

Review - Volunteer Tourism in the Global South

Written by Stephen Wearing

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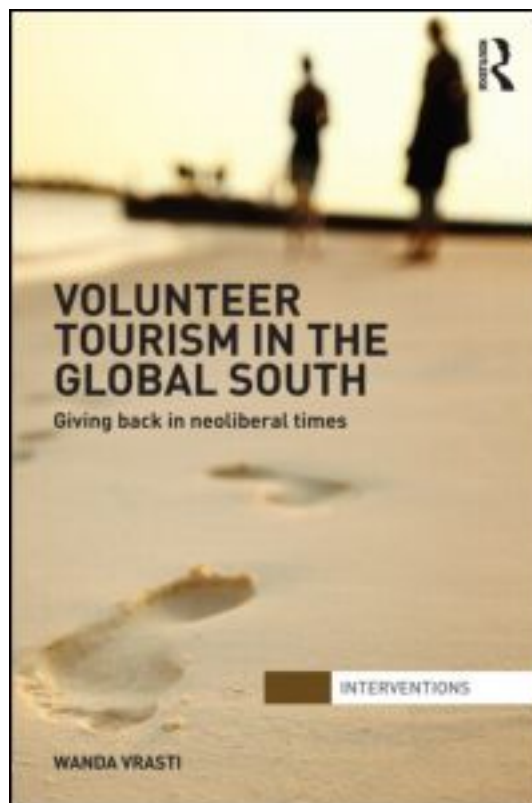
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STEPHEN WEARING, NOV 28 2012

Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times

By: Wanda Vrasti

Oxon: Routledge, 2012



This work explores the increasingly popular phenomenon of volunteer tourism, paying particular attention to the governmental rationalities and socio-economic conditions that valorise it as a noble and necessary cultural practice. Combining theoretical research with primary data gathered during volunteering programs in Guatemala and Ghana, the author argues that although volunteer tourism may not trigger social change, provide meaningful encounters with difference, or offer professional expertise, as the brochure discourse and the scholarly literature on tourism and hospitality often promises, the formula remains a useful strategy for producing the subjects and social relations neoliberalism requires.

Vrasti suggests that the value of volunteer tourism should not to be assessed in terms of the goods and services it delivers to the global poor, but in terms of how well the practice disseminates entrepreneurial styles of feeling and action. Analysing the key effects of volunteer tourism, it is demonstrated that far from being a selfless and history-less rescue act, volunteer tourism is in fact a strategy of power that extends economic rationality, particularly its emphasis

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on entrepreneurship and competition, to the realm of political subjectivity. Although this position is not new (cf. Dorfman & Mattelart 1975) it does provide a way to analyse the issues that surround volunteer tourism. So although *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South* is presented as ‘...a unique and innovative analysis of the relationship between the political and personal dimensions of volunteer tourism and will be of great interest to scholars and students of international relations, cultural geography, tourism, and development studies,’ it is possibly more at a level of an interesting exploration of this area using accepted theory. However, the book certainly offers a platform for academics and practitioners to debate and exchange ideas on the value of volunteer tourism and it provides a conceptual discourse on north-south dialectics, and the problems and challenges of global interactions through tourism in a global context that is dominated by neoliberalism. The book constructs a view of tourism in the post-colonial around the idea that the North is not morally bankrupt, but alas the North is also not altruistic. It then suggests that all actions that we ascribe to the personal require investigation and analysis through a lens that is able to provide a critical view of our actions.

The book combines theoretical research with primary data gathered from volunteering programs in Guatemala and Ghana by the author while undertaking her PhD. The book is split into five chapters and is interestingly very short for a book coming out of a PhD. It begins with an introduction to volunteer tourism (which it aligns with voluntourism) and provides a historicized account on the globalised nature of it from the British Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) and the US Peace Corps to present day. It does not romanticize this area and sees many contradictions in its processes. Chapter two presents ‘The self as enterprise,’ providing an insight into the roles the volunteer may have as a subject to various influences, particularly that of neo-liberalism. This is followed by two chapters on the data the author gathered these are titled Multicultural sensibilities in Guatemala (Chapter 3) and Entrepreneurial education in Ghana (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 is the conclusion, titled ‘International political life.’ It provides some insight into how new trends such as volunteer tourism get encapsulated by capitalism, the very thing they seek to break away from, and leaves us with an overview of how volunteer tourism fits in the discourse of international relations.

