



# 'Looks good on your CV': The sociology of voluntourism recruitment in higher education

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## Abstract

The recruitment for what has become known as 'voluntourism' takes place on campuses at many universities in Australia. Under the banner of 'making a difference' students are solicited to travel to developing countries to aid poor communities, to enjoy the sights and tastes of the distant and exotic 'other', the 'experience' touted as a useful addition to the curriculum vitae (CV). This article addresses the discursive terrain of voluntourism by providing an analysis of the ways in which students are invited to participate in such cultural practices while recruiters give little or no information about the lived realities of people in poor nations. We argue that voluntourism reinforces the dominant paradigm that the poor of developing countries require the help of affluent westerners to induce development. We contend that the recruitment of students by voluntourism organisations is an example of public pedagogy that reinforces a hegemonic discourse of need.

## Keywords

critical pedagogy, development discourse, neoliberalism, voluntourism

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Recently, on her arrival to give a lecture for an Indigenous Studies course, one of the authors of this article was confronted by flyers placed on every chair, the pinning of a flyer to the lecturer's podium, and the presence of a representative from one of the many organisations actively engaged in the recruitment of tertiary students for voluntourism. The representative, a man in his early to mid-twenties, spoke to the packed lecture theatre using what was clearly a well-rehearsed patter along the lines of:

Hey guys, there's a meeting today at lunchtime for those interested, and I'd love to see you all there. We have some awesome packages available for you to travel and get some experience in developing countries helping out with projects designed to make these communities stronger. Not only will you be helping others less fortunate than you, but you can use the experience on your CV as an example of working to help communities abroad.

The lecturer allowed him to deliver his presentation. She listened and considered how this experience might be used as a basis for analysis in Indigenous Studies. One of her concerns was how the process of the sale and consumption of a 'development experience' operated at a pedagogical level to solicit students into a seamless rhetoric of neoliberalism. Here, in this institutional space of teaching and learning, the representative deftly disarticulated the discourse of voluntourism 'empower[ing] developing communities'<sup>1</sup> from Indigenous communities. In Indigenous Studies, a discipline based on the rejection of the principles of colonial society, *anti-colonialism* is a core practice, so this packaging of a development experience in an indigenous community emerges as especially problematic. What we term 'voluntourism' was in effect being neatly inserted into the spatio-temporal context of Indigenous issues, but presented as normative, indeed as worthwhile and beneficial to those communities, when in fact the practice of voluntourism and its claims of empowering developing communities require much closer scrutiny.

The presenter pitched the product with the confidence of 'normativity': it was a 'given' that students would be interested in travel and development. The question was: 'Where do you want to go?' not *if one should* go, nor even whether such activities would cause more harm than good for an Indigenous community. Neoliberal discourses of 'freedom' acquired positive connotations for the students as ethical considerations about the 'other' were pitched at potential voluntourists. The mantra of 'freedom', packaged with the slogan of 'making a difference', is presented as an individual choice for the target audience, who are encouraged to 'give back' while experiencing the 'exotic other'.

This article explores two related aspects of the voluntourism business. First, it critically analyses the discursive rhetoric and practices that surround and inform the voluntourism phenomenon. Second, it demonstrates the relationship between voluntourism and pedagogical practice within higher education as voluntourism companies enter the spaces of Australian tertiary institutions to 'spruik their wares'.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the entry of voluntourism's representatives into higher education institutions is not a matter of chance; staff from these organisations are invited and welcomed, their practices authorised, their presence on campuses institutionally sanctioned as worthwhile for students, and one must assume, of benefit to the institution. The authorisation of certain practices and policies that relate to Indigenous people has been problematised elsewhere in relation to neoliberal policies about cultural competence (McGloin and Stirling, 2011). Our analysis here draws attention to the neoliberal

ideology, discursively realised through rhetoric and sets of practices that normalise the combining of volunteering and tourism within a framework of market capitalism. As researchers from different fields, but with similar feminist and sociological foci, we contribute to a growing body of literature around voluntourism that seeks to critically examine what Vodopivec and Jaffe (2012: 111) refer to as ‘the concurrent commercialization of development and difference’.

