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'Making a Difference': Volunteer Tourism and Development

JIM BUTCHER and PETER SMITH

Abstract: In recent decades there has been a boom in international volunteer tourism, mainly in the form of the growth of gap-year companies offering placements, linked to conservation and community well-being goals. This paper makes two points: firstly, it argues that the growth of volunteer tourism is in part a product of the politics of the current period – the decline of grand narratives and the growth of 'life political' alternative forms of agency. Hence volunteer tourism, motivated by the impulse to 'make a difference', tells us something about the way in which development issues are being conceived of by idealistic young people who comprise the majority of volunteer tourists. Secondly, the paper takes issue with the view that today's volunteer tourists are part of a tradition of colonialism and neo-colonialism that projects western conceptions of modernization onto the Third World societies to the detriment of the latter. Rather, it is argued that the politics behind volunteer tourism is better characterized as a rejection of modernization as development in favour of a post-development influenced approach.

Keywords: volunteer tourism; life politics; gap-year; ethical consumption; tourism and development.

Introduction

It is, on the face of it, odd to write about tourism (the act of leisure travel rather than the development of the industry) in the context of a discussion about development in the global South. Yet the last two decades have witnessed a growing literature on an 'ethical' tourism that links the behaviour and purchasing habits of consumers to development outcomes (Krippendorff 1987; Poon 1993; Patullo 1996; Weaver 2008; Wearing and Neil 1999; Scheyvens 2002; Wearing et al. 2005; Hickman 2007; Pattullo and Minelli 2009). This literature almost invariably focuses on small scale, community-oriented tourism that explicitly aims to promote both conservation and community well-being.

This growth is part of a more general trend – the invocation of ethical consumerism as an important way to make a difference to communities in less developed countries (Harrison et al. 2005).

Volunteer tourism, the focus of this paper, is exemplary of such attempts to 'make a difference' through ethical travel (Scheyvens 2002: 108; Simpson 2004b; Raymond 2008). At issue is the politics through which this noble impulse is channelled – 'life politics' (Giddens 1991, 1994). This is a politics that involves a reconfiguration of the relationship between individual and political issues, away from the grand narratives of Left and Right, in favour of a politics that takes individual identity as its starting point. This 'life politics' revolves around individuals' attempts to reposition

themselves culturally in the context of their own lives and through this to try to act upon their immediate environment and also more broadly in the social and political realms (Giddens 1991).

Yet, rather than a progressive focus for environmental and cultural radicalism (Wearing 2001), or more prosaically as a positive channel for the simple desire to help others, it will be argued that life political volunteer tourism is indicative of a diminished political (and ethical) climate in which development politics is understood through the prism, of a green hued/ post-development tinged individual morality rather than through a development oriented, progressive, collective politics.

By way of a formal definition, this paper takes the view of Wearing, who argues that volunteer tourism, 'can be viewed as a development strategy leading to sustainable development and centring the convergence of natural resource qualities, locals and the visitor that all benefit from tourism activity' (2001: 12). Volunteer tourists devote a proportion of their leisure time and spending to alleviating material poverty, restoring particular environments or engaging in research into society or the environment (Wearing 2001: 1) largely, although not exclusively, in the global South. The types of projects discussed in the emerging volunteer tourism discourse – small scale, community-based integrated conservation and development projects – are the principal focus of this paper.

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This paper is mindful of Hannam's (2002) characterization of tourism research being slow to incorporate theoretical developments that have long been central to other social sciences. This is especially important given that, other than a few key texts, volunteer tourism is under-theorized. Addressing these limitations, the paper situates recent research in tourism development within wider sociological insights into the construction of identity through the act of consumption, and comments on the implications of this. A number of recent research studies have taken an empirical or case study approach to exploring the concept of volunteer tourism from the volunteer or hosts' perspectives and this has deepened the understanding of volunteer tourism. The purpose of this paper is, however, to interrogate the term 'volunteer tourism' and the emerging discourse around it. Hence this paper is necessarily exploratory rather than empirical in nature.

