

Handbook of Globalisation and Tourism

Edited by

Dallen J. Timothy

*Professor, School of Community Resources and Development,
Arizona State University, USA*

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25. The geopolitics of volunteer tourism

Jacob Henry and Mary Mostafanezhad

INTRODUCTION

With more than 1 billion tourists crossing national borders annually, the tourism industry is one of the most far-reaching geopolitical practices of the twenty-first century. Over the past decade, tourism studies scholars have increasingly addressed the role of geopolitical discourse and practice in tourism (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Dowler, 2013; Hazbun, 2008; Ojeda, 2013; Rowen, 2016). Geopolitical practices encompass the myriad ways that people classify, order, and spatialize the world to produce geopolitical imaginaries of places and the people who inhabit them (Agnew, 2003). These discourses form a particular way of imagining the world through territorial powers (Kearns, 2003, p. 174). In tourism, geopolitical discourses and practices refer to issues such as securitization, territorialization, migration, statecraft, and nation-building. The shift towards these collective themes has ushered in what has been described as a geopolitical turn in tourism studies (Mostafanezhad, 2018).

Volunteer tourism in particular is aptly understood as a geopolitical practice between ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’, where the encounter between transnational actors is mediated by geopolitical discourses of, for example, development, inequality, and place. In this chapter, we consider how geopolitical discourses permeate the everyday activities of volunteer tourists, the projects they choose, and the legacies they (hope to) leave. We argue that critical geopolitics lends a productive, underutilized lens to better understand the transnational and humanitarian interactions that occur on tour. Drawing on popular, feminist, environmental, and imperial dimensions of a wider critical geopolitics framework, we address how state-centric and nationalistic discourses are emboldened or challenged within volunteer tourism.

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS AND VOLUNTEER TOURISM

The critical turn in geopolitics has provided new analytical space for scholarship that examines the role of discourse, texts, and meaning in the formation of geopolitical imaginations and material implications (Agnew, 2003; Dalby, 1991; Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Scholars of critical geopolitics examine how geopolitics can be expanded beyond policy making and academic discourse, to the everyday experience and routine realities of most people (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1667). Particularly useful in this regard is Jason Dittmer’s (2013) concept of geopolitical assemblage, which highlights how geopolitics is always partial and assembled through a complex range of component parts, as well as by state and nonstate practices and histories. In this way, photographs, social media accounts, and physical encounters, among other assemblage components, co-produce volunteer tourism as a geopolitical assemblage. Thus, the analytic of geopolitical

assemblages can account for the mundane, yet geopolitically significant, encounters and experiences of volunteer tourism (Dittmer, 2010).

Popular Geopolitics and Volunteer Tourism

Popular geopolitics is a subfield that addresses the ways in which discourses and rhetoric in popular culture co-produce geopolitical assemblages. Tourism landscapes and experiences have long mediated popular geopolitical discourse and practice, as well as co-produced geopolitical imaginaries. To speak of the popular geopolitics of international volunteering is to acknowledge the ways in which discourses of volunteer tourism draw from geographical imaginations. These discourses have geopolitical implications for the material practices of volunteer tourism as well as international development and conservation more broadly. They demarcate what activities are perceived to be appropriate in particular geographical spaces. For example, the common practice of orphanage volunteer tourism in Cambodia is radically different from the kinds of volunteer tourism one would find in, say, West Virginia (USA). These differences emerge from socio-historical constructions and have real, material implications for volunteer tourists and host community members alike.

There is a range of popular culture texts that mediate the volunteer tourism encounter. Film, for example, is an important genre through which potential volunteer tourists identify sites they would like to visit and volunteer in. Films convey geopolitical pedagogies: viewers learn how to 'read' a city, country, or continent through imagery portrayed in popular media. For example, the 2008 drama *Slum Dog Millionaire* 'taught' a Western audience the geopolitical imaginaries of Mumbai, subsequently amplifying the volunteer tourism industry in the city. Tourism scholars are uniquely positioned to conduct grounded, empirical research on the images, texts, and experiences of volunteer tourism and how they facilitate the learning and re-learning of geopolitical imaginaries. Recent ethnographic work on this topic has revealed the workings of multiscale, embodied, and emotional geopolitics, all of which are essential to the study of volunteer tourism (Benwell, Dodds, & Pinkerton, 2012; Dittmer & Dodds, 2013).