## **Apples and oranges: distinguishing voluntourism from development volunteering**

Voluntourism may on the surface appear to be a form of volunteering for development, but we argue the two activities are distinct. However, rather than create a false binary it is perhaps more useful to view the two activities as operating within different paradigms; voluntourism within the market, and development volunteering within civil society. Admittedly there exist degrees of overlap depending on the models used. Defining the activity of development volunteering is thus highly contested and problematic (Georgeou, 2012). The length of time an individual spends volunteering abroad is one of the main differentials between voluntourism and long-term development volunteering, as is the level of remuneration (if any) received by the volunteer. Added to this is the locus of engagement in development (village, district, office, city, etc.), the skills required, language acquisition, and so on.

International development volunteering broadly refers to individuals who spend a period of time working in the Global South with the aim of promoting development; however, and as Georgeou argues, ‘the seeming simplicity of this description conceals complexities that are subjective and contextual’ (2012: 1). The subjectivity refers to the particular understanding that the volunteers bring to their role; the context refers to the operating milieu of the volunteer, which occurs within and through a sending agency, and a host organisation. Both the agency and the organisation are located within broader social, political and economic environments. Volunteering for development is usually undertaken through International Volunteer Sending Agencies (IVSAs), which originally emerged from civil society organisations (CSOs), but which now include government-funded programmes and placements, either directly through official schemes or indirectly through contracts and tenders to provide services to an official development aid programme. Volunteering for development has as its central concern ‘development’; making a contribution to a process of social change that is of value to the local community/host organisation.

Voluntourism is an economic activity driven by profit occurring within an unregulated industry and operating without any accreditation process. Monies are paid to a tour operator whose business is based in the Global North and who profits from sending others to developing countries and communities. This distinction is crucial as voluntourism companies have appropriated the language of humanitarian development in order to trade on the idea that they send people to ‘help’ others in dire need of assistance. However their different primary objectives affect the shape and form of their respective programmes, and what those involved are asked to do.

Development volunteering as practise tends to involve long-term development objectives and requires commitment from the development volunteer sending agency. This

commitment takes a programmatic form, whereby collaborative development programmes are agreed between volunteer-sending agencies and volunteer-hosting agencies. Programmes involve long-term planning and incorporate negotiated goals and milestones. This commitment requires changes in the skill-sets of the individual volunteers who contribute to the development process (Moore McBride et al., 2003: 176). In other words, development volunteers have a defined role and purpose within a broader development programme. Time spent by individuals can range from shorter stays of three to six months to upward of three years, while the institutional commitment between the agencies involved can be measured in decades; Australian volunteer-sending agency Palms, has relationships going back 50 years with some partners in developing countries (Georgeou, 2012: xviii).

Another core difference between development volunteers and voluntourists lies in what they are asked to do. IVSAs ask volunteers to take time out from personal networks and responsibilities in their own country, such as their career (although volunteers may undertake the activity either before or after their careers), to do a job in a developing country related to their particular field of expertise and experience for 12 months or more, and to work for a stipend below the market value (Georgeou, 2012: 99). In contrast voluntourism requires less individual time commitment as the experience of development is combined with travel to fit neatly into semester breaks for tertiary students. Indeed, the ASTA Travel Sense site (2013) claims 'No longer do travellers need to stay enmeshed in a foreign land for months to make a difference – they can now impact an entire community over the course of a week or two, or even during their honeymoon.' The labour of voluntourists is predominantly unskilled and may include physical work, for example in building projects, maintenance or the installation of water tanks. The notion of engagement with local communities often comes in the form of interaction with children in a classroom setting, usually in the guise of teaching English, or playing with children in the institutional setting of an orphanage.

Development volunteering generally stresses long-term partnership and engagement with a local community; voluntourism companies package development as part of an experience where the indigenous community forms part of the photogenic landscape, which adds value to the 'authenticity' of the individual's adventure. IVSAs approach development work as a cross-cultural engagement and an agreed and negotiated intervention in a long-term process of social change. Voluntourism approaches the activity of development practice as a commodity to be bought and sold.

