



Mary Mostafanezhad, 2014

## Volunteer Tourism: Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times

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Popular discourse surrounding the booming industry of Volunteer tourism ('voluntourism') locates the activity at the nexus of tourism and development. This has created polarised positions among both academics and development practitioners as to whether the activity contributes to the development of host communities or destructively perpetuates stereotypes of the 'Other', thus rendering invisible the structures of inequality. In this work, Mary Mostafanezhad attempts to locate voluntourism within broader geographical, political and economic processes, theorizing the activity as an articulation of globalization and neoliberal capitalism. As the author herself notes, the book goes beyond narrow debates as to whether voluntourism is 'good' or 'bad'; rather it follows Vrasti's (2012) suggestion that we disregard the development impact of voluntourism, and instead to focus on the central question of what the growth of the volunteer tourism industry says about broader cultural trends in contemporary western societies.

Like many other studies in this growing field, this book focuses on the perceptions of Northern volunteer tourists of their experiences of engagement with communities in the developing world. In this case, the focus is on volunteer tourism among three NGOs in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The Introduction (Ch 1) outlines the theoretical framework; Ch 2 aims to position volunteer tourism historically; Ch 3 explores the site in Northern Thailand; Ch 4 advances the notion that volunteer tourism is a sort of social movement; Ch 5 discusses the politics of sentimentality in the exchanges that take place; Ch 6 explores how the activity contributes to cross-cultural exchange that could possibly be personally and socially transformative. The conclusion proposes that volunteer tourism represents the beginnings of a new social movement, albeit within a neoliberal context.

A key contribution of the book is that it presents local perspectives, which are woven through the text. This allows local voices to shine through as hosts of Northern volunteers discuss their

experiences and perceptions of those who visit and work in their communities, and their own conceptions of development. In adopting a post-colonial lens, and to some extent critiquing volunteer tourism as both neocolonial practice and neo-imperial discourse, Mostafanezhad avoids the usual pitfall of attempting to speak for the subaltern.

While the study aims for an interdisciplinary approach, its main strengths lie in cultural studies, theories of emotion and body-politics, but not, for this reviewer at least, in understanding the articulation between development and civil society in a neoliberal epoch. There are three main issues with this book: history, theory and analysis.

Mostafanezhad's presentation of the historical roots of voluntourism does not engage in literature on development theory and practice in a robust manner. This is unhelpful when attempting to locate voluntourism within an historical analysis of development theory and practice. Indeed the discussion of the intersection of post-WWII secular volunteering embodied by the Peace Corps, and the rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) lacks nuance as it largely ignores other significant geopolitical influences, such as the end of the Cold War, and ideological influences, such as Robert Putnam's (1993; 1995) concept of social capital, or the extensive work of Lester Salamon (1994) on the economic value of volunteering. Both of these theorists have informed and shaped development practice broadly, and specifically how volunteering is understood. More significantly, Mostafanezhad does

not mention the importance of the 1992 Rio Summit, which integrated economic development into the discourse of development (Hall 2007: 112-114; Harrison 2008: 851), and which contributed to tourism becoming linked to poverty alleviation (Harrison 2008: 852; Goodwin 2009: 92).

Further, there is fleeting engagement with existing scholarship examining the relationship between tourism and economic development, and especially with the promise of pro-poor tourism (PPT) to make a significant contribution to the eradication of poverty. This omission is of particular note as the PPT rhetoric was taken up by community-based organizations (CBOs) in an attempt to attract tourists to their communities to spend money. As the author notes, many CBOs first emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s, but the context is not presented. It was the call for a New International Economic Order in developing countries that promoted the growth in small-scale projects that involved a high degree of participation by the local population, i.e., solidarity tours (Pearce 1992:16).

Despite describing the activity of volunteer tourism as one of consumption, the book fails to convincingly recount the historical roots of this activity within the private sector. It also places too much emphasis on NGOs practicing alternative development as the counter to state-led development, thus creating a false dichotomy between state-led development and locally-based development. This distinction is unhelpful, as in practice states remain deeply involved

in development and have not vacated the field, despite the rise of neoliberal ideology and the preference for contracting out of services, often to NGOs. The argument that the development of alternative tourism fills the vacuum caused by the retreat of the state from engagement with development practice is particularly weak as it neglects to discuss the wide variety of actors that engage in humanitarian and development work, including states, civil society groups, for-profit companies, social enterprises and the myriad faith based operations. In arguing that voluntourism is a form of alternative development, Mostafanezhad misrepresents the origins of the very phenomenon she is investigating. Likely this error stems from the importance ascribed to the globalization of mass media as a motivating tool for humanitarian and development action, in particular the expression of humanitarian compassion.

Commercial tourism operators based in the Global North position the activity of voluntourism as an alternative to mass tourism, and market tourism packages with volunteer experiences in disadvantaged communities as having a positive impact on host communities (Coghlan and Noakes 2012; Guttentag 2012; Smith and Font 2014; Tomazos 2010). Scholars such as Wright (2013: 240–241) have argued that the packaging of voluntourism experiences, increased accessibility to information, and links to other tourism sectors, have led volunteer tourism to be considered a ‘mass niche’ of the tourism market (Callanan and Thomas 2005), not as a

form of alternative development. Mostafanezhad’s uncritical positioning of voluntourism as outside of the mainstream tourism industry is thus highly problematic, and largely due to a conceptually loose understanding of neoliberalism which fails to interrogate the changing relations between state, market and civil society in any real depth. For example, the author advances the idea that the rise of volunteer tourism—along with corporate social responsibility, the US Peace Corps and ethical consumption—are expressions of soft power that together contribute to a ‘collaborative project of Western international hegemony’ (p. 32). In this view CSR is understood as an attempt to normalise neoliberal economic rationality, through companies embedding neoliberal rules and scripts, just as the moral neoliberal individual’s economic choices supposedly reflect ethical concerns about their world. Instead of critically unpacking the tensions between pro-social (Scherer and Palazzo 2011) and neoclassical (Dubink 2004), conceptualisations of CSR, the author adopts a specific and flawed interpretation. Historically companies have engaged in social and public issues to varying degrees, and in the past, such activities were referred to as ‘patronism’ or ‘welfare capitalism’, so this type of corporate behavior is not specific to contemporary neoliberalism.

The limited contextualization of the historical relationship between voluntourism and development ideology, and trends in development practice, is a significant limitation of this book. The

assumptions and conflations presented were particularly frustrating for a development scholar and practitioner. Largely ignoring development approaches that concern the use of the market to alleviate poverty, especially those which intersect with the emergence of voluntourism, is a significant oversight in a book concerned with the way neoliberalism shapes North-South engagement. That aside, the book makes a significant contribution to the literature on volunteer tourism as cultural practice, and in particular provides a view from those being helped by the increasing number of Northerner volunteers who want to 'make a difference'.

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