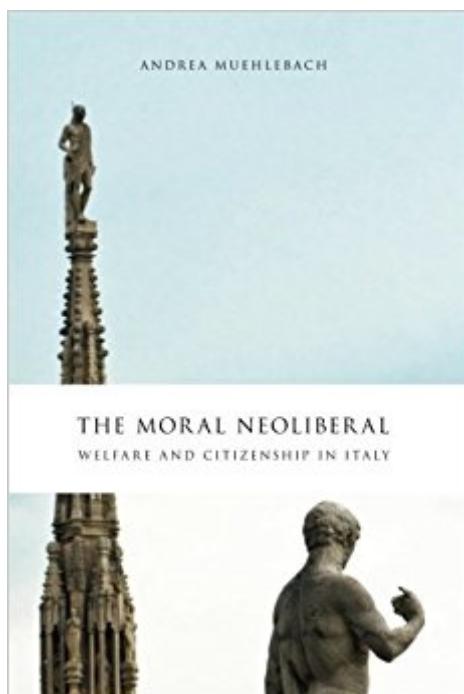


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# The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare And Citizenship In Italy (Chicago Studies In Practices Of Meaning)



## Synopsis

Morality is often imagined to be at odds with capitalism and its focus on the bottom line, but in *The Moral Neoliberal* morality is shown as the opposite: an indispensable tool for capitalist transformation. Set within the shifting landscape of neoliberal welfare reform in the Lombardy region of Italy, Andrea Muehlebach tracks the phenomenal rise of voluntarism in the wake of the state's withdrawal of social service programs. Using anthropological tools, she shows how socialist volunteers are interpreting their unwaged labor as an expression of social solidarity, with Catholic volunteers thinking of theirs as an expression of charity and love. Such interpretations pave the way for a mass mobilization of an ethical citizenry that is put to work by the state. Visiting several sites across the region, from Milanese high schools to the offices of state social workers to the homes of the needy, Muehlebach mounts a powerful argument that the neoliberal state nurtures selflessness in order to cement some of its most controversial reforms. At the same time, she also shows how the insertion of such an anticapitalist narrative into the heart of neoliberalization can have unintended consequences.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*, Andrea Muehlebach invites readers to undo their assumptions about neoliberalism by showing how an ethical turn brings care, love, and the sacred deeply within the fold of its thought and practice. In her intellectually aggressive dismantlings, labyrinthine analytics appear straightforward, and in her lush prose, the contemporary

becomes sensually tangible, gently hoisted right up to our faces. . . . Deftly theoretical and bountifully ethnographic, this outstanding book inaugurates new modes of inquiry and reengineers our thinking on these important problems. (Noel Molaf American Ethnologist) "Relevant beyond the Italian case, Muehlebach's book is as much a contribution to the anthropology of neoliberal humanitarian actors and the workings, tensions and ambivalences of their ethical journeys, as it is a brilliant example of an anthropology of the state from below, analyzing citizens' subjectification and their participation in state-making. Much more is needed of this kind of anthropology in and of Europe, especially at this historical moment, when many European states actively produce their absence through politics of austerity. To ethnographically fathom which forms of care are produced in the absence of the state, by whom, through which kinds of social imaginaries and who is left behind are pressing research questions, ones which should take inspiration and guidance from Muehlebach's book." (Janina Kehr Social Anthropology) "In a book that is both carefully documented and beautifully conceptualized, Andrea Muehlebach has explored a question of great relevance for contemporary debates about the forms of governmentality and subjectivation associated with the rise of neoliberalism: the new 'ethical citizenship,' which substitutes public systems of social security with voluntary forms of collective caretaking. Running contrary to some influential recent analyses of 'self-entrepreneurship' as a modality of voluntary servitude in a society entirely governed by market rules, she does not, however, contribute to the complacent image of the new mass consumption society. Rather, she describes a social dynamic of great indetermination, both ethically and politically." Her inquiry, focusing on a famous working class municipality in the periphery of Milan, where catholic and communist solidarities are now assuming new functions, also provides a fascinating insight into the history of contemporary Italy, explaining why it remains a 'laboratory' of social change which has world-wide significance. (Etienne Balibar, University of California, Irvine 2012-04-25) "As has been recently remarked by Mathieu Hilgers, 'while anthropology is a latecomer to the field, anthropological studies of neoliberalism are now displaying great theoretical and empirical creativity.' A convincing demonstration comes from this thoughtful book by Andrea Muehlebach, whose very title looks provocative and paradoxical since it is almost axiomatic to regard neoliberalism as antithetical to morality. . . . Very incisively written and clearly argued even when it tackles complex questions, this book has the great merit of showing that [in the words of Muehlebach] 'the contemporary neoliberal order works to produce more than rational, utilitarian, instrumental subjects,' and that the privatization of care it promotes is able to