One of the failures of the book is to provide an adequate breakdown of Volunteer Tourism which it presents it as a singular homogenous type of tourism. There are now varying definitions and conceptualizations that reflect the growing debate and critique within the study of tourism. While the early definitions of volunteer tourism tended to favor the altruistic side of volunteering, more recent debates ask “Is it (volunteer tourism) altruistic or ego-centric?” (or one of many positions along that continuum, see for example Mustonen 2007). A more common view is now being recognised that most forms of volunteer tourism (and indeed, modern volunteering) are not just about ‘doing good for others’ but also about ‘doing good for self’ (Matthews 2008) which is echoed in the UN definition of volunteering (United Nations 2001). Additionally, it has been suggested that volunteer tourism is different from ‘voluntourism’ in that for volunteer tourism the entire trip is devoted to volunteering while in voluntourism it may be a part of a mainstream tourism holiday.

I found a wish to see more on the theoretical links to the underlying theory in tourism, which the book does not deal with well. The book appears to desire to construct a view of tourism in the post-modern age but falls a little short. This might relate to the limitations of converting a PhD within a specific discipline with theory underpinning it from, in this case industrial relations, to a book, so missing some of the interconnections that enable an elaboration of the variety of ideas within both areas. However this does not detract from the positive input this book makes within the context of its transfer from PhD to book.

The debate that then is fundamental to the book is -do we have the ability to move beyond self interest in the things we do? Vrsti sits squarely in the discipline base that forms the platform for the book in International Relations and suggests that we are subjugating the South to the neoliberalism of the North. Here I think the debate could be taken one step further to suggest that this platform of altruistic and ego-centric focus creates for the self an ability to be more inclusive of the ‘other’ (see for example Wearing and Wearing 2001; Wearing and Wearing 2006), particularly if the motivation is focused around a belief system that sits the individual’s values outside of neoliberal consumerist veins of societies of the North, I would suggest can this can be found in a variety of forms of tourism such as Woofing (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) which fall outside the exchange tenet of through money which is often the central focus of neoliberalistic tourism.

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The book provides the reader with some interesting analysis of the relationship between the political and personal dimensions of volunteer tourism. As such, it will likely find receive the most interest from scholars and students of international relations, cultural geography, tourism, and development studies. As such the book offers a platform for academics and practitioners to examine the political as a part of volunteering, it contains themes broadly around conceptual discourses on global-local dialectics, and the problems and challenges of its future progress. Any aspiring student of the field of volunteer tourism and tourism should read this book. It is an invaluable aid in examining case study research and its methods. Without a doubt, it is an academic work of some scholarship and is a useful and welcome addition to the area of tourism for academics; most should find it to be stimulating and insightful when doing work in this area or supervising student work.

Dorfman, A. & Mattelart, A. (1975). *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic.* New York: International General.

Matthews, A. (2008). Negotiated Selves: exploring the impact of local-global interactions on young volunteer travellers. *Journeys of Discover in Volunteer Tourism*. K. D. Lyons and S. Wearing. Cambridge, MA, CABI Publishing: 101-117.

Mustonen, P. (2007). "Volunteer tourism – Altruism or mere tourism?" *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research* 18(1): 97-115.

United Nations (2001). *United Nations Volunteers Report*. Geneva, prepared for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Social Development.

Wearing, S. and B. Wearing (2001). "Conceptualizing the selves of tourism." *Leisure Studies* 20(2): 143-159.

Wearing, S. and M. Wearing (2006). "Rereading the subjugating tourist in neoliberalism: Postcolonial otherness and the tourist experience." *Tourism Analysis* 11(2): 145-162.

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Dr. Stephen Wearing is an Associate Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). His work on leisure and tourism community based projects in Papua New Guinea, Costa Rica, Solomon Islands, Guyana and Australian has received recognition internationally including a special citation from the Costa Rican Government for services towards community, conservation and youth and an outstanding contribution award from Youth Challenge International in Canada. He has conducted numerous projects and lectures worldwide and is the author (co-author) of a range of books and articles dealing with issues surrounding leisure and sustainable tourism. Stephen has taught at a variety of Universitys in his career at UTS, including Wageningen University, Netherlands; Newcastle and Macquarie University's, Australia.

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