The paper makes reference mainly to UK outbound volunteer tourism to illustrate a trend that is evident elsewhere too.

Who are Volunteers?

It has been argued that volunteer tourists are simply at the committed end of a spectrum of ethical tourism (Coghlan 2006; Cousins 2007), or perhaps of a growing band of 'new tourists' (Poon 1993; Mowforth and Munt 1998). Their holiday involves more structured and explicit action for conservation and development, but the desire to address well-being and conservation through purchasing ethical holiday is a shared feature with a burgeoning number of alternative, 'ethical' niches, among which ecotourism is the most prominent (Weaver 2006).

That said, some case studies have confirmed participation in volunteer tourism projects is often not solely linked to altruism – a desire to gain cultural capital and build one's CV also play a part in volunteers' motivations (Halpenny and Caissie 2003; Cousins 2007; Heath 2007).

Unsurprisingly, there is no fixed definition of who is and who is not a 'volunteer tourist' and indeed some would regard the term as an oxymoron. After all, tourism is usually considered as time away from social and political obligations, whilst volunteering involves a desire to help others, and is associated with altruism. Certainly, in the past volunteers for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) from the UK, the Peace Corps in the USA or the Australian Volunteers Abroad programme would not have been seen as tourists, but as skilled people, committed to spending a protracted period of time working in communities in the developing world. Tourists motives, on the other hand, are characterized

as self-interested – the desire for time off, relaxation and fun (Krippendorf 1987; Croall 1995; Scheyvens 2002; Hickman 2007).

However, the term is appropriate today for three reasons: First of all, the term is in usage – a number of key texts have been written on volunteer tourism, notably Wearing's *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* (2001) and Lyons and Wearing's edited volume *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism: International Case Study Perspectives* (2008). Also the *Journal of International Volunteer Tourism and Social Development* commenced publication in 2009.

In recent years volunteer tourism has been the focus of a growing number of academic papers that interrogate volunteer tourists' motivations and experiences (McGehee 2002; Brown and Lehto 2005; McGehee and Santos 2005; Cousins 2007; Coghlan 2006, 2007 and 2008; Gray and Campbell 2007; McIntosh and Zahra 2007; ATLAS/TRAM 2008) or focus on the host community (Broad 2003; Clifton and Benson 2006; McGehee and Andereck 2009). Hence the term 'volunteer tourism' has become widely used in tourism studies and elsewhere.

In the media too, gap-years or career breaks taken for volunteer tourism have been the subject of commentaries and critiques (e.g., Barkham 2006; Frean 2006; Kelly 2006; VSO 2006). Hence, it is a feature of academic and public discourse on the global South and development.

Second, the gap-year companies, charities and non-governmental organizations that organize volunteer placements explicitly link altruism to some of the more traditional pleasures of holidays. These trips amount to fun with a social purpose, that purpose being teaching, working with children or, as is the principal focus of this paper, community-oriented projects with a conservation or well-being focus. Volunteer tourists, for Wearing, '...are seeking a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will contribute not only to their personal development but also positively and directly to the social, natural and/or economic environments in which they participate' (2001: 1).

This focus of the gap-year and volunteer tourism companies seems to resonate with significant numbers of people seeking to act upon their world, outside of traditional political channels, in the realm of the ethical consumption of holidays. For many of these people the erstwhile assumed boundaries between political and personal life no longer apply.

Third, the term volunteer tourism also seems appropriate, given the context of the growing advocacy of

'ethical tourism' (Fennell 1999; Honey 1999; Weaver 2001; Hickman 2007). This advocacy holds that all tourism to the developing world should aim to address community well-being and conservation. Typically, tourists are encouraged to visit projects that use some of their revenue to conserve wildlife and to protect local traditions. NGOs of both conservation and well-being orientation, as well as the commercial sector, have become increasingly involved in such projects since the early 1990s (Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; McShane and Wells 2004; Butcher 2007), and generally promote them as ethical, sustainable development. This is in spite of the limited capacity for the projects to contribute to anything beyond the provision of a community's most basic needs.

