

Dr Volunteer and Mr Tourist: Lifting the Guilt off Volunteer Tourism

Volunteer tourists are not superhuman, they do not accomplish amazing feats and they most certainly are not going to save the world. Far from it; they have been described by the media as selfish, validation-seeking, insensitive neo-colonialists that do more harm than good. A respected newspaper went as far as to advise volunteer tourists to stay home instead, where they can do no harm to anyone. In academic circles there is a similar story with several authors highlighting what is wrong with volunteer tourism as a phenomenon, tourism activity, marketing phenomenon or postmodern pilgrimage, while others hail it as a new hope that will help the tourism industry to atone for all its past sins.

This author has found himself on both camps at different times. As an idealistic PhD student I would get carried away by the optimistic writings about de-commoditized tourist experiences and then later I started to criticize the irresistible rise of volunteer tourism as a commercialization ‘tour de force’; an entrepreneur’s dream that makes simultaneous demands on people’s time, effort and money. Just think about it, the prevailing paradigm of work, effort and money prescribes that people work to get paid, or work without pay, but paying to work is an oxymoron that people generally have had a difficult time wrapping their head around. I remember the reaction of a local dinner lady (closest description) at a children’s refuge in Mexico: “...what do you mean you paid to work in my kitchen?” I explained how I registered with an organization, booked a flight and arrived there to work; she looked at me and said: “...wow your life must be so easy”. Her words are still ringing in my ears. What was my response? Silence... What could I say? That I used my credit card to book the flight? That I had to travel economy? That I chose not to go to Rhodes, but I chose to work in her kitchen instead? Nothing would have alleviated the feeling that my life, in her eyes, was too easy. To her, working her ten-hour shift was for sustenance, while for me helping was leisure. After my shift I went out for drinks with my fellow volunteers, while she went back home to take care of her children. We were worlds apart.

On the same evening I had a chat with some of my fellow volunteers. The common feeling was one of unease, but we all quickly pointed out that there is nothing we can do for Anna (the dinner lady), and that we were there after all. We could have chosen Cancun or Ibiza for our summer holidays, but we all decided to work at a children’s refuge instead. In our eyes and the eyes of our friends back home we were these amazing, unselfish individuals that sacrificed

their time and effort to help unprivileged children. As for the locals, even though they did not understand how we paid to work, they still thought we were helping a good cause. One old lady who sold cold drinks on the same street as the children's refuge would give us a blessing sign, as we went by and would say that we had the sign of the Madonna. Everyone approved and applauded our efforts. My parents could not stop talking about their son and his trip and they even sponsored part of the trip for me to go across the world and help poor children. This pride and admiration says a lot about the underpinning philosophy of volunteer tourism, as an expression of altruistic or pro-social service. In this chapter I will get a chance to return to the phenomenon of altruism and how it applies to volunteer tourism. But for now let's just agree that helping children in an impoverished area is catholically received positively and most people would agree that it is a good thing.

So here we have a tourism phenomenon and product/service that a) makes demands on people's time, money and effort, b) is generally perceived as a good thing, c) makes the customers who purchase it feel good about themselves and their choices; no wonder volunteer tourism brokers have mushroomed in recent years. Add to that the limited risk and costs involved, given the fact that volunteer tourists, in most cases, pay for their flights, insurance coverage, accommodation and living expenses, and you can see why getting involved in volunteer tourism is a very lucrative business opportunity. As we are going to see in this chapter, from its early humble beginnings, volunteer tourism has evolved into a bone fide tourism sector which has recently exploded. We will view volunteer tourism as both a hybrid of work and leisure, but also as a hybrid of a bottom line business venture and a charitable enterprise. We will also see how the vast proliferation has led to ambiguity, ambiguity to confusion and confusion to a very lucrative and still mostly unregulated market, where there is room for both heroes and villains; success and failure.

Each participant or stakeholder, 'hero' or 'villain' in their own way influences our understanding of what volunteer tourism is, and who the volunteer tourists are. Durkheim would have called this the common human conscience of volunteer tourism which is gradually shaped as all volunteers' journeys are shaped by a common motif, a volunteer monomyth of call to adventure, adventure and return to normal life. Are volunteer tourists heroes? Are they villains? Maybe they are just human. What must not be overlooked though is the fact that beyond labels volunteer tourism has already had its effect on the lives of locals in more than 150 countries. If we only take into account the social capital of networks and relationships that have been created over time, the contribution of volunteer tourism is invaluable. In simple

words volunteer tourism has brought people around the world closer, especially young people who have worked side by side with locals and other volunteers on worthwhile projects.