## **Selling development: neoliberalism and the rise of voluntourism**

The proliferation of voluntourism companies can be linked to the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant logic underpinning current development practice. The rise of voluntourism dates from the 1990s, and it emerges from a Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) agenda that itself incorporated ideas of sustainable development from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. PPT was not meant to be a sector of the tourism industry. Rather, its intention was to bring together the poor with a range of stakeholders (including government, the private sector and civil society) to develop tourism that would benefit the poor through their systemic

integration in economic growth. The British government's 1997 White Paper on International Development makes this explicit with a pledge to 'Refocus our international development efforts on the elimination of poverty and encouragement of economic growth which benefits the poor'; this would be assisted by 'transforming the Commonwealth Development Corporation into a dynamic public/private partnership' (Department for International Development, 1997). PPT had as an objective linking the elimination of poverty to the broader tourism industry, yet this aspect of PPT never developed along the lines of its original conception, which relied on harnessing the private sector to alleviate poverty (Goodwin, 2009: 90). As a strategy, PPT required neoliberal private sector-led growth, however a pioneer of the concept, Harold Goodwin (2009: 92), notes that in the operationalisation of the approach, development funders and agency staff 'continued to work with the traditional approaches, paying insufficient attention to the market, not measuring the outcomes, failing to measure the net benefits and not engaging with the private sector'. As a result, the mainstream tourism industry did not embrace the aim of poverty alleviation and the ideal of helping the poor through tourism was taken up by two rather different actors.

On the one hand, community-based organisations (CBOs) try to bring tourists to *their* communities to spend money, thus assisting local people through hospitality, cultural tours, handicrafts and the sale of produce. On the other hand, commercial operators based in the Global North have sold the idea of 'helping the poor' in developing countries. While voluntourism is not exactly the same as taking a slum tour – or what Michelle Baran (2008) has described as 'poorism' – it is nonetheless a type of poverty tourism; one that positions the poor as 'the other' in need of assistance. Companies highlight the opportunities for intimate contact with the exotic poor, promising both authenticity and engagement with communities in developing countries. This approach adds value to the voluntourist's travel experience because it enables 'up close and personal' engagement with poverty – 'getting your hands dirty' is a selling point.

The neoliberal process of privatisation and contracting out commodifies the activity of 'doing development'. Voluntourism companies sell a 'development' experience to consumers by appealing to their desire to 'make a difference', while at the same time enjoying an adventure amongst the 'needy other' (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2012). Incentives to travel to what are depicted as exotic destinations in order to 'empower developing communities' ask students: 'What will you do with your summer?',<sup>3</sup> suggesting that they consider travel and volunteer work. This is in line with Wearing's (2001: 1) definition of voluntourists as:

[T]hose tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment.

Students are enticed by the neat conflation of travel with an opportunity to 'help' the poor of developing nations. Countries in 'need' of 'aid' include Cambodia, Thailand, Costa Rica, Tanzania, Nicaragua, South Africa and island states in the Caribbean. Websites solicit customers through video clips that focus primarily on the 'volunteer experience' and their individual desires: to help others, to be safe, to have an adventure, to have an authentic experience of 'the other'. For example, [givevolunteers.org](http://givevolunteers.org) invites student

engagement with their program through selected images of smiling western students accompanied by a spiel that promises the ‘adventure of a lifetime’. Information, selective images and blogs recount the ‘successes’ of voluntourism programs, and companies use competitions to entice customers: ‘Win a free trip to Costa Rica’ (Wearing, 2001: 1).

It cannot be denied that voluntourism is a fast-growing part of the tourism industry, nor that many young westerners are keen to spend a few days to a few weeks in communities in developing countries ‘helping the poor’. To appeal to these desires, companies market packages that reduce the complex activity of development practice to a service that can be performed in a matter of days by the volunteer as part of an adventure experience. Individuals pay thousands of dollars to private operators to participate in ‘meaningful tours’ such as the 14-day ‘Teaching and Temples Tour of Cambodia’, which includes in its trip highlights ‘the killing fields’, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and ‘Cambodia’s people’ (gapyear.com, 2013). A 2004 University of London study found ‘more than 800 organisations providing overseas volunteering in 200 countries, with an average fee ranging from £500 to £2,000’ (Ward, 2007). The trend is still for voluntourism organisations to charge large sums for experiences that can be acquired for considerably less in host countries through local operators.