In fact, it is worthy of note that in both the advocacy of ethical tourism and to a lesser extent in that of sustainable development itself, 'development' and the provision of 'basic needs', are conflated (Sharpley 2002; Liu 2003; Butcher 2006), with a limiting effect on the former term. For many advocates of ethical tourism, and volunteer tourism in particular, the provision of basic needs is not a stepping stone to wider development opportunities and liberation from poverty, but is a path to a sustainable 'steady state' at a level of economic development marginally above where the community started out (Butcher 2007) – hardly an inspiring vision of development. Indeed, the concept of 'basic needs' in development discourses introduces Maslow's (1943) psychological interpretation of an individual's 'needs' into the wider discussion of economic development. The focus on meeting 'basic needs', such as hunger and shelter, and subsequent orientation around these very limited development options in effect depoliticizes the struggle over economic development by limiting communities' aspirations to their most pressing necessities.

For the above reasons, it is perhaps surprising that the field of development studies, insofar as it seeks to address the way development is understood in contemporary society, has thus far neglected the social construction of 'development' through volunteer tourism discourse.

Who / How Many are They?

A number of studies have estimated the size and monetary value of the volunteer tourism sector. Research has also been undertaken into the gap year phenomenon. Given the range of organizations operating within the sector, and the differing agendas, unsurprisingly the conclusions vary. However, all the surveys demonstrate a marked increase in the numbers of volunteer tourists in the last 10–15 years (ATLAS/TRAM 2008).

Volunteer Tourism: A Global Analysis, a report published by the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education in 2008, surveyed over 300 volunteer tourism organizations worldwide. The report concluded that the market now caters for 1.6 million volunteer tourists a year, with a monetary value of between £832m and £1.3bn (US\$ 1.7bn–2.6bn). Growth in the sector has been most marked since 1990 (ATLAS/TRAM 2008: 5).

According to the UK government's commissioned report on gap year provision (defined in the report as 'a period of time between 3 and 24 months taken out of education or a work career', hence a narrower category than volunteer tourism), internationally there are over 800 organizations offering overseas volunteering placements in 200 countries. In total, these organizations offer around 350,000 placements opportunities annually worldwide (Jones 2004), though many of these placements will not necessarily be in the developing world.

Estimates from the UK gap-year industry suggest that in the region of 200,000 British youngsters aged 18–25 annually take a gap year (Simpson 2005: 447). Within this group of volunteers 'The Year Out Group', a group representing the gap-year industry in the UK, estimate that 10,000 young people a year are involved in placements in the Third World countries (interview with Richard Oliver of the Year Out Group, cited in Simpson 2004: 109).

Cousins (2007) has estimated that in 2005, UK-based conservation tourism organizations sent approximately 7550 volunteers, to over 341 conservation projects, in 71 countries, the major recipients being developing countries. These volunteers' principal activity is to engage with nature and gain experience of conservation work (Cousins 2007: 1029).

Tourism Concern, a UK-based charity which tends to look specifically at development and community-based tourism, estimates that there are now around 60 organizations in the UK offering volunteer tourism placements (Tourism Concern 2007: 1). These range from commercial companies to organizations operating in the NGO and voluntary sector.

However, the large number of organizations involved in this gap-year sector makes it hard to accurately assess the absolute number of volunteering places. There is also a wide variety of possible types of voluntary work with the commonest types being community and social work, teaching, conservation and environmental projects (Jones 2004).

Although the number of volunteer tourists in the developing world is unclear, that the number has risen and

is rising is broadly acknowledged. UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) figures demonstrate a steady rise in students opting to defer entry to higher education some of whom will participate in a gap-year project overseas (Simpson 2004: 11).