Volunteer Tourism and Soft Power

In contemporary times, states often exert geopolitical force through mechanisms of soft power. That is, rather than every instance of interstate negotiation being a matter of physical coercion or gunpoint (though there is no shortage of guns being pointed), states try to achieve goodwill and moral legitimacy in the global community. Joseph Nye – who popularized the concept of soft power – suggests that states should seek to construct win-win situations, or at least to convince other states that a win-win is possible. Soft-power geopolitics is successful when a state has 'the ability to shape the preferences of others' and engender support of state interests and values (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

International volunteers have long served as agents of soft geopolitical power. Perhaps most visible, the U.S. Peace Corps was born out of the Cold War fervor to stop the spread of communism, especially in Africa (Amin, 1999). The strategy was simple: likable young volunteers positioned in schools and communities throughout the Third World countryside would, through everyday interactions, convince local folks that the United

States was a benevolent force. It was hoped that these citizens would apply pressure on their governments to actively support the US, even if said governments would prefer to remain nonaligned. The strategy was not always successful. In Ghana, the Peace Corps' first host country, the volunteers lived in isolated housing and mainly socialized with expatriates. The only Ghanaians volunteers knew were their students. The American ambassador at the time commented, 'the Ghana government likes them as teachers. But as Peace Corps Ambassadors I know they can do more and I'm dissatisfied' (cited in Amin, 1999, p. 44).

Giving international volunteering a history reveals the ways in which it is not simply an act of individual or solitary practice. It is mediated by myriad institutions, cultural practices, and actors (e.g. celebrity humanitarians, alternative consumers, and volunteer tourists), and a long-standing humanitarian gaze – the relational act of spectatorship legitimating popular humanitarian experiences (Mostafanezhad, 2013). While the Peace Corps certainly still sends volunteers abroad, its enrollment is overshadowed by the dizzying array of for-profit, religious, and nonprofit volunteer sending organizations trying to woo today's would-be voluntourist. Nonstate actors like these sending organizations are an increasingly important part of the geopolitical puzzle; however, unlike state actors, private entities may 'reinforce or be at odds with official foreign policy goals' (Nye, 2004, p. 17). However, even the overt attempts at soft power via tourism currently sponsored by the Chinese government may also fall short of policy goals. Chinese tourists 'do not get to meet the locals who have no experience with China. Rather, they meet locals who have been more or less trained to meet their needs. Accordingly, the outreach of "Chinese ambassadors" is actually rather limited' (Chen & Duggan, 2016, p. 54).

Tourism scholars have an opportunity to advance the study of critical geopolitics by analyzing the geopolitical positioning of contemporary volunteer tourists. Are they, like the 1960s Peace Corps volunteers, rather ineffective as agents of soft power? How do hosts engage with the cultural values that are coded as 'American' or 'Chinese'? Perhaps most interestingly, can citizens now effectively rebuke their states' foreign policy abroad, or are they subsumed by nationalist categories as soon as they cross borders? These questions ultimately tie back into the multiple ways in which we 'live geopolitics,' a central concern of critical geopolitical scholarship.

VOLUNTEER TOURISM AS A GEOPOLITICAL PRACTICE

A diverse range of theoretical interventions in political geography can help us better understand the geopolitical work that is being done by volunteer tourism and volunteer tourists. We consider three of the most popular forms of volunteer tourism (teaching, conservation, and infrastructure) from three different geopolitical perspectives (feminist/ everyday, environmental, and imperial).

Teaching: Feminist Geopolitical Perspectives

A large plurality of volunteer tourists go abroad to teach. These volunteers sometimes participate in informal community education projects; however, more frequently they are stationed within a state's formal schooling system. Volunteer teachers generally

teach subjects that are not assessed for student advancement (e.g. art, life skills, physical education) or act as teacher's aides. They also are frequently responsible for English lessons (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). Many teaching-oriented sending organizations do not require volunteers to have any specialized content knowledge, pedagogical training, or prior experience working in a school (Jakubiak & Smagorinsky, 2016). Volunteers tend to struggle in the classroom, realizing that their lack of training in education severely limits their ability to be effective teachers, especially in an under-resourced school with English-as-a-foreign-language students (Jakubiak, 2017; Li, 2017). The volunteer teachers end up revising their priorities. What might have begun as a heroic mission to improve student learning outcomes slowly transforms into playing with children in order to prove to them how much the volunteer cares.

Feminist geopolitics helps us understand how these embodied interactions, which are small, private, and emotional, make 'the relationship between the intimate and the global evident' (Massaro & Williams, 2013, p. 571). Many people might question how travelling to play with poor children is *political* at all. Feminist geopolitics points to such depoliticalizing, especially around issues of transnational care labor (elementary education included), and tries to understand the power dynamics that render some activities banal or nonpolitical. What types of activities are removed from the realm of the political? How are patriarchal and other oppressive relations obscured by understanding volunteer teaching solely as an act of inspirational lessons and making children smile?