Writing of her experiences in an orphanage in Mombasa, Kenya, Michele Dobrovolny (2012) notes: ‘most of the voluntourists have paid a couple of thousand pounds to a British-based voluntourism agency for exactly this kind of authentic “African” experience’. She critiqued the practice and critically reflected on her own complicity in the ideology that informs it, ‘[T]o me, often the only difference between us [voluntourists] and the busloads of tourists heading out on safari seemed to be that we believed that we were doing something good.’ ‘Voluntourism agencies’, she added, ‘have sold us on the idea that there are people “out there” who need our help, overshadowing the question of how modifying our own lifestyles might equally bring about positive change.’ Dobrovolny (2012) points to the asymmetrical power relations that structure the practices of voluntourism, which reinforce the expectation that volunteers’ efforts will be rewarded with gratitude.

Voluntourism companies advertise themselves with promotional clips on YouTube, or flyers, and their websites are at pains to showcase success stories of people who have ‘made a difference’. As this ‘industry’ grows, there is a built-in assumption that the gifts of the volunteer to the grateful ‘other’ will keep on coming. Claire Newell, a self-described ‘travel expert’, promises that ‘[T]he feeling you get from helping others rivals even the bliss of lounging in the sun on a beautiful beach.’ Newell’s recommendation to prospective voluntourists is to ‘follow whatever tugs at your heart. There are orphanages in Romania and China that need volunteers, wells to be dug in Africa, houses to be built ... an estimated 10,000 projects to choose from’ (La Fon, 2013). Indeed, while globalised neoliberal capitalism continues to produce growing inequality, there will be increased ‘opportunities’ for voluntourism.

The logic of neoliberalism privileges individual autonomy and responsibility over that of the collective. The rise of voluntourism reflects this logic as volunteers’ aspirations to ‘make a difference’ occur within the locus of the market, and not through civil society, where historically people have joined social movements to effect change (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2012). This reflects ‘corporate’ citizenship, where individuals are seen as consumers rather than political actors. To legitimise corporate forms of citizenship, voluntourism

companies apply the language of 'participation' and 'empowerment' to sell the commodity of development and to appeal to a consumer desire to effect social change.

## Unpacking the discourse and 'ethic' of voluntourism

The practice of voluntourism is underscored by colonial power relations. Borrowing from Giroux's critique of neoliberalism, voluntourism's linking of individual consumption to the wider development experience of the poor in undeveloped nations represents 'the conflation of private interests, nation building, and evangelical fundamentalism', and 'brings into question the very nature, if not the existence, of the democratic process' (Giroux, 2004: 15) because it normalises the differential in power between the voluntourist, who consumes the development experience of the indigenous community, and those to whom aid is offered. Voluntourism spruikers (and we use this word deliberately) speak of a 'win-win' outcome, whereby western students learn something and the poor benefit from the labour provided. As noted above, it is also the case that most of the profit from the commercial endeavour stays in the metropole. 'Helping others' is one of a number of motivations for engaging in development activity, and voluntourism sells the idea of people having greater need in developing countries. Many students perceive this opportunity as an *entrée* to the development industry, and a future career option.

The discourse of voluntourism frames voluntourists as 'active agents of change', drawing on both the notion of need and on the powerful emancipatory language of social change. The emphasis on helping others who 'need' development suggests that the voluntourist, during her short stay, has the power and capacity to provide what the recipient 'lacks'. When voluntourists view their activity as helping a needy other, local knowledge and practice are automatically understood as inferior. This view is central to the success of voluntourism as it implies that voluntourists have knowledge to give, but it also holds the implicit assumption that locals are ignorant (Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Georgeou, 2012; Simpson, 2004). Voluntourism promotes and normalises narratives of 'developed' and 'undeveloped' thus creating 'discursive divisions, boundaries, "interfaces" and morally coloured identities' whereby voluntourists come to view locals as 'belonging to different material, social and epistemological worlds' (Rossi, 2006: 41). The power relations informing the discourse of voluntourism mimic and reinforce those responsible for global inequality and poverty in the first place. Colonial paternalism is predicated on the notion that there are 'haves' and 'have-nots', and that this will always be the case, therefore one's obligation as a privileged subject is to 'help' those less privileged. The certainty underpinning this view prevents voluntourists 'seeing' or 'engaging' with the fact that poor people can, and do, resist their own oppression, and exercise agency when and where possible.

