

A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa.
By Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi+280. \$35.00.

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Few books can claim to address a social problem involving billions of dollars with millions of lives hanging in the balance, but Swidler and Watkins's *A Fraught Embrace* does just that. Dissecting the role of foreign altruists and local brokers in aid efforts to stem the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa generally, and Malawi more specifically, this book makes a compelling sociological contribution to the study of foreign aid—a field of research more often reserved for economists and international development studies scholars. Swidler and Watkins turn a nearly 20-year research engagement on these issues in Malawi into a revealing ethnography of foreign aid to combat AIDS that introduces readers to the many actors, aims, and approaches involved in these efforts.

They begin by introducing the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and development in Malawi. Next, they turn to the key players in both the global and local contexts: the altruists (institutional and individual) and brokers (cosmopolitan/national, district, and local/interstitial) who awkwardly negotiate myriad clashing “fantasies” to translate their competing aims and priorities into reality. It is in this clash that we find the titular “fraught embrace” in which altruists “long” for the right broker to connect them with deserving project beneficiaries in the village and brokers who “pine” for altruists from whom they can derive livelihoods and enduring patronage. Though the romantic embrace metaphor might rub some readers the wrong way, Swidler and Watkins's focus on the gaps in understanding between altruists and brokers is its richest contribution.

The book then turns from the actors to the aims and approaches of AIDS altruism. Here, readers learn of the discordance among altruists and brokers over many issues on which they work (stigma, orphans, women's empowerment, and harmful cultural practices), in approaches to address the epidemic (training, training, and more training!), and on how they measure what they have achieved (performance monitoring and evaluation). Chapters 7–10 weave a convincing narrative of how altruists and brokers never seem to mean or expect the same thing when discussing these aims and approaches. Even the Malawian brokers share widely divergent understandings of the aid industry and its role in fighting the epidemic, depending on which organizations they work for, whether they are urban elites or in the village, and where they are in the hierarchical “aid chain” Swidler and Watkins describe.

These many disagreements and misunderstandings leave the authors “disheartened by the workings of the AIDS enterprise” (p. 204). In response, they conclude by admonishing the aid industry (large and small) to try to better

know and improve relationships with the brokers upon whom they rely and to do more to understand the local social and economic consequences of aid efforts. These conclusions may not come as a surprise to those familiar with the aid literature and its consistent refrain of prioritizing local needs over the designs of distant aid agencies.

One of the most intriguing qualities of Swidler and Watkins's book is its reliance on rich and diverse sources of ethnographic data including everything from interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of policy/project documents to their deft use of third-party ethnographic journals dating from 1998 onward. From this trove of data, they glean some of their most interesting findings regarding the views and experiences of the local brokers in the aid process as they walk the tightrope of balancing donor and villager demands and expectations.

While much in the book will not be news to scholars of aid, the most original contribution of the study is its exploration of the different levels of brokers in Malawi and the varied priorities and career pathways. Very few previous studies of the international aid industry have taken seriously the lives, career trajectories, and aspirations of the local agents involved in the delivery of development assistance. Swidler and Watkins provide a detailed picture of the complex relationships these brokers have with aid altruists and others in their society and underscore the frequent precarity and frustrations of the broker livelihood.

This book has portions that will appeal to sociologists of development, culture, and gender, and it will have an interdisciplinary reach to students of international development and foreign aid more broadly. Like all research, however, the book has its limitations.

First, as a reader coming to this book primarily from a foreign aid perspective, I found it more disconnected from some of the larger debates in the aid literature than I had anticipated, resulting in a sometimes naïve interpretation of some aspects of the aid industry. For example, the authors' interpretation of all aid industry actors as altruists is sure to grate on many aid scholars who would argue that aid—even to combat the AIDS epidemic—is rooted much more so in blatant donor self-interest than it is in any sort of altruism.

Second, and related to this, the book seems to pay less attention to the broader global inequalities and power imbalances in which these aid efforts are located than it could have. Aid, even if altruistic, is an inherent reflection of North/South power imbalance, inequality, and exploitation, and Swidler and Watkins might have done more to situate their study in a framework that addressed these power imbalances beyond the context of dependence or patron/client relations, in which the authors show how donors/altruists have money/goods that brokers/beneficiaries want.

Finally, as alluded to above, the authors' romance metaphor of the "fraught embrace" sometimes reads as patronizing or trivializing to both the altruists and the brokers involved. Perhaps more suited to the individual ad hoc altruists and the accidental brokers upon which they often rely, Swidler and Watkins's earlier article-length treatment ("Working Misunderstand-

ings: Donors, Brokers, and Villagers in Africa's AIDS Industry," *Population and Development Review* 38 [2013]:197–218) of this subject, which they framed instead as "working misunderstandings," rings truer—especially in the context of the institutional altruists and the national/district elites.

Uprising of the Fools: Pilgrimage as Moral Protest in Contemporary India. By Vikash Singh. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 239. \$90.00 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper).

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What does a pilgrimage in northern India have to do with moral performance, resistance to neoliberalism, and the sociological theory of religion? According to Vikash Singh's *Uprising of the Fools*, an ethnography of the annual Kanwar Yatra pilgrimage, quite a lot. By the end of this book, Singh has covered many miles on foot alongside countless pilgrims but has also extensively engaged Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Lacan, to name a few. This is not so much a book for sociologists of religion, something Singh is fully aware of given his purposeful avoidance of disciplinary literature, but a provocative attempt to highlight and theorize popular religious practice for social scientists interested in the psyche, the state, and the economy. In my view, this insightful book is an important contribution to an emerging critical project within the sociology of religion and would be useful for graduate seminars on theory, religion, culture, and even stratification.

Singh joins the pilgrimage to carry holy water from the Ganga River in Hardwar to regional Śiva shrines—something that can fairly be described as exhausting and painful for the millions of *bhola* (fools) who do so annually. In explicit contrast to the "Kantian, Cartesian, cognitive bases of Western thought" (p. 29), which might query the religious ideals and identity projects of his fellow pilgrims, Singh approaches the pilgrimage as an independent religious space that allows pilgrims to express economic and relational anxieties as a way of forming their moral capacity to reliably address those anxieties in their normal lives. Or, better put, the pilgrimage creates a "performative relational ethos . . . against the force of a hegemonic discourse of exchange and self-interest" (p. 163), which frames pilgrims' ordinary lives. This pilgrimage is a social drama in the lineage of Victor Turner and Edith Turner, but Singh widens that theoretical lens in order to focus on the external social realities that influence the pilgrimage's emotional life and collective meaning. Always in the background to pilgrims' lives and Singh's theorization are the rampant neoliberalism that destabilizes life for the majority of Indians and the state-produced religious nationalism that misuses Hindu popular beliefs. In pilgrimage, the fools find recognition, both social and spiritual.