Feminist theory has long been skeptical of conceptual binaries and dualisms (Ferguson, 2017). The cross-border educational encounter between young people in the Global South and their Northern volunteer instructors 'unsettles binary conceptions of politics as either global or local, central or peripheral, focusing instead on the circulation of power, identity, and subjectivity across space vis-à-vis transnational populations' (Hyndman, 2004, p. 315). The phenomenon of international volunteer teaching muddles with the classic binary: local vs. global. The volunteers themselves are highly mobile, travelling across borders to deliver lessons and express care; they are not local teachers, but they are forced to operate within a highly localized context of a school bureaucracy. Additionally, the lessons they design – especially in the subject of English – are meant to prepare their students for a life beyond what is imagined to be the local. Volunteers often see their role as one of inspiration; they imagine modeling the possibilities that exist beyond a rural village or slum. It is often assumed (sometimes erroneously) that the students have been limited in their mobilities within their own country, and certainly internationally.

Feminist geopolitics 'unpacks geopolitical power and demonstrates such power's exceptional role in the everyday lives of real people' (Massaro & Williams, 2013, p. 567). As Jakubiak (2017, p. 199) has found, volunteer teachers of English assume that improved English (i.e. vocabulary building, *but also* alignment to prestige varieties of the language) will lead to 'increased and elevated job prospects, unparalleled economic opportunities, and entry into an elite, nearly physical, space.' In reality, English acquisition – and schooling in general – often are not enough to make up for structural features like restrictive visa regimes and currency deflation, which frequently hinder students' mobilities. These structural barriers are not of concern to the international volunteer teacher, who is able to move across borders with ease.

The feminist geopolitical reading of volunteer teaching disrupts the local-global binary and reveals how the positionality of mobile volunteer teachers and supposedly immobile students creates a spatialized imaginary of aspiration. It reveals the contradictions within the humanitarian gaze; the volunteers may ‘empower’ the students through language learning as a form of cultural inclusion while also doing little to address geopolitical regimes of exclusion.

Conservation: Environmental Geopolitics Perspectives

Environmental geopolitics are of growing significance globally as states begin to define transboundary environmental problems and solutions. *Environmental geopolitics* is defined as ‘an approach to examining how environmental themes are used to support geopolitical arguments and realities. It asks how the environment is brought into narratives, practices and physical realities of power and place’ (O’Lear, 2018, p. 2). A growing subfield in political geography, environmental geopolitics examines the spatial aspects of risk and security as they relate to the natural world.

For many states, ecotourism is an important antidote to environmental degradation and is frequently seen as a win-win strategy for conservation and development goals. However, ecotourism is also bound up in deeply rooted power relations, where the interests of residents of newly designated conservation areas or tourism sites are often overshadowed by state goals. Conservation-oriented volunteer tourism projects are deeply embedded in a range of environmental geopolitical practices whereby they reshape environments and the political spaces that they represent. By integrating political ecology and geopolitics, environmental geopolitics offers new perspectives from which to examine ‘larger institutional processes at work to discursively and materially produce global natures’ (Bigger & Neimark, 2017, p. 14).

Scholars of environmental geopolitics propose that rather than taking ‘arguments about food shortages, resources conflicts, or climate security at face value’, we should ‘investigate how food, resources and climate are identified, made distinct, measured, and portrayed as something, somewhere, to be secured or that pose a particular threat requiring a response’ (O’Lear, 2018, p. 2). Conservation-oriented volunteer tourism frequently draws on contemporary ideas about enclosure and protection. Activities such as caring for elephants, tagging turtles, and restoring ecological habitats are common within volunteer tourism. These practices reinforce a sense of obligation to secure the environment, as an army might secure a city or a state its borders. Conservation volunteering also tends to sharpen the Western epistemological distinction between people and nature. In one oft-cited example, volunteers were shocked that Costa Rican hosts would sell jewelry made from sea turtle shells, and even went so far as to organize night patrols and secure a perimeter around the turtles’ beach, creating a miniature space of sovereignty (Gray & Campbell, 2007). Volunteers tend to advocate for a geopolitics of fortress conservation (Brockington, 2002); they support states that seek to reassert absolute sovereignty over space in the name of nature preservation. Discourse emerging from conservation volunteering espouses the idea that when there is human-nature conflict, nature should be protected. Never mind that all these volunteers fly to their conservation sites in airplanes or that tourism now accounts for 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018).