draws ambiguously but effectively on highly different ethical practices, not least those of leftist men and women who are openly critical of capitalism and neoliberalism. (Pier Paolo Viazza Anthropolos) “Recounting the vicissitudes of Milanese Italians who have become gradually more involved in helping unprivileged people, Muehlebach magisterially illustrates the experience of individuals, collectives, a civil society and, in part, the postmodern condition of the West. . . . considering the lack of sociological and political imagination that seems to characterize the current political discourse inside and outside Italy, Muehlebach, with the post-Keynesian, post-welfarist idea of ethical citizenship, must be credited for a very powerful effort to enrich the debate. (Marco Briziarelli Journal of Modern Italian Studies) “This book makes the provocative argument that neoliberal capitalism, although it has been unjust and disruptive in Italy as elsewhere, has also embraced a new kind of social solidarity based on volunteer care-giving. Dr. Muehlebach takes us inside the daily practices of retiree volunteers caring for frail elderly in a declining factory town near Milan. Through her keen eye and beautiful prose, we discover how they differentiate what they are doing from charity; how they define themselves as morally emancipated; how they understand concepts like solidarity, pity, giving, compassion, commitment, materialism, and heart. Her attention is an eye-opener for all of us trapped in easy judgment and provides a study with wide implications beyond the Italian case. (Jane Schneider, City University of New York 2011-11-28) “The Moral Neoliberal is an outstanding book addressing with great precision and authority a decisive series of transformations unfolding in Italy and, by extension, across Europe. The ethnographic narrative is vibrant, the argumentation is crisp, and the analysis is persuasive. Andrea Muehlebach’s investigation is premised on a forceful rejection of the conventional understanding of contemporary social order that is awkwardly and imprecisely glossed as neoliberal. She provides an alternative architecture of a moral neoliberalism populated by engaged, reflexive subjects who are experimenting with the imperatives of what she terms ethical citizenship. The results are breathtaking. --Douglas Holmes, State University of New York (Douglas Holmes 2011-10-17) “In this astute ethnography of voluntarism in a working-class town in the de-industrialized periphery of Milan, Andrea Muehlebach demonstrates convincingly that contemporary neoliberal reforms produce not only rational, instrumental subjects but simultaneously compassionate, ethical citizens with deep moral commitments. Her acute and nuanced analysis of the pedagogical techniques employed in volunteer training classes and the quotidian practices and discourses of volunteers, shows how unremunerated voluntary labor, construed as intimate, compassionate acts of gifting outside the realm of commodified market exchange, is cultivated and

managed by legal regimes and administrative policies just as the securities of the modern Italian welfare state are being dismantled. (Sylvia Yanagisako, Stanford University 2012-04-25)

Andrea Muehlebach is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto.

Insightful. Original. Careful. Touching. And, very well written. It shows a great breadth of literature and reading on the part of the author, well beyond the 'borders' of anthropology field. A must-read for all those interested in the intersection of health, economics, anthropology, ageing, social sciences, Italy, and Europe.

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