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Directions for volunteer tourism and radical pedagogy

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A common refrain – the pedagogical call – reverberates through critical volunteer tourism studies. It demands that counter-hegemonic ‘pedagogy’ be deployed to educate and implicate volunteers. The first call for pedagogy seems to come from Kate Simpson (2004, p. 690) who demanded that voluntourism incorporate a ‘pedagogy of social justice’ (PSJ) which would ask volunteers to consider ‘why there are global differences, or how people’s lives in different places intersect.’ Scholars have routinely echoed this call over the years (i.e. Freidus 2017, p. 1318; Jakubiak 2016, p. 207; Keese 2011, p. 275; Tiessen 2007, p. 87; Vrasti 2013, p. 74). However, while the pedagogical call is oft-repeated, it has remained theoretically and methodologically stagnant. It usually demands (broadly) that volunteers reflect on their positionality and study historical and contemporary political economy, sometimes with a regional focus. Methods recommendations make quick references to Paulo Freire and the larger critical pedagogy tradition. With a few exceptions (Crossley, 2013; Hammersley, 2014; MacDonald, 2014), calls for a PSJ are placed in the conclusions of critique essays, literally an afterthought. This is especially surprising since asking young people to consider ‘how people’s lives in different places intersect’ is what geographers do daily! This note offers three avenues for further research to develop a more sophisticated theory of radical pedagogy as intervention within voluntourism. Studying these avenues – researcher-reflection, action research and continued engagement – will help scholars better conceptualize the opportunities and limits of a pedagogical voluntourism for counter-hegemony (Henry, 2018).

Researcher-reflection is needed to better understand why pedagogical calls are so prevalent. After all, scholars could remain more theoretically pure by denouncing voluntourism, by saying it cannot be salvaged. But we do not; instead we call for pedagogical reform. Why is this? Is it only because we believe the voluntourism machine cannot be stopped or is there a real anticipation among scholars of various critical persuasions that voluntourists can become more critical with the right guidance? Harn Luh Sin (2010, p. 990) once thoughtfully reflected, ‘something intrinsic in my heart tells me not to stamp down hard on many volunteer tourists’ goodwill and genuine desire to do something about the unfair world they see.’ This ‘something intrinsic’ perhaps stems from the many similarities
between the volunteer and researcher. Volunteers demonstrate an interest in global inequality, they stay in the remote places to which we have deep commitments; and they often have the same liberal worldviews radical academics held before Marx, Foucault or Kropotkin showed us the errors of our ways.

For some of us, the similarities are less abstract. Volunteer tourism has propelled more than a few students into graduate programs to further interrogate their volunteering (i.e. Hammersley, 2014; Jakubiak 2011, p. 16; Rao 2010, p. 19; Zahra 2011, p. 91). Recent reviews of fields like African studies and development studies have noted the presence of volunteers-cum-scholars (Gordon, 2015, p. 18; Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018, p. 98). For a facet of volunteer tourism which is so close to home, the transition from volunteer to (radical) academic or activist remains woefully understudied. Future research should seek to better understand the social factors that predict this transition. What are the effects of prior coursework, affective encounters and volunteering motivations (beyond altruism vs. egoism)? Reflecting on the commonalities in our own stories will allow us to better conceptualize the moves a PSJ would need to make to steer volunteers towards critical geographies.

We also need to conduct action research to test pedagogical methods. Scholars currently in the field should do our best (and publish our tactics) to nudge the volunteers and field staff we encounter in our research to become better geographers. Liang, Caton, and Hill (2015, p. 236) have shown that, ‘participating in an interview was in itself viewed as a noteworthy catalyst in helping study participants reflect on their learning [which] demonstrates the value that can ensue simply by having a relative stranger ask the right questions.’ Hammersley (2014) used email-based interview prompts to facilitate volunteers’ critical reflection even after they returned home. As action researchers, we can use our lines of questioning in interviews and intermediate correspondence to help push volunteers to develop their geographical and sociological imaginations.

As we tear down hegemonic narratives, we must not forget the importance of continued engagement with returned volunteers. Literature on the post-tour is still sparse (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Couch & Georgeou, 2017; Ong, King, Lockstone-Binney, & Junek, 2018). However, a common narrative is beginning to form: many volunteers fall back into old rhythms, life trajectories and (non)politics upon returning home (Couch & Georgeou, 2017; Ong et al., 2018; Schwarz, 2015). The returned volunteer is (understandably) overwhelmed by newfound radical leanings and generally unsupported in developing these ideas. Couch and Georgeou (2017, 28) report a particularly visceral example from a respondent they call Sam who stated: ‘I really felt that no-one understood me or gave a shit. I remember wearing one of those t-shirts that said ‘China is raping Tibet’ … my poor mum asked me to stop wearing it … she said it was too full-on and would confront people… I actually felt there was no point saying or doing anything.’ (For a more encompassing example of a post-volunteering crisis, see Holdsworth and Quinn’s (2012, pp. 399–401) treatment of a volunteer they call ‘Matilda.’) The hard work of being ‘full-on and confronting people’ is essential to radical politics, but volunteers’ commitment to these challenges is likely to waiver without continuing support.

Radical educator Jean Anyon (2011, p. 99) argues that, ‘people do not “become political” and then take part in contention; rather, participation in contention creates new, politicized identities.’ Social spheres are as important for contention as consciousness raising – the implication for volunteer tourism is that any PSJ would be utterly lacking if it did not carry on after the volunteers return home (Park, 2018). If ex-volunteers are properly guided, they may become the vanguard of tourism geographies’ ‘geopolitical turn’ (Mostafanezhad, 2018). After all, volunteers can actually help the people they meet in Kenya, Costa Rica or
Thailand by turning obscure policy conversations in the Global North about free movement/open borders or debt cancellation/reparation into contested political topics. Returned volunteers have ‘a particular kind of credibility that we often associate with ‘first-hand experience” even if they are misrepresenting place (Roddick, 2014, p. 272). A PSJ would need to convince volunteers to wield this credibility against the geopolitically predatory policy emanating from their home states and give them the political literacy and support to do so.

The PSJ project is opportune now. Recent research has documented what many of us have sensed – voluntourism is (finally) getting a bad public reputation (Schwarz, 2018). It no longer ‘enjoys such unabashed support’ which Vrasti (2013, p. 4) wrote against just a few years ago. Interestingly, some volunteers are now choosing programs they feel are less enjoyable or more reflexive to sidestep social scrutiny from peers and kin (Schwarz, 2018, p. 194). With a fear of the ‘voluntourist’ label hanging over their heads, perhaps a critical mass of volunteers will be willing to engage with us scholars and educators – to do our assigned readings and participate in our Socratic circles?

Undoubtedly, some acknowledgement of the numerous limitations of a social justice pedagogy in voluntourism is warranted (see also Henry, 2018). One limit is profit: this effort will not be conducted by a for-profit company. Length of stay is another barrier. The archetypical in-and-out-dig-a-well project is probably not conducive to a PSJ; deep and intermediate volunteers are more likely to be radicalized (Park, 2018). Most importantly, even advocates of a pedagogical voluntourism acknowledge that educating the privileged to face oppression and complicity often yields diminishing returns (for a critique, see Ahmed, 2004). At the same time, we do not actually know what a geography of social justice embedded within and continuing beyond voluntourism could accomplish. I argue it is time to answer our own calls and find out.

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Notes on contributor
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