. In Rotterdam, the effects of competitive tendering in what is called "the social domain" are particularly dire. The city's assimilation policy preceded the national assimilation policy (that was already avant-gardist compared to the rest of Europe) and the production of a "negative other" of the "active citizen" is particularly absolute. But these findings could also stretch beyond the particularities of this case and onto other European migration regimes in which market dynamics produce forms of exploitation that intersect with iterations of "giving back."

In conclusion, anthropological theories on the gift exchange are incapable of addressing the ways in which the hegemonic narratives that evoke the trope of the gift (and its associated language of social indebtedness, gratitude, reciprocity, obligations, and sociality) mask the commodification of refugees and their labor. We must acknowledge that these narratives situate refugees as perpetual debtors within processes that naturalize protracted forms of indebtedness and facilitate neoliberal exploitation. Instead, this article calls for acknowledging, researching, and theorizing the skills, initiatives, and social resources with which so many refugees actually build the social life of the cities in which they settle.

Data availability statement

As an anthropologist, I was part of the lifeworlds of the participants whom I studied. The findings are situational, and data were collected and constituted intersubjectively. The data I gathered are not suitable for analysis by researchers who have not been present in these specific ethnographic settings. Data are stored in an encrypted folder secured with a password.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval statement

Funding

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Notes

1. I use pseudonyms for participants and organizations to offer privacy and plausible deniability. Delinking people's names from their words and opinions prevents public criticism or abuse (McGranahan, 2021).
2. The policy category "permit holder" (*statushouder*) refers to people whose need for protection is recognized by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) and who are given an asylum residence permit for five years. After five years, "permit holders" may be granted a permanent residence permit if they meet a set of criteria and possess a civic integration diploma. In 2000, the Dutch government abandoned separate administrative statuses for refugees. Asylum seekers who are considered refugees have similar rights to asylum seekers who are granted subsidiary protection.
3. Navigating this landscape is not easy: many language schools were said to have taken severe financial advantage of people who don't know their way in the Netherlands and cannot speak the Dutch language (ISW, 2018; The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2020: 59).
4. In addition to social benefits this included active and passive voting rights (i.e., the right to vote and to be a candidate in elections), affirmative action laws, financial assistance to schools that received children "with a migrant background," access to social housing, and agreements that enabled volunteer work (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2007; Ghorashi, 2005; Vasta, 2007).
5. This policy mantra of active citizenship fails to take into account structural racism on the labor market in the Netherlands (Bovenkerk, 1995; Odé et al., 2019; The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2021; Vasta, 2007). Knowing that the Dutch nation state has been premised on institutional racism and is known for the denial of this racism this bears no surprise (Essed and Nimako, 2006; Wekker, 2016). In addition, strict asylum policies cause so much stress among asylum seekers and refugees that these policies in themselves hinder their socio-economic integration (Bakker et al., 2014).
6. It is not a given that these activities lead to paid work (Kampen, 2014), which makes salient that they are indeed a counter-gift to having received benefits—not a prelude to waged labor.
7. During the late 80s, this neoliberal shift was defended with the technocratic and depoliticizing slogan of "no-nonsense" politics (Daalder, 1995), and in the 1990s, social-liberal pragmatism of

the Third Way that further free market thought was normalized by an appeal to pragmatism (Oudenampsen, 2018).

8. A survey confirms that recent Syrian refugees who fled to the Netherlands in 2015 and 2016 are eager to "participate in the Dutch society" and to be independent and self-reliant (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2020: 8–12).

9. This raises questions about the ethic of social membership, in which the welfare state is historically rooted (Bloemraad et al., 2019).

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