In some cases this has drawn criticism as researchers have found that volunteers undercut local workers in the job market, given the subsidies provided to local organizations or businesses to 'hire' volunteers. Yet, we should not throw away the baby with the bathwater by dismissing volunteer tourism for stealing jobs from the locals or for creating jobs or projects when there is no need for them. Instead we should put all our effort and research into educating future volunteer tourists on how to make the right choice, but also perhaps into lobbying for universal regulations that would require brokers to have proof of need for their active projects and also a means of calculating their contribution to the projects they serve. Is regulation the way forward? Perhaps...but over-regulation would lead to total commoditization of volunteer tourism that would erase whatever is left of its early ethos and spirit. Can volunteer tourism survive without regulation? It is completely up to the people who are currently making a living out of volunteer tourism. Of course there is nothing wrong with this enlightened instrumentality, provided that they also serve real causes and their strategic planning is for the long term, with an eye on sustainability. All stakeholders need to understand the symbiotic relationship between the brokers and the projects they espouse to serve. Too many liberties taken, will lead to a possible backlash, which in this time and age of social media would prove catastrophic for the business side of the brokers' activities. In turn the demise of the brokers will inevitably mean less resources and support for projects and causes.

Volunteer tourism hinges on the assumption that if problems faced by communities are by nature divergent, they must also have many solutions. If a problem can have many solutions, then it can also have a diversity of people with a diversity of experience working out these solutions. Volunteer tourism creates the social capital as it brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds and expertise all working on a common goal and in a variety of settings. Given the problems that volunteers are called upon to help with, it does not come as a surprise that participants are affected by their work and their experience. In their study on volunteer tourists on a children's home in Mexico, Tomazos and Butler (2012:183) raised the issue of the 'recycling' of volunteers and possible attachment issues between the volunteers and the projects and people they served on. Many participants mentioned the feeling of guilt and loss upon departure, realising this would be the last time they would see the children. It is this attachment that brings forth another paradox of VT. It always seems simpler to be charitable if the recipient of one's charity is depersonalised to some extent at least. As humans, different

individuals respond to individual images of human suffering as they empathize with other human beings (Hoffman, 2000).

Whatever the case a considerable number of people respond to this emotion by writing cheques, passing on their bank details, making contributions on line in order to alleviate the suffering of others (as depicted in the media). As these contributions are made people expect that the agents of their good intentions (charities etc.) will distribute their donation wisely and fairly. By the time the money has left one's bank account people feel content, satisfied in the knowledge that they did their part to help others and they can, with a clear consciousness, get back to their own lives, even though, at the back of their minds at least, the fear that their contribution will not be enough and that nothing will change; but hey, at least they did something, unlike others that, unlike them, do not care. There is an interesting reversal of what Marx viewed as commodity fetishism. If commodities are to be consumed as items of pleasure and as confirmation of the identity of the consumer, then the consumers must not think about the labour relations involved in the production of what they are consuming. This of course means that individuals must forget about the social relations which lie behind the commodities they consume. Similarly individuals make their charitable contributions, almost mechanically; they complete the transaction and then they stop worrying about the recipients of their help by repressing and censoring any thought that may make them feel uncomfortable. This willed forgetting (Erdelyi, 1990) is also reinforced by the phenomena of compassion fatigue as many writers, journalists and reviewers have accused the mass media (especially television) of redefining the relationship of audiences with human suffering, by overusing icons of atrocity. According to them, modern visual media generate "moral habituation" in audiences (Zelizer, 2000), or to put it more simply: "You see so much, you no longer notice it, and in seeing more, you may even feel less" (Morris, 1996: 24). To the average individual who does his/her bit every month for charity, suffering is something that just happens to some poor unfortunate souls, in different parts of the world, and their plight is as forgotten as the direct debit that keeps taking money out of one's account sometimes, months after they have stopped caring.

VT brings this suffering closer to the average individual/participant and it individualizes poverty and human suffering. What people back home see as amorphous, collective suffering, volunteers see as the plight of distinct individuals. They put names on these previously anonymous faces they saw on TV. While it is arguably easy to do your duty from afar and forget about it, it is impossible for the volunteer tourists to ignore the life conditions of individuals they interact and spend time with. A new sense of duty prevails, a primitive social

impulse takes over, and as a result, in many cases, volunteers recognise the futility of their efforts and they agonize feeling helpless. No contribution that they can make will help these individuals flourish. No contribution could, in general, take children out of orphanages, bring water to villages, or provide relief to areas hit by catastrophes, and volunteers are fully conscious of this fact. They understand that their efforts will not save the world and that they are probably taking more out of the experience than what they are putting in. Yet, what helps, at least a little, is the knowledge that there are others that care and that they are not alone. It is in this care that volunteers find solace and hope that there will be others to follow and build on what they will leave behind. It is this cycle that gives meaning and purpose to volunteer tourists and the volunteer tourism phenomenon.

