

***“The White Man’s Burden” Politics of Volunteer Tourism***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores critically the political economy of volunteer tourism along the lines of a ‘white savior complex’ and argues that the meanings, practices, and policies of volunteer tourism development continue to be informed by colonial thought, resulting in disempowerment of the rural populations in the Third World and making volunteer tourism an avenue to exert power and exploit the Orient as the West’s pleasure periphery. This study contributes to tourism social science research by trying to understand how ‘race’ (white privilege) has shaped systems of inclusion and exclusion through ideological and epistemological practices and as such critically analyzing different aspects of racialized discourses in volunteer tourism.

Keywords: Volunteer tourism, political economy, white savior complex, colonialism, race, feminization.

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## **Introduction**

This study argues that volunteer tourism is akin to neo-colonialism, and further shows the commonality between the two concepts in terms of romantic ideals of feminization of the Third World by the developed countries, in the past and once again, in the present times. The similarity between the history of colonization and the current practice of volunteer tourism, and the resulting negative connotations arising from it, are far too significant to be ignored. While majority of volunteer tourism studies have acknowledged the significance of volunteer tourism and challenged conventional understandings of socio-economic change in the Third World, the ways in which ideas about “race” flow through volunteer tourism and development discourses are rarely spoken about. Indeed, development today is a radical and intrusive white endeavour (Biccum, 2011; Duffield, 2005). Moreover, the overall impact of anti-racist contributions by white and non-white tourism scholars to expose and challenge racism embedded in whiteness remains marginal in tourism studies. Indeed, race dynamics are an important factor in volunteer tourism. Then why the invisibility of ‘race’ in volunteer tourism discourses? Kothari (2006, p. 2) asks, “perhaps within a discourse framed around humanitarianism, cooperation and aid, raising ‘race’ is too distracting, disruptive and demanding? Or does the silence of ‘race’ conceal the complicity of development with racialized projects?” This conceptual paper identifies the need for further exploration of the subtle manifestations of racism within volunteer tourism and insists that ‘race’ deserves serious discussion in volunteer tourism research, particularly in this time of changing global order. This study intends to take volunteer tourism research into a different trajectory by arguing on the “white savior complex” and the romantic ideal of feminization of the Third World. In doing so, this paper argues how the relationship between white people and their non-white brothers and sisters in the Third World remains tortured historically. My critique of ‘volunteer tourism development’ is derived from insights from postcolonial theory - particularly from the works of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Spivak and critique of ‘sustainable development’ is derived from the works of Arturo Escobar and Vandana Shiva.

## **The New Civilizing Mission**

The literature on volunteer tourism has virtually no evidence of long-term benefits of volunteer work in the Third World, whereas there is a huge emphasis on the transformative experiences of the volunteers. As Gray and Campbell (2007, p. 464) noted:

“Academic interest in volunteer tourism remains scant, focused primarily on the identities, behaviours, values, motives and personal development of the volunteers... while it is important to understand the volunteers, they represent only one half of the story.”

The travel narratives today abound with the primitiveness of the toured, the enrichment of self of the tourist, and the renewed appreciation of their own lives. A British company website (studential.com, 2011) illustrates this fact while justifying the need for volunteer tourism:

*“More and more people are becoming motivated to go out and do something as the news media daily report on poverty in the developing world. You may find yourself working with people who live in poverty, surrounded by disease, and frequently hungry. You will hopefully return with a great sense of achievement and pride in what you have done for a local community.”*

The dependency of the locals on the Western World is strong, leaving these host countries, which are although now independent, with still little control over their resources and land. The question arises - the purpose of volunteering in the Third World is to *do* good, or to *feel* good? Commentators have argued that if designer clothes and fancy cars signal material status in the West, then volunteer tourists' stories of embracing of poverty and its discomforts signals (almost a spiritual?) superiority of their characters (Zakaria, 2014). Also, in the name of “helping” the less fortunate, volunteer tourism often provides opportunities to take selfies with poor kids as Facebook profile pictures. In a recent article in *The Onion* the author describes sarcastically how a six-day visit to a rural African village can “completely change a woman’s Facebook profile picture.” The article quotes “22-year-old Angela Fisher” who says: “I don’t think my profile photo will ever be the same, not after the experience of taking such incredible pictures with my arms around those small African children’s shoulders.” As Kascak and Dasgupta (2014) opined, “Photography—particularly the habit of taking and posting selfies with local children—is a central component of the voluntourism experience.” Can taking selfies with poor kids be ever justified in making a difference in this world? As Cole (2012) reminds us, “A singer may be innocent; never the song.”