The voluntourism discourse is above all seductive in its promises of a feel-good experience that will benefit both the voluntourist and the recipient of her altruism. This discourse works only on the basis of imparting basic information and appealing to a paternalistic understanding of the plight of people in poor nations; to expose the differential in power relations upon which the promise of good outcomes for all is based would be counterproductive. A 2011 episode of *The Agenda*, a Canadian current affairs program from TV Ontario, entitled 'Voluntourism: Helping or Hurting?' throws a critical light on the

discourse of voluntourism (TV Ontario, 2011). The show assembled a panel of interested parties, including a human rights journalist, a school principal, an economist, a social worker/academic, a voluntourism organiser and a business reporter. What was telling was the absence on the panel of representatives from local communities who have experienced voluntourist activities. This omission cannot be ignored in the context of a discussion about whether or not voluntourists are beneficial to the development of local people.

One of the participants stated that 'people want to give back', a core belief that obscures the complexity of voluntourism, and a mantra discussed in some detail by Mary Mostafanezhad (2013). This assumption ignores the reality that while voluntourism 'gives', it is also taking, as the experiences of the authentic 'other' and of 'doing development' are acts of consumption in the voluntourism paradigm. This episode of *The Agenda* brought together some disparate and competing viewpoints on voluntourism, but framed the conversation around the overarching goodness of the act of giving and helping the poor. The framing of the show is underscored by a discourse where the inherent 'goodness' in the activity of giving is uncontested, thus constraining what can and cannot be said, whether challenges can be made, opposition voiced, questions raised and so on. Discursively, what is reproduced here is what Badiou (2001: 28) refers to as the 'mindless catechism' of ethics, a conservative human rights agenda that speaks universally and which can be effortlessly assimilated by western capitalism. Participants in the programme must conform to a discursive premise where any transformative political agenda is negated and opposition silenced, thus serving to legitimise the capitalist order that prescribes a universal standpoint of ethics (Stavrakakis, 2006: 196). In a neoliberal economic environment the management of individuals' desire 'to do good' is the natural corollary of a service delivery model that seeks to harness the disorganised goodwill of individuals and then focus it toward the 'problem of poverty'. Such an approach to the 'problem' underpins the practice of social entrepreneurship using market 'solutions', which is advanced as a viable option wherever possible for social problems. Following this logic, profiting from doing good fits with commercial models of 'good business practice'. Voluntourism thus positions itself as an ethical business: it helps the poor while it helps itself.

The universalising 'catechism of ethics' plays out in *The Agenda*. References to 'good' volunteering and 'good' development, and 'best practice' were positioned within the context of a range of positive terms, which, when encoded into a semantic framework, fit discursively within the language of current development best practice. The views of one participant, who bravely attempted to dissent were toned down: the 'agenda' was quite clear; 'help' *cannot* be a bad thing. Following an acknowledgement of the problematic of forming bonds with orphaned children, and then leaving them, one speaker claimed:

there's a lot of really great examples where voluntourism can really lend a helping hand to local communities, so it's about wanting to do good ... but we need to control it and package it in ways where that idealism is actually harnessed. (TV Ontario, 2011)

Voluntourism, according to this rhetoric, cannot be challenged; to do so would incur opprobrium for transgressing the inherent 'truth' of human rights. Inbuilt into the discourse, therefore, are subtle warnings that criticising the goodwill inscribed in this type

of development aid is to be discouraged, and that, with the correct organisational administration, voluntourism can only be a 'good' thing. For example, the same speaker stated:

I don't think we should look down on people that want an experience because they want to do good in this world ... the key... is to go in with organisations and with help that can package your experience in a way that actually does really good things. (TV Ontario, 2011)

So, in the final analysis, the core argument about voluntourism as a help or hindrance to communities is suspended, and is replaced by the overarching concern about whether or not we (privileged westerners) should judge other privileged westerners for wanting a development experience. This negation of alternative views steers the audience away from the discussion of 'the ethics of voluntourism'. Instead it relocates the debate into a more comfortable zone, where poverty is not the central issue; rather, the motivations of individual western 'helpers' become the focus. Amid the range of *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts*, the potential for any productive dialogue is countered by the discourse of development as understood through the lens of liberal human rights. This 'mindless catechism' leaves colonial relations of power undisturbed. As Vodopivec and Jaffe (2012) testify, the binaries that inform this practice (us/them; local/global; developed/developing; problem causers/problem-solvers) are necessary to the continued success of voluntourism.

