

Book Review

Capitalist Humanitarianism

Hulsether, Lucia. (2023). *Capitalist Humanitarianism*. Duke University Press.

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Humanitarian projects are well known for providing relief, protection, and progress for people affected by natural and man-made crises on any scale around the globe. However, *Capitalist Humanitarianism*, by Lucia Hulsether, delves deeper into many humanitarian projects and traces capitalism's footprints and how it pursues its goals through these projects. Hulsether asks about capitalism's ulterior motives, interrogate the idea that capitalism is "socially responsible," and describes capitalist humanitarian projects as "embarrassed beneficiaries of neoliberal surplus," which tries to reconcile between people and profit, in other words, between care and capitalism. She refutes the capitalist humanitarianism claims and describes all these endeavors as a way to "save capitalism from its own excesses" (p. 1).

Capitalist Humanitarianism contains an introduction, six interludes, six chapters, epilogues, and a thorough investigation of historical fair-trade archives, microfinance institutions, and many ethnographic case studies about socially responsible companies. The book opens with Hulsether's story of her personal life and experience. She describes herself as a child of two White people "with high-level degrees and steady jobs as a professor and a pastor" (p. xi). Her parents influenced her perspective with the idea that race and socioeconomic status could provide unfair advantages for them and described it as the inheritance and hegemonic power of capitalist economies. Then she explains her own experience of the protest and hunger strike as a part of the Yale graduate teacher union to pressure the university into contract negotiations for a livable wage and decent health care. She describes this experience as "a spectacle of self-denial at the center, a battle which was impossible to win" (p. x), which she perceived as a metaphor for the slow death that capitalist economies impose on their workers. Hulsether questions capitalism as a White supremacist patriarchal empire that "was founded on the theft of life from the racialized and feminized poor" (p. xvi), asks how this political-social-economic system could be bent toward a humanitarian good (p. xv), and her journey to discover the answer starts!

In the first chapter, Hulsether's main argument is centered on criticizing "fair trade" as one of the capitalist reform projects. She questions the truth behind the narratives that shape these projects, such as the historiography of Ten Thousand Villages as the first fair trade chain in North America and the Overseas Needlework and Crafts Project. This project was embarked on by a Mennonite missionary named Edna Ruth Byler. When she traveled to Puerto Rico a year after the end of World War II, she encountered serious deprivation and decided to provide opportunities for local women to increase their income. She thought about holding embroidery lessons and selling needlework crafts in a bigger market. As a

result, the Overseas Needlework and Crafts Project was born and established outposts in different places such as Puerto Rico, Jordan, Jerusalem, Hong Kong, and Haiti, where urgent humanitarian needs were tied with a high demand for indigenous and locally produced textiles (p. 32). Hulsether argues how these narratives emphasize the good personal intentions of the missionaries and the virtue of their projects. Moreover, by emphasizing multicultural tolerance, care, and solidarity, this storytelling facilitates neocolonial power and persuades mass consumer culture. She concludes that this historiography “can morph into quasi-apologetics for respectful occupation, sensitive colonialism, and humanitarian capitalism” (p. 45). Hulsether believes that capitalist humanitarian projects like fair trade change the categories of occupier and occupied into categories of consumer and producer and is a way to preserve capitalism by working with, rather than against, free markets.

“How can we reveal what is really going on with the production conditions?” “What is the real provenance of this commodity?” These are questions that Hulsether asks in the second chapter. She argues that through fair trade, producers endeavor to revive the commodity for a global labor justice project and indicates that consumers are not aware of commodities and their origins, where they are built on abuse, exploitation, and slavery.

In the third and fourth chapters, Hulsether discusses lending programs, microfinance institutions, and pioneers such as Accion International and Finca International. She defines *microfinance* as the mechanism American capitalist hegemony used to reproduce its ideology. She illustrates the claims of ads and images that microfinance projects can lead to financial inclusion in underdeveloped countries, and through these projects, the life of the poor could be “beyond war, poverty, and the migrant train.” Hulsether points out that although humanitarian finance seems “a shiny appeal to diversity” that promises to decrease racial capitalism, it is not a way to empower people excluded from free market prosperity (p. 108). In contrast, it could be a “technique for disciplining the erratic behaviors of the poor” (p. 92).

In the fifth chapter, Hulsether explains another aspect of capitalism that has drawn criticism, the imposition of Western man as a universal subject. She argues that the secular modernity project incorporates every difference into its totality and asks to what extent other groups such as women, brown and Black people, indigenous people, queer people, immigrants, children, and disabled people can “imagine, desire, and pursue intersubjective freedom” (p. 140). She asks, “What if the people whom capitalist humanitarians seek to serve do not acquiesce?” “What if they prefer not to be cast as the next mass-produced stars of neocolonial development?” (p. 135). Then she argues about the forced and imposed urge of capitalist humanitarian projects for information, which helps them to plan for future projects. For instance, she considers documents generated by funding organizations, such as grant proposals, annual reports, budget statements, historical archives, etc. (p. 142), as possible tools to intervene and for coercive inclusion. The significant point she mentions is that most of this data focuses on the populations that capitalist humanitarian reform chooses as its primary focus: “women and girls in the global South” (p. 143).

In the sixth chapter, we read Hulsether's narrative of traveling to western Guatemala, which is called a "poverty tour" and a "social-action-adventure tour." She discusses how microfinance institutions determine three criteria of "talent, accountability, and positive attitude" as an alternative credit score for poor people (p. 163). However, "the command to hope can be a tall order when poverty, vigilante violence, environmental catastrophe, and a selectively absent state are the stuff of everyday life," as she describes.

Hulsether's book ends with questions about the possibility of change and to what extent critique should be promising and constructive. As she points out, "historical narrative sets a foundation for future moral action." As a result, Lucia Hulsether brings her deep scholarly knowledge with accessible storytelling and honest internal monologues to provide a profound historical narrative of capitalism. Hulsether's despair and pessimism toward the current situation, which reflects throughout the whole book, do not alter her strong will for change. This despair and pessimism could be a turning point for confronting a real history and ultimately lead to hope for change and moral actions through philanthropy.

The strength of *Capitalist Humanitarianism* lies in the combination of rich theoretical perspectives and dozens of ethnographic case studies. This thought-provoking volume is recommended for those who are seeking to know how "historical deliberation shapes the trajectory of capitalist humanitarianism" and why capitalist humanitarian projects fail to bring equality and justice. Although Hulsether presents these arguments based on the countries of Latin America, these issues also could be pondered by Muslim scholars whose research is focused on colonial politics in Islamic countries. Furthermore, *Capitalist Humanitarianism* provides insightful knowledge for scholars and students interested in understanding philanthropy's meaning and learning about its responsibilities and promises, defending philanthropy against its recent criticisms, and improving and supporting it for its inherent values.