Yet, the volunteer tourism industry represents a moral economy because it encompasses the moral implications of marketing tourist experiences using poverty, deprivation, ecological sensitivity (to name a few) as commodities which are effectively bought by and sold to volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourism involves – even before the experience takes place – monetary transactions which expose it to reduce the above phenomena into consumable objects. In the case of volunteer tourism, as the market continuously finds new ways to codify our most inner desires and wishes, it found a way to translate people's wish to help others, or contribute to a cause into a system of monetary exchanges that places a premium on an alternative or even enlightened type of tourist experience- much alike to what happened to ecotourism.

Events have proven that the market will always be a step ahead to assign different values or a premium to any new tourism product, as long as the discourse meets the needs and desires of a marketable niche. In this light, any form of reformed new tourism or volunteer tourism is bound to become commoditised and thus 'undesirable' or 'harmful' as traditional approaches dictate that commoditized volunteer is bad and non-commoditized is good. But is this approach helpful? Zelizer (2002, p.276) explains that "the social world organises around competing, incompatible principles: sentiment and rationality" [...] "intimate social relations and economic transactions" (Zelizer, 2005, p.22). These principles are said to operate in separate spheres and hostile worlds, that is "distinct arenas for economic activity and intimate relations" (Zelizer, 2005, p.20), and if the two worlds come into contact with each other this will inevitably result in mutual moral contamination and disorder. Can helping others be treated like any other commercial tourist experience, or should it remain in a separate realm? Of course, volunteering is included in the intimate, compassion-driven and social sphere, however

when this is transformed into a 'product' or service which is sold in the marketplace it enters the rational and economic sphere.

Debra Satz while recognizing the importance and value of the market she argues the importance of drawing a line in the sand in terms of what things might be bought and sold. She expresses her concern with prohibiting what she calls 'noxious markets' which take advantage of the economically vulnerable and/or the ill-informed. To her eyes noxious markets are nothing but the result of unequal social standings and imbalanced power structures and the market should not be taking advantage of the vulnerable individuals and essentially there are goods, that by their very nature should not become commodities. Essentially there are goods that by their very nature should not become commodities, such goods, according to Walzer (1983) are, what he terms as social goods, and they should remain in the sphere of sentiments and not on the one of commerce. There is a different lens in terms of how goods are valued by the market and how by different individuals. This incompatibility thesis recognises that commodification is inimical to intrinsic values that can be associated with some goods and as such the market should not assign values to them.

In her 1996 work on contested commodities Margaret Jane Radin cuts the Gordian knot of the two spheres arguing that a good can be incompletely commodified if the values and ethos crucially associated with that good have survived commodification. What Radin alludes to then is that perhaps the act of a good becoming a commodity is not inherently good or bad, but it hinges on the outcomes of this commodification. This view has its roots in the pragmatism school of thought and what philosophers may call "non-ideal justice", or what economists term "reform" or "second best" ethics. This ethical stance seeks to improve a present situation, rather than pursuing an idealistic optimum. Satz herself recognised the futility of trying to erect barriers and arguing that goods can be corrupted through sale, as such objections collapse when put under dialectical pressure. Instead what is more important is to focus on preventing extreme harm and vulnerability outcomes that are of course context dependent. This approach is inherently pragmatic and accidentalist rather than essentialist insofar as the wrongness of selling a particular good is contingent on the social conditions. These social conditions and different outcomes may dictate the formation of value judgements, and not a set of pre-existing assumptions. In this light volunteer tourism should not be dichotomised into commodified and decommodified tourist experiences and seek ways to reform the industry, or ban forms of projects; instead we should view the exchanges that take place (monetary or other) through

volunteer tourism, as an important part of providing a service to others; no exchanges, no income- no income no support for projects.

The crux of the argument then squarely lies in the outcomes; do these exchanges bring the desirable outcomes, or not. Debating commodified and de-commodified forms of volunteer tourism is a Sisyphean task and one that disorientates from the real goal that should be to deliver volunteer tourism that could make a positive difference to the lives of the local recipients. In the dawn of volunteer tourism the focus was the local recipients, but for marketing reasons the volunteer took certain stage with the known consequences. Accepting volunteer tourism as incompletely commoditized will accept the commercial side of volunteer tourism, as a necessity, lift the guilt that haunts the industry and focus on what really matters, and that is the local recipients.

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