**Fig 2.** Source: Google image

Quite some time ago, Barkham (2006) and recently, Boffey (2011), writing for a major British newspaper (*The Guardian*) criticized the motives of volunteer tourists:

*“Are these the new colonialists? They're the students who go abroad to boost their CVs, have a laugh - and help out in the developing world at the same time. Gap years are having a rough time. Ageing cynics have long declared the term for the rite of passage between school and university refers to the empty space between the ears of over privileged teenagers. Or the chasm between materialistic students dripping with iPods and the impoverished subjects of their misguided*

*charity. This week, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) opined that the "charity tourism" of many year-out programmes was a new form of colonialism. Students who travel to developing countries risk doing more harm than good."*

*"The multi-million pound gap-year industry is in danger of damaging Britain's reputation abroad and raising fears that the west is engaged in a new form of colonialism. Young people planning a gap year should focus on what they can offer their hosts in order to discourage the view that volunteering is merely a new way of exercising power."*

This culture of gap year volunteerism is propelled by the portrayal of Africa in American media and pop culture, as South African activist Zine Magubane claims. She blames, in part, American celebrities:

*"Whether it's Bono shilling for AIDS dollars, Angelina and Madonna toting their African offspring, Gwyneth [Paltrow] and David Bowie declaring they are African, or Matt Damon and George Clooney rallying for Darfur, it appears that a new generation of philanthropists have taken up the 'White Man's Burden'. You would think there were no African think-tanks, no African universities, no African human rights lawyers" (Goffe, 2015, p. 3).*

Gap year volunteerism is just a miniature of the wider problem. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are left with thought - many decades after formal colonialism crumbled, why, still, the West often emerge centrally in discussions about the Third World? Lange, Mahoney, & Hau (2006) have documented that those territories that were the most economically prosperous before colonialism often became the least economically developed after colonialism. Harvard historian Niall Ferguson (2012, p, 57) asks in his book *Civilization*, "In 1412, Europe was a miserable backwater, while the Orient was home to dazzling civilization, so how did the West come to dominate the Rest?" An interesting question to ponder! Another British historian William Dalrymple justified,

*"It is impossible even to consider this motion seriously without noting how far behind the West was for 90 percent of our history...the British went to India to get a bit of action in the Mughal Empire which was then immeasurably richer than anything London, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Milan put together. Britain, with its mastery of cannon and artillery, drained India and the money came to Europe. The might of Britain was built in the 18th and 19th centuries on the ruination of India - where India went from a 23 percent share of the global economy to 4 per cent."*

Dalrymple further clarified how Robert Clive, an "unstable sociopath" who was the first Governor of the British East India Company helped in the plundering of Indian treasures and caused famines due to policies which were disastrous to local Indian farmers. In a similar vein, American historian Will Durant (1930) in his seminal book, *The Case for India*, argued that British colonial rule in India was the organized banditry that financed England's industrial revolution. According to Durant, the British rulers even took over the technology of India as India during that time was flourishing in ship building besides the expertise of making steel and textiles. Indeed, when poet Kalidasa was writing exquisite poems in India, then Europe was busy with

Visigoths ransacking the flailing Roman Empire and not paying attention (Roy, 2015).

Escobar (1995) argues that western discourses of development discursively produce the third world as inferior and thus as its object of study and intervention. But what about the struggles the western world faces on its own soil? For example, according to a report by UNICEF (2014), 27% of children in the UK (i.e., one in four) and 32% of children in the US (i.e., one in three) live in poverty. Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi aptly asks why these young American volunteers would choose to come to Africa to help digging wells, for example, when they have so many social ills in their own communities? (Goffe, 2015).

