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Challenging the Responsibility of 'Responsible Volunteer Tourism'

Introduction

Volunteering in tourism is changing. An increasing number of organisations no longer merely advocate volunteering but now offer opportunities to volunteer *responsibly*. The difference between volunteering and volunteering responsibly is rarely explained but the latter implies a stronger moral dimension; to participate is to evidently do good. To that extent, the promotion of responsible volunteer tourism might reasonably appeal to policy-makers seeking to maximise socio-economic welfare of those living in particular destinations. This Dialogues paper questions the ability of organisations to offer, and for actors to participate in, 'responsible' volunteering. Moreover, it argues that the notion of responsible volunteer tourism offers no more than a veneer of respectability to an activity which has complex consequences which are potentially valuable or damaging in their effect. Hence, there is a danger that responsible volunteer tourism amounts to little more than a marketing device to attract more participants rather than address the root causes of inequalities that neoliberalism entails. This paper thus seeks to challenge academics and policy makers to critically rethink responsible tourism and, more specifically responsible volunteer tourism. In line with the critical turn in tourism studies, we emphasise the need to address the political structures and imbalances of responsible tourism discourses (Jamal et al., 2013) as we consider the ethicality and practice of responsible volunteer tourism.

The paper develops this critique through four key issues that remain apparent. Firstly, we argue that responsible volunteer tourism remains integral to neoliberalism which emphasises market based economics as the solution to poverty at the expense of broader state interventions into the social inequalities that responsible volunteer tourists engage with. Secondly, we argue that responsible volunteer tourism emphasises the responsibility of the individual (often without any real accountability) to solve the problems of social inequalities and thus masks the need for the broader actions that responsible tourism asks for. Thirdly, we note the inherent power relations that are involved in any form of responsible volunteer tourism and how this is predicated on a 'care for the self' rather than a care for the other. Fourthly, we highlight the continued neo-colonialism involved in responsible volunteer tourism through ongoing Eurocentrism. Fifthly, we acknowledge the ways in which so called green marketing of responsible tourism also masks inequalities through discourses of heroism and greenwashing. It is concluded that policy makers need to be much more critical of responsible volunteer tourism if they are to avoid the Cassandra complex.

Neoliberalism

Volunteer tourism shares similar values of care and awareness with responsible tourism. At first, the latter emerged as an alternative and responsible form of travelling (Wearing, 2001; McGehee, 2002) and it has been also been referred to as justice, pro-poor, or goodwill tourism (Butcher and Smith, 2010; Rogerson, 2011). Nonetheless, rising concerns over industry practices and subsequent attempts to improve its operations have marked a shift from being implicitly responsible volunteer tourism to be openly labelled responsible volunteer tourism. This is particularly evident if we look at the recent efforts made by the industry to develop and adhere to guidelines for the creation of

'more responsible' volunteer tourism experiences. In this article we critique the implications and complexities that underpin 'more responsible' volunteer tourism products and experiences. The volunteer tourism industry is integrated into the growth-focused logics of neoliberalism and it follows the same economic model of "relentless growth in global consumption" (Carrington et al., 2015: 2). As a result of growth in contemporary capitalism, everyday consumption practices are subject to change to satisfy new consumer's desires for a laudable focus on sustainability, ethics and social justice. This, allows possibilities of alternative consumption which "inadvertently works to thwart the destruction of capitalism" saving it from itself through the creation of a "more just, more sustainable, kinder" (Carrington et al., 2015:3) type of capitalism. Conceptualising responsible volunteer tourism within this neoliberal capitalist context facilitates a more critical understanding of the difficulties and often paradoxes that permeate the commercial and moral drivers of developing responsible volunteer tourism experiences. The danger is that advocates of responsible volunteer tourism become complicit in masking the unequal relationships that precipitate the need for the very actions they support.

Individualism

The growth in responsible tourism discourses is part of the wider neoliberalisation of development and humanitarianism in tourism (Mostanfanezhad and Hannam, 2014). In neoliberal terms there is an absence of collective values and aspirations introduced by the enhancement of individualism and self-interest (Harvey, 2005) which are replicated in responsible tourism through the activation of mechanisms of responsibility attributed to individual consumers. The focus on the individual rather than the society emphasises a shift in the political agenda which prioritises individuals' roles of doing good in the society alleviating, at the same time, the public scene from moral obligations. This resonates with what Vrasti and Montsion (2014: 341) have suggested in that: "the relation of responsibility that ties individuals and their communities is no longer based on collective bonds and social obligations given through a national project so much as on capricious ethical and affective principles, like volunteerism". Hence, ethics, care and responsibility become part of a personal project yet they remain mediated by the marketplace. Responsible volunteer tourism as an individualised project displays all the symptoms of the Cassandra complex where people know the problem but ignore the complexity of the underlying answers (see Urry, 2016).