However, the issue is not only or even mainly about numbers, but about the profile of volunteer tourism, and ethical travel in general, in public consciousness and academic discourse. For example, the discussion of gap-years has a high profile in universities' tourism and geography departments, and the UK media regularly features volunteer tourism as an 'ethical' alternative – it is certainly a significant phenomenon in public debate. In this vein, a number of authors have highlighted the role of volunteer tourism in the formation of contemporary identity for those taking part and beyond (McGehee 2002; McGehee and Santos 2005; Gray and Campbell 2007; McIntosh and Zahra 2007).

Volunteer Tourism as Life Politics

British sociologist Anthony Giddens identified a shift from the traditional politics of emancipation, embodied in collective identities informed by the politics of Left and Right, towards 'life politics' (Giddens 1994, 1998, 2000). For Giddens, contemporary society is no longer bound by the fixities of tradition or custom, as we are living in a 'post-traditional' world. Life politics represents the attempt to create morally justifiable lifestyles, and to bridge the gap between the individual and social change, when we are no longer guided by such traditions as class, religion or family.

Hence life politics is a reconfiguration of the relationship of the individual to their society, through which individual identity becomes the key site of political change (Giddens 1994, 1998, 2000). This certainly chimes with the literature on volunteer tourism (Wearing 2001), and also with the publicity put out by gap-year companies (Bindloss et al. 2003).

It is worth noting that it also chimes with the much more extensive literature on ecotourism and development, which sees enlightening experiences through which the tourists deepens their understanding of nature on one hand, and the promotion of sustainable development on the other, as two sides of the same coin (Wearing and Neil 1999; UNEP/WTO 2002; Fennell 2003). This is pertinent, as many of the conservation projects on which tourists can volunteer could be regarded as ecotourism (Coghlan 2006), a niche its advocates claim benefits communities through ethical behaviour and purchasing. The volunteer simply takes this sentiment to its logical conclusion in structuring their visit around conservation and community development rather

than assisting this through their spending whilst on holiday.

Life politics clearly has a strong affinity with ethical consumption – what and where we buy the things we need and desire is not only a part of the process of negotiating one's own identity, but can also connect with the lives of others who have produced these same things, as well as with other issues such as the environment (Giddens 1991: 215). For example, it is argued that consumers can force a more ethical agenda onto companies through exercising choice in favour of products that are deemed more sustainable or that involve a 'fairer' outcome for workers (Hertz 2001; Nicholls and Opal 2005; Jackson 2006; Paterson 2006).

As an early example of this trend, in 1988 The Green Consumer (Elkington and Hailes 1988) sold some 350,000 copies in a single year. It was illustrative of the growth of ethical consumption as a focus for people's aspirations. It is since around this time that gap-year companies have grown greatly in number and size (ATLAS/ TRAM 2008: 5), and in which 'ethical tourism' has become a significant issue amongst human geographers and others studying tourism and development.

Of course, engaging in social action through consumption may be social action only for those who can afford to pay. This is certainly the case with many volunteer tourism placements, which as we have seen above, given their cost are generally the prerogative of the middle class (ATLAS/ TRAM 2008: 39).

However, the impulse to volunteer is widely held amongst young people, and encouraged through schools, universities and government (Jones 2004). It is a pervasive agenda, often seen as a part of developing citizenship, or, in the case of international volunteering, global citizenship. Gap-years are accredited, structured and even praised by politicians for their contribution to citizenship (Heath 2007). Further, Simpson (2005) has argued that the gap-year experience is increasingly seen by employers as desirable and can thus be considered, in part, as a training ground for future professionals, who accumulate 'cultural capital' through their volunteer work. This is in stark contrast to the associations of travel in the 1960s and 1970s, in which a year out was more likely to be taken in the spirit of Kerouac, dropping out, rather than signing up for global citizenship (Butcher 2003).

