

Elizabeth Holzer. *The Concerned Women of Buduburam: Refugee Activists and Humanitarian Dilemmas*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015. viii + 200 pp. Bibliography. Index. Paper. \$21.00. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5690-9.

Based on intensive fieldwork in Ghana and Liberia, Elizabeth Holzer's well-written and fascinating study of Liberian refugees in a UNHCR-managed refugee camp in Ghana makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature that dissects the antinomies of humanitarian governance. Humanitarian governance is exactly that: a splash of care served in heaps of power. Although the goal of humanitarian aid is to assist those whose lives have been devastated by large-scale emergencies, this aid can be delivered only if the recipients are managed and controlled. Holzer offers a name for this paradox: "compassionate authoritarianism." *The Concerned Women of Buduburam* observes how the UNHCR, a compassionate authoritarian, responded to a group of women refugees who organized, a little too zealously for the UNHCR, to improve camp conditions and take some control of their lives.

The book is organized into an introduction, a conclusion, and six chapters. The introduction and chapter 1 situate the book in its historical context and also in the context of theories of disciplinary power. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the "politics" of camp life, including its administration, civic engagement, and relations between the administrators and the residents. Chapter 3 provides an interesting portrait of the relationship between UNHCR and the Ghanaian government, with authority constantly being delegated and reshuffled depending on the circumstances. Whereas the first three chapters focus on "everyday politics," the last three explore "contentious politics." There are many underlying drivers, but the most inflammatory concerned the UNHCR's evolving policy for resettling the refugees. According to its mandate, the UNHCR's primary function is to help find a "durable" solution to refugee flight, and it relies on three alternatives: repatriation, third-country resettlement, and local integration. In this case the Liberians wanted either to go home when the conditions were safe or be resettled to a third country (preferably in the West)—they were openly opposed to the idea of local integration. In response to rumors that the UNHCR was about to alter its policies in ways that went against their preferences, some female Liberians took to the streets. Holzer skillfully uses this episode to dissect the structures and choices that ultimately soured relations between these protestors and the UNHCR, with Ghana eventually supporting the latter.

As always, the UNHCR was in a tough position. Sometimes the forces align to hasten a durable solution to a refugee crisis, as when refugees coming from the Soviet bloc found Western countries willing to provide asylum and a path to citizenship, or when a conflict ends and refugees eagerly return home. Until such a solution is found, under international law refugees have certain rights that are intended to allow them to survive with some modicum of dignity and self-reliance, including the right

to education and employment. The problem, though, is that host countries often cannot afford to provide these basic services, and often have their own concerns about containing the refugees. From such circumstances spring the ubiquitous refugee camps, often administered by the UNHCR and supported by international funds. The UNHCR and other aid agencies provide life-sustaining assistance, and refugees are expected to be relatively grateful for their lot.

But what happens when the refugees, as in the case of Buduburum, take it upon themselves to ask for reforms, improvements, or even rights? There are two drivers encouraging such initiatives. Over the years, and in response to perceived accountability deficits, the UNHCR and other camp administrators provided refugees with various mechanisms to express their concerns and grievances. Also, as Holzer notes, in this particular case the UNHCR was attempting to help refugees feel empowered so that they could return to Liberia to become “*future citizens of a postconflict country*” (136; italics in original). According to Holzer, refugees are aware that they have some strategic choices to make; they worry that if they are too polite they will not get anywhere, but that if they are too strident they risk being labeled as rebels. As she explains sympathetically, it is not as if the UNHCR enjoys ignoring or resisting what are often quite legitimate grievances, but rather that it often is unable to accommodate them because it is short of resources and is itself subject to pressures from the host government. In Ghana both the UNHCR and the government wanted to maintain stability in the camps, but it is a condition of Foucauldian governmentality: they have different sets of tools of governance, often used in combination though not necessarily coordinated. The UNHCR provides caregiving assistance, but often it deployed its care in a way that was intended to maintain control. And, in a situation in which the refugees got too rebellious, both the UNHCR and the Ghanaian authorities acted in ways that were intended to suppress the rights and voices of refugees. As Holzer writes, “disputes between refugees and humanitarians regularly transformed into conflicts between refugees and host” (159).

There is much to like about the book. It is a useful addition to the growing literature that considers refugees from the perspective of critical theory, yet Holzer deploys her keen ethnographic eye to resist pat Foucauldian orthodoxy. For instance, whereas some critical perspectives dismiss “volunteerism” by refugees in camps as evidence of the hidden hand of administrative power, Holzer suggests that refugees truly care about the conditions in which they live, and want to work collectively to improve their situation. This is a compact book that successfully works with and against the critical convention, and it is highly recommended.

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