

New Charity Economy Through the Lens of Affective Statehood

Volunteering for Food Banks and Social Supermarkets in Austria

As in many countries across the globe, food banks and social supermarkets have been crucial in Austria for quite some time, especially since the 2000s. The debates about this phenomenon address food waste and sustainability as well as poverty and food security. Particularly with regard to the risk of poverty, food banks and social supermarkets have gained importance since the Corona crisis, the war in Ukraine and – related to this – the rapidly rising inflation. As an effect, ever more people are in need of offers from food charity institutions. At the same time, food banks and social supermarkets are also reaching their limits, partly because they, too, need to manage rising energy costs as well as the dropping of food donations.

So far, this topic has been hardly researched in the Austrian context. Our research project applies, for the first time, state theory and affect theory in order to engage with the widely ignored role of volunteers and their self-images in Austria. More precisely, the project, first, takes up debates about the so-called “new charity economy” (Kessl et al.) which analyzes the relation between expanding food charity institutions and current transformations of the welfare state. After all, activating volunteers to donate their (spare) time to support people considered “needy” contributes to close gaps that have emerged from welfare state restructuring. Second, proposing the notion of affective statehood, the project argues that this activation of citizens for volunteer work is also successful because it relies on mobilizing feelings such as compassion and solidarity. The project combines affect theory and intersectional feminist approaches to research this dynamic. Volunteering in the social sector has always been a gendered issue, making women and their presumed qualities such as empathy and care an unpaid resource for the welfare state. At the same time, intersectional feminist approaches have crucially contributed to better understanding the entanglement of politics, state, and feelings.

Against this background, the project explores volunteers’ motivations to engage in food banks and social supermarkets. The goal is to investigate how volunteers perceive, appropriate or even rework state demands, and the kind of feelings that play a role within this context. For this purpose, the project develops a mixed-methods approach that combines exploratory expert interviews, narrative interviews with volunteers, photo-elicitation, and a (small-scale) ethnography in order to examine the perception of affective modes of mobilization in relation to current welfare state restructuring.