This shift to the politics of consumption is often regarded as in part due to changes in production in western economies and the nature of work. 'Post-industrial' writer Andre Gorz (1982, 1985) identified a shift in the technical organization

of production that led to a more individuated, less collective experience in the workplace – contributing to a decline in traditional collective allegiances relating to work. This is mirrored by the post-Fordism thesis, developed in the pages of the left journal, *Marxism Today* (see for example, Hall 1988; Leadbeater 1988; Hall and Jacques 1989; for a wider discussion of these themes see Kumar 1995). For Bauman (1996) the result of these trends is that contemporary society engages its members primarily as consumers rather than producers. As a consequence of these changes Bauman characterizes contemporary society as moving from ‘heavy’ and ‘solid’ modernity to ‘light’ and ‘liquid’ modernity (Bauman 2000).

Post-Fordism, or ‘liquid modernity’, is notable in that it marks a shift from the politics of production (and social class) to consumption (and individual identity) in radical thinking. The consumption of alternative forms of ethical tourism is just one example of the wider consumption of ethical products (Paterson 2006) and the radical credentials of these activities are prominent in the debates (Butcher 2007).

Most profoundly influencing the growth of life politics is the collapse of perceived alternatives to capitalism. The collapse of communism seemed to confirm that alternatives to the market do not work (Giddens 1994, 2000; Jacoby 1999). This is reinforced by the adoption or at the very least acceptance of market forces as positive or ineluctable, even by capitalism’s erstwhile critics on the Left, as, apparently, ‘no one any longer has any alternatives to capitalism’ (Giddens 1998: 43).

In the apparent absence of alternatives, the market has taken on the appearance of an eternal reality in political and social debates (Heartfield 2002). Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ thesis, following soon after the end of the Cold War, presenting a contemporary world in which all the big ideological issues have been settled, is perhaps emblematic of a sense of closure of grand politics (Fukuyama 1992). For Laidi (1998) the end of the Cold War precipitated a far-reaching ‘crisis of meaning’ whereby few institutions can claim to provide meaning in an increasingly globalized world. It is this wider absence of meaning that pushes ethical consumption to the fore. Mouffe argues that moral issues have become central to contemporary political life and the struggle between ‘right and wrong’ has replaced the struggle between ‘right and left’ (2005: 5). The portrayal of volunteer tourism as ‘doing the right thing’ (and also mass tourism perhaps as ‘wrong’) is indicative of this.

The decline of allegiance to big political ideas has contributed to a disconnection between individuals and their governments, and politics itself, and has led to a

preoccupation with re-establishing this connection in some way (Laidi 1998; Bauman 2000). Indeed, it is in this spirit that gap-year projects are often encouraged by the authorities (Jones 2004; Heath 2007). Volunteering is seen as a way of developing a sense of ‘global citizenship’, with concepts of citizenship increasingly being a part of the remit and curriculum of schools and universities (Advisory Group on Citizenship 1998; Bednarz 2003; Standish 2008). Traditional political channels, on the other hand, increasingly invite cynicism, and many feel alienated from the institutions of government (Giddens 1998; Devji 2005; Furedi 2005).

This process, through which the world of consumption and lifestyle has become prominent in the search for selfhood, and also in social and political issues, can only be outlined here. But it is in this spirit that many volunteer tourists seek to affect change as a part of a self-conscious shaping of their own identity: their own sense of self. The trip can be a prominent part of a person’s ‘biography’ in this respect. Indeed, a biographical approach to selfhood is associated with life politics generally (see Bauman 2000) and travel specifically (see Heath 2007). The narrative is that of the individual rather than of the society visited. The reflexive character of the trip is evident too. It is suggested that as part of the volunteer experience, ‘...interactions occur and the self is enlarged or expanded, challenged, renewed or reinforced. As such, the experience becomes an ongoing process which extends far beyond the actual tourist visit’ (Wearing 2001: 3). Similarly, for McGehee and Santos (2005) participation in the volunteer project is the key element in the consciousness-raising of the individual participant. To misquote the old feminist slogan, ‘the personal becomes (life) political’.