Infrastructure: Imperial Geopolitics Perspectives

Perhaps no volunteer tourism activity is quite as infamous as going to Africa to build a well. The small infrastructure genre of international volunteering, in many ways, paved the way for the rise and diversification of the contemporary volunteer tourism landscape. Nowadays, these activities garner a fair amount of criticism, perhaps more than any other voluntourism niche. This is partly because infrastructure is physical and visible, both when it is functioning and when it is broken. It is easier to launch critiques against a neglected PlayPump than to conduct a qualitative assessment of environmental improvement or teaching quality. Also, infrastructure projects – like volunteer teaching – are rooted in uncomfortable imperial impulses. A group that is ‘we’ decides that ‘they’ do not know or have something, and ‘we’ should give it to ‘them’. Unlike teaching that can be contextualized and individualistic, infrastructure volunteer tourism works best with templates and routine. Not only have ‘we’ decided that ‘they’ need a well, we assume that they need the exact type of well that can be built on a standard budget, over a standard timeframe, by a group of unskilled laborers who are unfamiliar with the local geography. Nevertheless, international small infrastructure volunteering has weathered the significant criticism and remains incredibly popular with volunteer tourists.

Imperial geopolitics are organized by a simple principle: ‘Dangers come from the remote parts of the world . . . and they do so because of a lack of connectivity, enforced either by lawless remoteness or the deliberate design of local tyrants and dictators who deny their peoples the benefits and opportunities of connectivity’ (Dalby, 2008, p. 427). Infrastructure (or lack thereof) has always been decisive in times of conflict. Warring factions always seek to secure as many roads, ports, airstrips, and cities as possible. However, geopolitical peacekeeping is also focused on infrastructure and the idea of remoteness. Connected places are legible and therefore less likely to cause problems for the state or the geopolitical order (Scott, 1998). Thus, what might seem like altruistic connectivity can also serve to make a population more reliant on state services (electricity, for example) or more connected to the centers of power via paved roads.

Infrastructure development projects, not only those that involve volunteers, are generally contested within communities (Baptista, 2010). Community members who seek to benefit from closer alignment to the state or who can consolidate their power using the new well, pump, dam, or building will support the project. Those who stand to lose power will, obviously, oppose it. Volunteers working on infrastructure projects often seek to bring villages across the world into the ‘modern era’. However, they do not generally interrogate the local dynamics at play. When community members seem unenthused by projects, volunteers assume that they are just ‘locals’ stuck in their old ways (Park, 2018). Rarely do volunteers consider the possibility that community members are making sensible choices after assessing the relationalities which may emerge from the project. Even when it seems like communities are almost unanimously excited for an infrastructure project, conflict over how to allocate resources from the project may go on for years after the volunteers leave (Crabtree, 2013). If the opinions are irreconcilable, the state might be called in to mediate the claims. Increased infrastructure inherently leads to increased connectivity; thus, the imperial geopolitical project to end remoteness and the danger it supposedly breeds is advanced.

TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE GEOPOLITICS OF VOLUNTEER TOURISM

A geopolitics framework provides new lenses through which to examine volunteer tourism. By foregrounding the ways in which volunteer tourism co-constructs geopolitical imaginaries, scholars can address the local and global implications of the practice. Although volunteer tourism can have positive impacts on local communities and environments, the broader geopolitical implications of the practice must be reexamined. A geopolitical account of volunteer tourism requires a multiscalar perspective. Ethnographic research can tell us much about how volunteer tourism is experienced, but these experiences should be scaled up to consider the broader discursive implications to which they contribute.

Emergent research on volunteer tourism addresses the range of experiences that the category encompasses. For instance, while there is now a significant body of literature that explores Western volunteer tourists, new work reveals how volunteer tourism takes different forms in non-Western contexts (Chen, 2016; Pan, 2017; Wu, Fu, & Kang, 2018). The growing representation of Chinese volunteer tourists in Southeast Asia, for example, reflects the shifting geopolitical climate and center of power. Reflecting on what has been termed ‘Chinese globalisation’, these forms of volunteer tourism can be similarly examined for the ways in which they perpetuate and contest existing geopolitical discourses.

Given the growing literature on volunteer tourism and its cognate fields such as celebrity humanitarianism and humanitarian aid work, a number of key questions have emerged over the past two decades of research in the field. For instance, we can consider how scale figures into our analysis of the volunteer tourism encounter. What would happen, for example, if in our research we focused not only on the encounter, but also on the local, regional, national, and global context in which volunteer tourism exists? How can we address the ways in which the humanitarian imagination mediates but is also mediated by the humanitarian encounter, and with what implications? Emergent research may also consider how we can spatialize our analysis to map the geopolitical implications of volunteer tourism.

