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Volunteer Tourism Mystification: A Global Capitalism with a Human Face

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Title: Volunteer Tourism Mystification: A Global Capitalism with a Human Face

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Abstract:

This presentation aims to offer a critical analysis of volunteer tourism through a dialogue between macro and micro perspectives, demonstrating how individual histories of volunteers are inscribed in the dynamics of globalization and articulated through market logics.

In the age of neoliberalism, with the rise of social inequalities and global ecological problems, many voices have been raised to denounce the limits of the current system and the necessity to develop ethical and responsible alternatives, in order to address these problems. Ambivalent motivations (feelings of guilt combined with a sense of responsibility) drive people to escape the current system, namely the capitalist system, perceived as the primary cause of all these plagues. This rejection is obviously expressed through consumption or anti-consumption. However, ironically, the market logic based on consumer needs satisfaction and creation succeeds in absorbing these forms of resistance and turning them into new markets. Hence, resistance and alternative forms of consumption are perceived as new opportunities for expansion. As Holt (2002) explains:

The market today thrives on... unruly do-it-yourselfers who engage in non-conformist producers. Since the market feeds off of the constant production of difference, the most creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices are the most productive for the system. Furthermore, in this international context of environmental, economic and social crisis, the government's failure to respond to these issues on a national and international scale has led to a trust crisis among citizens (Hancock, 1989). Consequently, civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGO) have taken the lead in the field of international development and humanitarian aid. Especially after the independence of colonies, development became the new articulation that governs the relationship between the West and the so-called "third world" countries (Hancock, 1989). Thus, humanitarian workers became new heroes, a vocation that fascinates many young westerners who aspire to work in this field and change the face of the world. Alain Ehrenberg (1991) points out the central role of consumption, in the society of individuals, which is to express oneself. He suggests that consumption has recycled the ideals of the liberation movement of the seventies and has built on it an ideal of personal realization and freedom where everyone could create her/his own legend.

In this context, the volunteer tourism market has emerged, offering the perfect formula for a total immersion in a Hero Journey (Campbell, 1949), an experience that combines tourism and volunteering through participation in social projects in developing countries, such as orphanages, in order to contribute to poverty alleviation (Wearing, 1991). It allows young people without experience to play the role of humanitarian workers during their holidays while reconciling their altruistic motivations (helping the poor) and their self-interest (leisure and self-realization).

Early research on volunteer tourism took an advocacy stance focusing on its numerous advantages in terms of community development, environment preservation, medical assistance, and educational support (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). However, this phase of advocacy was

followed by a wave of criticism, which pointed out the possible negative impact of volunteer tourism. The dark side of this emerging market as a new form of exploitation and colonialism was highlighted both inside and outside of academic circles (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Although this awareness has risen, the volunteer tourism industry does not seem to be affected by this criticism. The proliferation of NGOs and travel agencies acting in this field is proof of this.

Drawing from insights from post-development theory (Escobar, 1995) and the society of individuals (Giddens, 1991; Ehrenberg, 1991), the purpose of this paper is to understand the volunteer tourism marketplace by analysing the websites of three volunteer tourism agencies. Preliminary results show that the volunteer tourism market finds its source from the need, or rather the pressure, of the contemporary individual to be someone exceptional and to surpass her/himself. Inspired by the colonial era, grounded in western individualistic society, and legitimized through the illusion of development, the volunteer market is a mystification of a global capitalism with a human face.

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