Life politics, as advocated by Giddens, urges a reconfiguration of the relationship of the individual to society against an historical backdrop where ‘the terms left and right no longer have the meaning they once did, and each political perspective is in its own way exhausted’ (1994: 78). Whilst this description of the categories of Left and Right may well contain some truth, it is not necessarily the case that life politics represents an advance on the politics of the Left or, for that matter, the Right. Life politics poses the formation of a self-defined identity as the key site of political change. That the individual is only able to form their identity through the act of consumption, at best, limits the focus of change to the individual in the private sphere (Bauman 2000) and, at worst, represents the degradation of the idea of the historical subject (Heartfield 2002). Further, the growth of life politics represents a narrowing of human subjectivity away from collective solutions to social problems towards individual life choices. More prosaically, Furedi (2005) argues that the

celebration of life politics actually endows everyday activities (shopping or leisure) with political meaning, thus what is considered as political involvement is ever enlarged. Pointedly, the growing importance of life politics and the politics of consumption more broadly mirrors the decline of social explanations of and collective solutions to human problems.

Seemingly central to the talking up of volunteer tourism and life politics in general is what Christopher Lasch refers to in his well-known polemic, *The Culture of Narcissism*, as a self-conscious 'projection of the search for self into politics' (1991: 28). This, for Lasch, diminishes public politics to a form of therapy for the individual – political possibilities at the level of society lose out. Certainly, the emphasis on transforming the consciousness of the volunteers invoked earlier by Wearing and others is suggestive of this individual take on politics. Mohan, discussing development workers' understanding of development, makes the point succinctly. He points out that being over-reliant upon personal contact for one's view of development tends to encourage a conception of development and inequalities based upon a fetishized view of culture, rather than through fundamental historical and material inequalities (Mohan 2001). 'Being there' is no substitute for politics.

New Volunteers and Old

One way of coming to grips with the character of contemporary volunteer tourism is to consider continuity with, and change from, international volunteering in the past.

Modern development volunteering emerged after the Second World War. Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) was founded in 1958 in the UK and the Peace Corps in the USA in 1960. Other examples of state involvement in promoting development volunteering include; Australian Volunteers Abroad founded in 1963, the Dutch SNV, founded in 1965, the Japan Overseas Corporation volunteers (JOVC) founded in 1965 and the Canadian Executive Service Organisation (CESO) founded in 1967. There has been an emphasis in these organizations on practical, technical skills, to help Third World societies on their path to modern development, a path favoured not just by western governments, but also by many newly sovereign third world states (Preston 1996).

Post World War II volunteering was both altruistic and also tied up with the politics of the period. The Peace Corps was certainly motivated by the desire, as its first director put it, to 'help in the world-wide assault against poverty, hunger, ignorance and disease' (Shriver 1961 cited in Roberts 2004). However, Amin (1999) claims that this was also part of

promoting an image of US altruism as well as helping the third world to modernize, thus reducing the threat to western interests through communist influence.

In the case of VSO, Bird's history of the organization shows that the founder of this organization, Alec Dickson, in appealing for funding for the organization, pointed out that communist countries were better at such overseas work than the west, and appealed to British pride (Bird 1998).

These organizations harnessed the desires of able, idealistic young people to play a role in economic and social modernization in the developing world. However, this, for 'anti-development' thinkers, is precisely the problem – the assumption that the countries concerned needed advice and assistance from without on how to modernize, and indeed whether to modernize at all in the sense accepted at the time (Escobar 1995; Esteva and Prakash 1998).