It should not be forgotten, as Spivak (1988) calls ‘strategic essentialism’, that there are first worlds within third worlds and third worlds within first worlds too. “The conquest continues” (Chomsky, 1993) as usually other people’s problems seem simpler, uncomplicated and easier to solve than those of one’s own society. In this context, Zakaria (2014) justifies that the decontextualized hunger and homelessness in Haiti, Cambodia or Vietnam is an easy moral choice - unlike the problems of other societies, for example, severe poverty in Manchester or London or the failing inner city schools in Chicago or the haplessness of those living on the fringes in Detroit is connected to larger political narratives. In simple terms, the lack of knowledge of other cultures makes them easier to help. For example, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Nicholas Kristof’s regular and extremely popular columns in the *New York Times* in which he often describes his or other Westerners’ endeavours as activists/saviors in the Third World. Cole (2012, p. 4) criticizes Kristof, “He does not connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated ‘disasters.’ All he sees are hungry mouths, and he, in his own advocacy-by-journalism way, is putting food in those mouths as fast as he can. All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.” Jose (2014) aptly sums up this big problem with western humanitarianism by citing a hilarious video created by a development organization based in Norway:

*“Let’s Save Africa! is the satirical video’s call to action. It opens with a truck stopping abruptly in a grassy area, ostensibly in Africa because Africa is just one big country. A white, blond girl jumps out with high-calorie food in hand, dressed in a white tank top, shorts and a stylish bandanna. She runs toward an unknown destination and does what every good volunteer does: starts hurling food at hungry mouths. After a tour in which she teaches children to read, subsequently posting a selfie with them as her Facebook profile picture, the young woman, Lilly, sits down for a game inspired by Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. The final question for the satirical game show, Who Wants to Be a Volunteer: How many countries are in Africa?”*

Thus, it can be argued that much like imperialism is operationalized through different kinds of institutional power (agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank), similarly contemporary tourism in the name of ‘volunteer tourism’ exerts power and exploits the Orient as the West’s pleasure periphery. As Escobar (1992, p. 25) argues, “Third World reality is inscribed with precision and persistence by the discourses and practices of economists, planners, nutritionists, demographers and the like, making it difficult for people to define their own interests in their own terms — in many cases

actually disabling them to do so.” Precisely, a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1979, p. 3).

### **Volunteer Tourism And Religion**

Ver Beek (2006) highlighted another important issue emphasizing that volunteer trips often have an explicit goal of imparting certain religious beliefs on the host community. Van Engen (2000, p. 21) also opined that ‘evangelism is a main goal of many groups.’ McGehee and Andereck (2008, p. 20) further clarified, “The role of organized religion in volunteer tourism often seems to be the ‘elephant in the living room’ that no one wishes to discuss.” Similar to the ‘colonial ideology of improvement’ discussed above, missionary interventions were also very active during the colonial times. As Van der Veer (2001, p. 12) claimed, “Missionary movements in nineteenth-century Britain, for example, created a public awareness of the fact that there was a larger world beyond Britain and that British Christians had an imperial duty towards the rest of the world.” A year ago, Rutledge (2014), in the highly acclaimed TV series, *Encounter*, in Australia while exploring the connections between religion and life, wondered if ‘volunteer tourism’ is the new colonialism.

*“It's done for the experience of the volunteer', says Roger O'Halloran, the executive director of PALMS, an NGO that was born out of the Catholic social movement of lay missionaries. 'It's all about the volunteer, with the pretence of helping someone, and I don't buy it.' Roger O'Halloran says that PALMS is wary of people who want to volunteer out of a sense of Christian charity because an inappropriate power relationship can be formed between volunteer and host in which the giver has all the power over the receiver. He says the way poverty is represented in the media contributes to this separation between people. According to O'Halloran, many volunteers think 'that's all they are, just poor people, and I can help them by giving of my excess and that makes me a good person'. [But] they are fellow human beings who have skills and capacities and resourcefulness probably far beyond anyone living in a Western society.”*

Muehlebach (2013) examined this growth of Neoliberalism and its volunteer culture (how socialist volunteers are interpreting their unwaged labor as an expression of social solidarity) as it combines with traditional Catholic practices (how Catholic volunteers think of their volunteering as an expression of charity and love) to oppose extensive market rule and the anti-welfare actions of the government. Wilson and Janoski (1995) found out in their study that among Catholics, the connection between church involvement and volunteering is formed early and remains strong. Karl Marx’s (1843) celebrated dictum that religion is the “opium of the masses” is still relevant today as religion is used by authorities to make people feel better about the suffering they experience due to being poor and exploited. As French sociologist Luc Boltanski nicely explained “suffering, though at a distance” is a master subject of our mediatized times and is routinely appropriated in American popular culture.