Power relations

The neoliberal boundaries which confine discourses of ethics and responsibility are entangled with notions of power which circulate and defines individual's roles in responsible volunteer tourism. Foucault (1982) famously demonstrated that in terms of power relations, governments were shifting towards a greater individualised 'care of the self' involving a devolution of power which made the individual more responsible for their own actions but simultaneously legitimised society to 'uncare' for the majority. Power is rooted in human relations and "in everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him (sic) by his own individuality, attaches him (sic) to his (sic) own identity, imposes a law of truth on him (sic) which he (sic) must recognise...It is a form of power which makes individual subjects" (Foucault, 1982: 781). On the one hand, this leads us to contextualise volunteer tourism as part of the transformation of today's societies which links productivity and commodities to moral values. On the other hand, responsible volunteer tourism promotes care, compassion and individual dispositions for a fairer world. According to Vrasti and Mointsion (2014: 337) volunteer

tourism is, therefore, placed within the “so called *Third Way* neoliberalism [which] sees no contradiction between market rationality and moral actions”. This exposes practitioners and academics alike to some of the complexities that underpin volunteer tourism.

Eurocentrism

Volunteer tourism, like other forms of responsible tourism, emerges from the concepts of Western development and aid (Guttentag, 2009; McGehee and Andereck, 2008) that still reinforce a neo-colonial project of the West knows best. Eurocentric definitions of progress and amelioration exclude knowledge systems which are not part of the West. Western views of development are constituted by an interrelated dimension: on the one hand, it embraces the contradictory “set of processes underlying capitalist developments” (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008: 5) while, on the other hand, it refers to a plan of “intervention in the ‘third world’ that emerged in a context of decolonization” (Hart, 2001: 650). Programmes of intervention are carried out by aid agencies (both commercial and third sector) which often prioritise economic outcomes over the social transformation of the places where they operate. The privatisation of development becomes part of the wider neoliberal agenda of the government and markets even as it promotes bottom-up approaches to ameliorate the wellbeing of people and destinations, particularly in the so-called Global South.

Responsible Volunteer Tourism Marketing

This passage from the macro (i.e. society) to the micro level (companies and volunteer tourists) of intervention contributes to weaken systems to control and regulate the tourism industry exercised by the state. Instead, it encourages the growth of models of corporate self-regulation which often take the form of Western codes of practice, guidelines or examples of best practice which are then utilised for marketing purposes. These models are valued by the industry as Campbell argues (2006: 930) because “it is better to control the regulatory process themselves than to be forced by the state to succumb to a process and a set of standards over which they would have little control”. Self-regulation goes hand in hand with self-praise which has been highlighted in previous studies in volunteer tourism as the desire of volunteers to make a difference, to feel good and to contribute to something worthwhile but also at a macro level through award programmes that highlight so called ‘best practice’ in volunteer tourism. In this context, Smith and Font (2014: 942) have noted that: “preference is given to communicating what is easy, and not what is important. The status of the organisation is no guarantee of responsible practice, and price and responsibility communications display an inverse relationship. ... volunteer tourism operators are over positioning and communicating responsibility inconsistently, which highlights greenwashing...” Responsible volunteer tourism, thus, self-validates itself and its participants as somehow being accountable by praising individual heroism which is “normally confined to acts of bravery or sacrifice, such as would be rewarded with medals or trophies” (Tomazos and Butler, 2010: 22). Examples of this can be seen in the Guardian International Development Achievement Award where individuals who were “making a difference to improve the lives of some of the world’s poorest people” were invited to nominate an “unsung hero in international development and give them the recognition they deserve”, or, similarly, the annual responsible tourism award ceremony which celebrates “heroes of responsible tourism” and “the most inspirational and enduring responsible tourism experiences” (Responsible Tourism, 2016).

Conclusions

While responsible volunteer tourism experiences may be desirable, and the values of altruism and care noble, the creation of self-organising modes of industry governance is problematic. This is exacerbated by the lack of critical and conceptual engagement with the meaning of responsibility which emerges from a “lack of sufficient ontology in structuring a way forward” (Fennell, 2008: 4). In addition to this, the de-contextualisation of responsible and volunteer tourism discourses from wider geopolitical landscapes and global institutional governance (Jamal et al, 2013: 4600) expose the industry to neoliberal challenges and ambivalent outcomes (Fennell, 2013).

Further, the lack of regulatory systems weakens “the welfare of those operating at the margins of the economy by requiring others to involve them as part of the tourist offer” (Koens and Thomas, 2016: 11). Therefore, in order to rethink responsible volunteer tourism as a social and economic development strategy we need to reconsider our critical engagement with both the concept and the practices of tourism organisations and ‘responsible’ volunteer tourists. In order to avoid simplistic categorisations of what is portrayed to be right and to be wrong we need to question the efficacy of lifestyle politics (i.e. individual political engagement versus common arena) in ethical tourism (see Butcher and Smith, 2015).

This paper advocates the adoption of a radical critique of responsible volunteer tourism. This should encompass more radical ways of engaging the public sector and government, as well as a more appropriately politicised engagement of individuals with the concepts of responsibility, care and development through more complex systems thinking as the future of tourism and development cannot be reduced to the actions of individual actions however ‘responsible’ they may aim to be.

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