Despite more than two decades of work on the topic, there is still a significant need to address the ways in which race, class, ethnicity, and other social categories are perpetuated and/or contested through volunteer tourism. For instance, scholars have only recently begun to critically examine how volunteer tourism has contributed to a racialized geopolitics of place (Henry, 2018). Intersectional work might examine the gendered expectations of the humanitarian imagination and how volunteer work – by definition, unpaid – marginalizes women through the spatializing effect of distinctions between public and private spaces. Yet, volunteer tourism may also provide ‘a physical and an ideological space in which the different meanings of femininity could be explored or contested’ (Ware, [1992] 2015).

Although tourism scholars have long been preoccupied with the role of authenticity and alienation in tourists’ motivations, these theoretical framings have not yet been fully addressed in volunteer tourism. For many volunteers, the authenticity of experience is still the yardstick by which the experience is measured. Emerging research may also consider how authenticity figures into the geopolitical imaginary and the ways in which it correlates with global flows of capital. For example, scholars may consider the materiality of authenticity or how volunteers consciously enlist geopolitical discourses in

social media posts after they have returned home. This kind of analysis could also lend itself to insights into the geoeconomics of volunteer tourism, or how local development strategies are constituted by and co-constitute neoliberal globalisation and cross-border interdependencies that can pose a challenge to state authority (Sparke, 1998).

CONCLUSION

This chapter emphasized the significance of addressing volunteer tourism as a geopolitical practice. As a form of soft power, volunteer tourism is deeply entangled in broader geopolitical assemblages of state-making, international relations, and development. These assemblages have discursive as well as material implications. As partial and complex forms, the geopolitical assemblages of volunteer tourism are co-produced as much through, among other component parts, clichéd images of young Euro-Americans caring for orphans in 'Africa' as they are by state discourses around international development, aid, and debt.

Yet, these discourses and practices do not go unchallenged. Over the past several years, a number of critiques of volunteer tourism in popular culture have emerged that call into question the geopolitical implications of volunteer tourism. For instance, the satirical Instagram and linked Facebook page *Barbie Saviors* and the Tumblr *Humanitarians of Tinder* have received significant attention in popular media for how they highlight the broader geopolitical implications of volunteer tourism (Mason, 2016; Richey, 2016; Wearing et al., 2018).

For instance, in her critique of the intersection of sexiness and benevolence in images of volunteer tourism experiences on Tinder, a popular dating app, Mason asks, 'why do people use humanitarian photos to generate hook-ups on social media? How does holding an African baby make someone "hot"'? (Mason, 2016, p. 822). These critiques reflect the ways in which the assemblage components of volunteer tourism, such as the photographs, social media accounts, and physical encounters, are also significant sites of geopolitical practice. Thus, the analytic of geopolitical assemblages can account for the mundane, yet geopolitically significant, encounters and experiences of volunteer tourism (Dittmer, 2010). In this way, popular geopolitical imaginaries fuel and are fueled by the humanitarian gaze and other neocolonial impulses.

In this chapter we argued that three prominent genres of volunteer tourism – teaching, infrastructure, and conservation – can be theorized as geopolitical projects. By theoretically grounding our analysis of these practices in feminist, environmental, and imperial geopolitics, we demonstrated a range of new frameworks from which to reconsider the geopolitical implications of volunteer tourism. We also laid groundwork for future inquiry to guide scholars and students who seek to contribute to the geopolitical turn in tourism studies. We highlighted emerging work that addresses volunteer tourism among non-Western volunteer tourists. Emerging work from Asia, for instance, is illustrative of emerging trends towards intra-Asian volunteer tourism flows. This work will have a diverse range of geopolitical implications that may depart from current work that typically focuses on Western volunteer tourists in non-Western contexts.

These threads of analytical inquiry into volunteer tourism as a geopolitical practice are woven together by the ways in which they draw attention to geopolitics of everyday

experience. They also highlight the need for multiscalar and historically situated accounts of volunteer tourism. This emphasis suggests a need for a methodological shift away from quantitative analyses of motivations, impacts, and sustainability and toward a more nuanced account of how geopolitical discourse is co-constructed and circulates at multiple scales. Thus, we argue that the academic study of volunteer tourism would benefit from a geopolitical perspective that accounts for the broader implications of the encounter and industry.

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