Volunteer tourism is the contemporary manifestation of imperial travel. Although Marx opined long ago that religion will fade away with modernity yet it is important to note that for most people in the world today - religion still remains the ultimate source of morality. Ironically, in an era of sustainable development these deprived

communities still continue to be celebrated as the 'white man's burden.' This supports Said's (1979, p. 308-309) claim, "The Oriental is fixed, stable, in need of investigation, in need even of knowledge about himself. No dialectic is either desired or allowed." Indeed, "the subalterns cannot speak!" (Spivak, 1988) and they are, were and must always be poor. But this is a denial of the humanity – what about human ethics that include the values of equality among people? Foucault (1986, p. 77) was correct:

"In these dislocating experiences, *who* is this Other that is seen? It is not you, yet you as Other are forced to see yourself as Other because that is the way you have been positioned in the eyes of others, and that positioning seems to be utterly fixed, fastened solidly into its place in an irrevocable scheme... You are both silenced and spoken for. You are seen but not recognized. You are identified but denied an identity you can call your own. Your identity is split, broken, dispersed into its abjected images, its alienated representations" (77-78).

It should be noted, however, that in the case of people in the Third World, the concept of religious identity is intricately bound up with imperialism, colonial history, and now the hegemony of world capitalism. As the Orient develops, the interpenetrations between the producer and consumer of religious representations—between an Orient hungry for foreign capital and a West craving cultural and spiritual authenticity—will continue. However, there is a caveat as Ferguson in his book *The Great Degeneration* warns, "we may be living through the end of Western ascendancy." Indeed, "who gets to tell the story is the battle of the day" (Horn, 1997, p. 60).

## **Conclusion**

This paper explores critically the political economy of volunteer tourism along the lines of a 'white savior complex' and argues that the meanings, practices, and policies of volunteer tourism development continue to be informed by colonial thought, resulting in disempowerment of the rural populations in the Third World. While examining discourses of volunteer tourism development using theoretical perspectives from colonialism this study paves the way to understand how contemporary tourism discourses serve as markers for the third phase of colonization that Mies and Shiva (1993) allude to in the earlier quote. Harvard economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (1999, p. 3) justifies that "the quality of life should be measured not by our wealth but by our freedoms", and if that is the case, then contemporary discourses of volunteer tourism development certainly fall short on delivering freedom to the poor people in the Third World.

This study contributes to tourism social science research by trying to understand how 'race' (white privilege) has shaped systems of inclusion and exclusion through ideological and epistemological practices (Kothari, 2006, p. 6) and as such critically analyses different aspects of racialized discourses in volunteer tourism. Unfortunately, considering all its intentions and claims of impartiality, tourism social science research has generally traveled in only one direction, that is from the West to the East. As Bailey (2006) argues, "White ways of knowing, being, seeing, ontologizing, evaluating, nation-building, and judging have been presented to us as ways of doing philosophy, pure and simple." Hence, it is important for tourism social science researchers to accept the paradigm shift that is happening from Amero/Euro-centric

literature of 'us' studying 'them' – the “Exotic Other” and attend to Malinowski's (1922, p. 25) famous observation, how “to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world”? As Kenyan activist Mwangi eloquently asserted to a group of students at Duke University: “If you want to come and help me, first ask me what I want... Then we can work together” (Goffe, 2015). In these challenging times, when Western power is often constructed in hyper-machismo and chauvinistic terms, it is imperative for us to decry the destructive attributes of the Western notion of masculinity that is often linked with violence and bloodshed and, rather, tap into a higher form of power that is grounded in equality and peace.



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