

Book review

Volunteer Tourism – Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times

**Mostafanezhad Mary
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An overall commentary about the content of book

Readers who are expecting to receive an extensive overview of how the market of volunteer tourism organization and economy has developed will be disappointed but readers looking for a critical perspective and for ways that neoliberalism mediates tourism developments in Thailand, this book is a good match.

The author Mostafanezhad is a Critical Anthropology Scholar with a sharp eye for detail who spent years in the field and speaks the language of the hosts and provides an insider's view. Volunteer tourism is a very fast growing niche tourism market in the world and is fascinating in its complexity.

Drawing on cross-disciplinary perspectives in geography and anthropology as well as development, tourism and cultural studies, the author illustrates how a focus on sentimentality in volunteer tourism encounters obscures the structural inequalities on which the experience is based. Throughout the book this focus is omnipresent, however during the read and examining the extensive fieldwork it also becomes clear to the reader that the volunteer tourism experience has many layers. The all-pervading extensive geopolitical ideological focus does not fully catch the particularities of skilful collected data showing often-complex interactions. The statement by the author that "volunteer tourism is a twenty-first century materialization of

popular humanitarianism where the geopolitics of hope are remapped in a commodity oriented fashion" (p. 143) shows her political perspective and sets the tone for the rest of the book.

What contribution does the book make to our understanding of the future of tourism?

The book provides us with an account of what happens when popular humanitarianism, ethical consumption and tourism in a neoliberal marked economy meet. It is a useful insight into the future of tourism because in the future popular humanitarianism, ethical consumption and tourism will meet again in different configurations. The developments in Thailand have been mapped out. The book shows how a neoliberal system turns even developmental issues into a tourism commodities and clearly shows the effects of advances such as popular humanitarianism on tourism development. This is relevant since popular humanitarianism might be a driving force for other developments in tourism. The book also provides a future insight into an understanding of a geopolitics of hope. This is also expressed in the book: *The Critical Turn in Tourism Studies: Creating an Academy of Hope*, edited by I. Ateljevic, N. Morgan, and A. Pritchard,

This book is one of a number published by Ashgate New Directions in Tourism Analyses. The aim of the series is to publish high-quality monographs or edited collections that seek to develop tourism analysis at both theoretical and substantive levels using approaches which are broadly derived from allied social science disciplines such as sociology, social anthropology, human and social geography, and cultural studies.

The central arguments of the book

The author of the book poses three central arguments that are implicitly

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discussed in the book and explicitly mentioned at the start of the book.

First, how neoliberalism is resisted as well as how this resistance is co-opted through the privatization of social justice agendas.

Second, how individuals take on neoliberal subjectivities and identity formations.

Third, the ways neoliberalism is appropriated as a coping strategy in local struggles for economic survival.

Structure and setup of the book

The book is structured through seven chapters including an introductory and a concluding chapter.

In Chapter 2, entitled “Making a difference one village at a time” is an historical account of the origins of volunteer tourism. It poses the thesis that volunteer tourism is not a new phenomenon and that as early 1850, Thomas Cook’s original package tour was inspired by “broad social agenda” and philanthropic goals” in the twenty-first century the volunteer tourist is considered a neoliberal subject. Accordingly the author volunteer tourism is motivated by a widespread romanticization of peoples and places perceived to be beyond the realm of capitalist modernity and therefore living more authentic and community oriented lives (p. 40).

In Chapter 3: “The seduction of development: NGOs and alternative tourism in Northern Thailand”. Briefly introduces the problematic relationship between them. The chapter identifies different NGO’s and their history in the Thai context. Moreover the chapter offers relevant testimonials from volunteers regarding the NGO’s. The theme of the next Chapter, 4 is: “Cosmopolitan empathy, new social movements and the moral economy of volunteer tourism”. It resulted in a very readable and insightful chapter, which claims that the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami triggered the development of so called celebrity volunteers around the world as role models for young people.

Celebrities so as Angelina Jolie, Madonna and George Clooney lead the voluntary tourists and provide a basis for a global citizenship.

In Chapter 5: “The cultural politics of sentimentality in volunteer tourism” The author introduces her political agenda and argues that volunteer tourism stresses the sentimental aspects of development and neglects structural inequality. Through a number of examples she backs up the argument. In Chapter 6: “Converging interests? Cross-cultural authenticity in volunteer tourism” focusses on the experiences of the volunteers. This chapter offers an interesting perspective. The experiences the author describes from a personal level are perceived by me the reader as rather valuable. However, in the argument of the book, these are being framed as rather plastic neoliberal phenomenon. This finding is rather controversial since it somehow undermines the argument of the book. In Chapter 7 “Re-mapping the movement: popular humanitarianism and the geopolitics of hope in volunteer tourism” the author also becomes more optimistic and sees potential for volunteer tourism to play a role in a so called “Geopolitics of Hope”. In the introduction to Chapter 1, the author introduces the Assemblage theory by Deleuze and Guattari, using this theory would have helped the author to identify what volunteer tourism does at a larger number of levels.

Would you recommend purchasing, yes or no and reasons why?

I would recommend buying the book since it offers readers a rigorous perspective, which is insightful and unique.

By the end of the book, the author is also seems to be a different person. She loses some of her strong opinions and ends with questions for the reader. I agree, I can see potential interactions which somehow can escape the neoliberal forces and become transformative in itself.

Through ethnographic and theoretical representing of volunteer tourism alignments in the milieu of volunteer tourism in Northern Thailand, the author provides an account of neoliberalism as a cultural, political and economic ideology and practise that takes place, shifts and reconfigures within the transnational volunteer tourism encounter.

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Further reading

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

Grit, A.G. and Lynch, P. (2011), "Hotel Transvaal & molar lines as a tool for opening up spaces of hospitality", in Ateljevic, I., Morgan, N. and Pritchard, A. (Eds), *The Critical Turn in Tourism Studies: Creating an Academy of Hope*, New York, NY, pp. 208-18.

Mostafanezhad, A.P.M. (2014), *Volunteer Tourism: Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times*, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

About the author

Dr Alexander Grit is a Research Lecturer at the Stenden University of Applied Sciences. He teaches courses on leisure studies, tourism development, urban development, hospitality and retail concept development, and he conducts research with students and partners into the art of facilitating serendipity in spaces of hospitality. His research interest focusses on the health of interactional spaces, network organizations, art and hospitality, serendipitous processes and Deleuzian Philosophy. He has contributed articles and book chapters on art, retail concepts, home exchanges and museums to edited books and journals including *Research in Hospitality Management* and *The Critical Turn in Tourism Studies: Creating an Academy of Hope* (2010). He is co-author of the book *Disruptive Tourism and its Untidy Guests: Alternative Ontologies for Future Hospitalities* (2014).