Simpson (2004) argues that today's volunteering has some roots in military volunteers signing up to fight for a cause, such as struggles for independence in Latin America in the 1980s and the Spanish civil war in the 1930s. These volunteers, she says, were inspired by 'a mixture of idealism, expediency and opportunism; a mixture that continues to influence contemporary international volunteers' (Simpson 2004: 30). Similarly, McGehee and Santos (2005) suggest that volunteer tourism has common characteristics with social movements in the US for civil rights and modern labour movements.

However, historical comparisons such as these are very limited due to the wholly different political and historical contexts of the volunteers. To compare volunteers fighting in the Spanish civil war, assisting struggles for third world national liberation in the 1970s and 80s or fighting for civil rights in the 1960s to today's development volunteers is to trivialize the former and flatter the latter. The comparison only serves to emphasize what is new and distinctive about contemporary volunteer tourism – that it is influenced by the lack of grand political narratives of Left and Right or of national self-determination, the sort of narratives that characterized the combatants in the aforementioned causes.

Even comparisons with VSO and the Peace Corps indicate more change than continuity. Whilst in the 1960s these organizations can be seen as part of Cold War politics, and hence part of the western modernization of the Third World in the name of capitalism (or indeed communism via volunteers from the Soviet bloc), the narrative of contemporary volunteering is clearly a personal narrative that eschews grand political projects in favour of providing, '...an opportunity for an individual to engage in an altruistic

attempt to explore 'self' (Wearing 2001: 3). Similarly, like much advocacy of integrated conservation and development, volunteer tourism most often eschews modernization in favour of a self-conscious deference to local culture and ecology. For Wearing, therefore, '[The] underlying ideology of volunteer tourism represents a transition in society from an anthropocentric view, where the world is interpreted in terms of people and their values, to an ecocentric view, where the world fosters the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature' (Wearing 2001: 157).

Hence this paper suggests that it is wrong to argue that today's tourist fantasies mimic those of colonial times (Tickell 2001) or that volunteer tourism presumes westernization as a part of the development process (Simpson 2004b: 685). It is hard to agree that today's volunteers believe they are there to 'bring civilization to the natives'. Rather, they are keen to learn from them, and development efforts are linked to supporting the pre-existing way of life at a localized level rather than in any way transforming it through economic development (Wearing 2001).

In the past, selfhood was often linked to class interest or national mission (Laidi 1998; Sennett 1998; Bauman 2000). Today, the narrative of the self replaces these grand narratives. Formerly the social and economic transformation of the developing world was the shared goal of the competing political theories of modernization and under development (Harrison 1988; Chang 2010). Nowadays volunteering tends to eschew such transformation in favour of modest 'sustainable' projects focusing on localism and Schumacher's anti-development maxim 'small is beautiful' (1993).

It is the decline of political alternatives to the market, the subsequent belief that 'there is no alternative' and the anti-political mood fuelled by these trends that together elevate ethical consumption to the status of a new politics. Without substantial political alternatives, human agency, the 'desire to make a difference' if you like, becomes connected to lifestyle – aspects of our lives that were previously unproblematic (shopping or holidays for example) become politicized (or moralized).

Hence, whilst it would have been bizarre in the 1960s to talk of volunteer tourism, today it makes some sense. What characterizes volunteers of the past, and indeed the foundation of VSO and Peace Corps, was a belief in a certain path towards economic and political progress. Gap-year volunteers are more likely to eschew state led macro-economic transformation, replacing it with a politics of 'care' (Popke 2006) and sustainable living (Wearing 2001), closely linked to a narrative of personal growth. Rather than impose

'western' standards upon ex-colonies, gap-years are sold on the basis that the volunteer has as much, if not more, to learn from the society visited, than they have to learn from us (see for example Acott et al. 1998).

Who Benefits? The Community or the Volunteer?

