New Colonialists of Africa? - Tackling the White Saviour Complex in Contemporary Voluntourism

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This critical reflection aims to explore the increasing phenomenon of voluntourism in the tourist industry, with western tourists spending months or even years volunteering in African or other third world countries. It also attempts to examine how these attitudes tie into people's understandings of the differences between how both "First" and "Third" world countries work and explores the unconscious privilege and unequal race relations bundled up in these "selfless" acts. The contribution draws on colonialist theories alongside theories on the sociology of tourism in order to examine how a distorted postmodern form of the tourist gaze has led to the growth of this sector. Doing so a discourse analysis will be employed to study the marketing of voluntourism on the most popular websites and unpacking the language and assumptions implicit in how it is sold to the public.

Volunteer tourism is one of the highest growing sectors/"trends" of the tourism industry today, with over 1.6 million people volunteering overseas every year (savethechildren.org, 2017). According to the "Volunteer Forever" website, 93% of volunteers travel solo and 83% of volunteers are female (2018). Voluntourism is often characterised by volunteers travelling from western countries such as the USA, the UK and other wealthy European countries to offer help and support to poor third world communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America which lack sufficient infrastructure and many

modern-day necessary facilities: clean food/water and health etc. These tourists then help for a set amount of time, building facilities or infrastructure such as a school for example and then will head back home to their own countries to reap the benefits of having this volunteering experience on their CV.

"Global Crossroad" is one of the most popular volunteer tourist websites online. Interestingly their main tagline on the website is: "Over 20,000 happy volunteers since 2003" which implies the centricity of the experiences of the volunteers, rather than referencing the happiness/improved wellbeing of the impoverished people they are being sent out to help. Looking through how they have sold their Ugandan retreats, they post (Global Crossroads, n.d: n.p.:

> Uganda declared independence from British colonization in 1962, but the country has had some troubling conflicts since, most notably a bloody civil war. As a result, there are thousands of displaced children in Uganda, which is where volunteers are needed most.

This quote shows the obvious contradictions in this scheme, referring blatantly to how the recent collapse of British colonization is the reason for the country's divide as well as its poor infrastructural and economic state. Yet it is signalled to be crucial that we return to this troubled country to fix their problems. Frantz Fanon (1963), pioneer of

postcolonialist theory, argues it is the colonized people only who are able to rebuild their own culture according to their own preferences and values, the culture which had been erased by colonialism.

Voluntourism is also increasingly criticised in popular media, with many arguing it feeds into the "White Saviour Complex". This is a concept perpetuated by much of the Western media, e.g. in films and television, representing the white man (or woman) stepping into complex situations. Using their power (assumed unproblematically to be derived merely from being a western subject) they are able to solve all the problems in this situation and are consequently hailed as a saviour or a god. At the same time, they are get something out for themselves in the form of work experience. Teju Cole (2012: 5) writes concisely:

> One song we hear too often is the one in which Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism… Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected…the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of "making a difference".

Some charity institutions have picked up on the problematic nature of their campaigns and thus Comic relief has ended its use of (white) celebrities for African charity appeals. This came after accusations from an aid watchdog that their campaigns, particularly one fronted by Ed Sheeran in Liberia, reinforce "poverty tourism" and white saviour stereotypes. David Lammy (quoted in Rawlinson, 2019: n.p), a Labour MP who has long been critical of comic relief for portraying Africa as a continent of hopeless "poverty-stricken victims", said:

> I hope my comments surrounding (this) will inspire the charity to refresh its image and think harder about the effects its

output has on our perceptions of Africa – and the costly knock-on effect this has on the continent… it sends a distorted image of Africa which perpetuates an old idea from the colonial era.

Lammy picks up on a very important theme here in the issues with voluntourism. He argues charities like comic relief amongst others "tattoo images of poverty in Africa" onto the public's mind.

This distorted postmodern form of the tourist gaze has many assumptions and preconceptions baked into it that some could see as implicitly racist; the first being an already assumed and implied paternalistic view of countries in Africa and elsewhere in the non-developed world. It is damaging to disseminate only the image of Africa as weak and needing outside help to the public as it becomes the only association one thinks of when talking about Africa and by doing this, it ignores the vibrant cultural scene in many countries as well as the human achievements and successes Africans have had in the past and present.

'You would think there were no African think-tanks, no African universities, no African human rights lawyers' (Goffe, 2015: 3). Perceptions like this can be dangerous and damaging, not only for how the tourist gaze functions from tourist to the "consumed", but reversely, the gaze emitting from the "consumed" towards the tourist, Vodopivec and Jaffe (2011) argue that voluntourism promotes the idea that, for Africans, support and development comes only from the outside. Writing for the BBC, Zane (2016: 1) explains that:

> Because of the history of slavery and colonialism, many people in Africa find such attitudes deeply patronising and offensive. Some argue that aid can be counterproductive, as it means African countries will continue to rely on outside help.

Many also argue that this is a new postmodern form of colonialism, known as neocolonialism (Guttentag, 2009), 'casting the white Westerner as the hero in a savaged land' (Cecil, Pranav & Takacs, 1994: 8). Boffey (2011: n.p.) writes for The Guardian:

> '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… The 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.'

The point Boffey picks up on here is helpful as it forces us consider how much we are actually helping and to what extent we are damaging these countries, the road to hell is often paved with good intentions as the saying goes. A point to reflect on should consider why we are so enthusiastic to help countries so distant to us; and why do many not turn their "altruistic" gaze towards more local domestic issues in the UK; ones that there are no shortage of, such as the massive increase in homelessness and child poverty (Hood and Waters, 2019), issues that are not too dissimilar to what volunteers would be dealing with in Africa.

Tourism sociologists Vodopivec and Jaffe accuse these companies as selling a holiday in the name of "charity" which essentially extracts value from vulnerable and oppressed minority groups in order to achieve an advantage in the employment market; self-development at the expense of people in developing countries. They argue that volunteer tourism, practiced through the discourse of "altruistic individualism", is in itself a product of neoliberal ideologies and subjectivities, which is (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011). This is troubling because if the emphasis continues to be shifted away from the structures that have caused these problems and more towards personal qualities and virtue, the causes of oppression become more and more invisible and they will in turn reproduce these existing inequalities.

The wider structure of neoliberalism and an expanding service economy has also led to the introduction and growth of this previously niche sector, aiming to offer every different type of tourist experience. Is it this promise of consuming a unique experience in an exotic environment that is the prime reason for the growth of voluntourism? If this is the case, voluntourism can actually be regressive and damaging for these countries if the tourism industry is doing nothing but commodifying their poverty in an exotic location as an opportunity for a holiday combined with a career boost.

However, some would argue that due to our massive wealth and influence as a country, as well as our history of colonialism being responsible for the underdevelopment of these places, that we have a moral duty to support and help these countries and use our privilege for good. I would say to those that would contend that, while it is correct that we did have a large part to play in their underdevelopment and supporting these countries is always a positive, I would argue that voluntourism is not the best way to go about doing this. It seems that although this move may look charitable from the outside, I would argue, relating to Giddens' theory of late modernity and Beck's risk society, contemporary life has made this act hyper-individualised and often more about self-development than about genuine support for those less fortunate than ourselves.

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