It is hard to argue that the actual contribution to development amounts to a great deal directly. Indeed, the impacts on local people are often assumed, rather than researched (ATLAS/TRAM 2008: 39). Whilst volunteer tourists can get involved in building homes or schools, or engaging in conservation work within the local community, they have usually paid a significant fee for the opportunity to be involved in this work (an average of \$3,000 per trip in 2007, ATLAS/TRAM 2008: 39): money that, if donated to a local community directly, could potentially pay a greater amount of labour than the individual volunteer could ever hope to provide. This is especially so in the case of gap-years, in which the level of technical skill or professional experience required of volunteers is negligible. Indeed, Simpson (2005) suggests the lack of requirement for any particular expertise is, itself, an element of the appeal of many gap projects. Volunteer tourists are able to experiment with their identity and take on varying roles within the host community with little or no attention paid to their (lack of) qualifications other than that of being an enthusiastic volunteer (Hutnyk 1996: 44).

Hence, it is unsurprising that many of the press commentaries, and of the emerging academic studies and articles on the subject, allude to the moral issue of whether gap year volunteering is principally motivated by altruism, by a desire to benefit the society visited, or whether it is, as Heath argues part an 'economy of experience' through which young people generate 'cultural capital' based on experiences which benefits them in their careers (Heath 2007).

However, it has been argued that the contribution to development cannot be measured simply in terms of the projects themselves. Rather, the projects play a role in developing people who will, in the course of their careers and lives, act ethically in favour of those less well-off. Thus, the experience of volunteering becomes '...an ongoing process which extends far beyond the actual tourist visit' (Wearing 2001: 3).

For example, a common sentiment is articulated by Chris Brown of Teaching Projects Abroad (TPA) who makes the case that a lack of experience of Third World societies on the part of the bankers and businessmen of tomorrow contributes to exploitative relationships (cited in Simpson 2004: 190). He puts it thus: 'How much better it might have

been if all the people who are middle and high management of Shell had spent some time in West Africa [...] how differently they would have treated the Ibo people in Nigeria?' (sic) (Simpson 2004: 190). Jonathan Cassidy, of Quest Overseas, concurs, arguing that if influential business people could 'look back for a split second to that month they spent working with people on the ground playing football with them or whatever' then they would act more ethically in their business lives (Simpson 2004: 191). Such sentiments are typical. Through individual experience we can develop, decision by decision, a more ethical world, with less suffering, more fairness and greater opportunity. This is illustrative of a personalized take on development that seems to have become more prominent in a political climate characterized by the perceived failure of grand political narratives (Gitlin 1995; Bauman 2000; Furedi 2005).

Conclusion

Whilst a number of articles and the tone of many commentaries suggest that there is a continuity between volunteer tourists and neo-colonialism, this paper takes issue with this and argues that in fact volunteering tends to be influenced by post-development and neo-populist thinking. As such, the issue is less neo-colonialism superimposing western ideas of progress and modernity, and more the rejection of progress and economic development. Indeed, the talking up of volunteering (and ethical tourism in general)

as a way to 'make a difference', is in contrast to the decline of macro-political agendas based on economic growth and social transformation of the global South. Indeed, such agendas are eschewed as unsustainable or unrealistic.

Volunteer tourism seems to fit well with the undoubted growth of life political strategies to help others (often seen in terms of well-being rather than development, hence distancing the activity from the macro-economic implications of the latter). Yet, such limited strategies, aimed at a humble 'making a difference', can appear positive and attractive in an anti-political climate. The personal element appears positive – it bypasses big government and eschews big business. Yet, it also bypasses the democratic imperative of representative government and reduces development to individual acts of charity, most often ones that seek to work around rather than transform the relationship of poor, rural societies to the natural world.

Cynicism at the act of volunteering is certainly misplaced. The act of volunteer tourism may involve only simple, commendable charity. However, where volunteer tourism is talked up as sustainable development and the marketing of the gap-year companies merges into development thinking, this is symptomatic of a degradation of the discourse of development. The politics of volunteer tourism represents a retreat from a social understanding of global inequalities and the poverty lived by so many in the developing world.

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