One of the key themes encountered as we trawled through websites, clips, blogs and testimonials is the ubiquitous mantra of 'making a difference'. We are initially reminded of Derrida's concept of *différance*, where difference is continually deferred, incomprehensible and part of a chain of signifiers with no real content or meaning, but which has the capacity to signify both difference and deferral (Derrida, 1982: 5). Following this logic, 'making a difference' makes no immediate sense; it is a statement that acquires meaning only through the discursive structures that constitute 'difference'. In this context 'difference' is used as a signifier for socio-economic 'improvement', access to good food, schools, English and the trappings of western capitalism. But of course 'making a difference' may have an entirely different set of meanings to many poor communities. Many Indigenous peoples are trying to retain their languages and cultures as they existed prior to western intervention, colonial invasions, wars, dispossession of land, loss of kinship, cultural practices and traditions, and ensuing poverty. 'Making a difference' assumes it is the voluntourist who becomes the active agent in the process of positive social change. In other words, the very notion of 'making a difference' implies a power relation based on a binary of agency whereby change can only occur through the intervention of the voluntourist. There is no acknowledgement in the mantra 'making a difference' that people in the local community can effect their own change. Within this paradigm, people in developing countries remain the undifferentiated 'other' to whom a difference needs to be made.

According to the discourse of voluntourism, making a difference is intelligible precisely because it has been established as an *a priori* fact. Recruiters want recruits to *know* that their act of 'doing development' will matter to someone somewhere, and that their altruism will be repaid in kind. Promotional images of smiling children in the embrace of tanned westerners communicate the promise that voluntourists will bestow development on those in need, and that the needy will be dutifully grateful. Voluntourism positions development as a commodity brought to communities by individuals, yet the recipients of

development remain consigned to their impoverished conditions well after the voluntourists have gone home. 'Making a difference' within the discourse of voluntourism becomes meaningful, therefore, only through recognition of the effects of 'benevolent' acts by the voluntourist. This point is developed by Stephen Wearing (2001: ix) who argues:

In a global society that increasingly finds dogma and marketing used to instil values and exploit social relations volunteer tourism represents both an opportunity and a means of value-adding in an industry that seems to represent consumer capitalism at its worst.

Wearing's work offers what he calls a 'largely sociological perspective' on the practice of voluntourism. His study is primarily a reflection on the effects of voluntourism on the 'self', that is, the voluntourist. This work focuses on the personal and individual development of the voluntourist and argues that the voluntourist's experiences lead to an improved sense of social responsibility, an idea that avoids the complexity involved in 'making a difference' in the development context and to the people of poor communities. Wearing moves the focus of 'making a difference' to the individual self-development of the voluntourist, whom he positions as holding the potential to contribute to the overall (global) common good. Wearing (2001: ix) sees 'making a difference' through voluntourism as having a flow-on effect, one that 'causes value change and changed consciousness in the individual which will subsequently influence their lifestyle'. While this 'life-changing experience' may change how the voluntourist lives her life upon return, there is an assumption that the lives of people in developing communities have also been changed, and that they have had a positive experience. In many situations, of course, this is not the case, as the example below of Cambodia's orphans illustrates.

## Voluntourism and Cambodia's orphans

The practices of colonialism worldwide tell us that a common consequence for Indigenous peoples is the separation of children from their communities through forced dislocation, family disintegration and poverty. Although Indigenous people comprise less than 5 percent of the world's population, they constitute about one-third of the world's 900 million living in extreme rural poverty (NCD Alliance, 2012). Roughly 70 percent of the world's Indigenous population live in Asia (IFAD, 2013), where Cambodia is a popular voluntourist destination. Cambodia is home to an estimated 17 Indigenous groups, many of whom have suffered unspeakable hardship and dislocation. It also has a high number of orphanages. Al Jazeera's (2012) report 'Cambodia's Orphan Business' provides shocking detail about the extent of corruption by many voluntourism organisations and orphanage administrators in Cambodia. One voluntourist, now cynical about the practice, was informed that of the money paid to organisations for voluntourism (up to \$3000 per month), only \$9 a week per volunteer was paid to the orphanage she attended.

Mission.tv's (2013) film *Cambodia: Say No to Orphanage Tourism* also discusses the dangers of voluntourism for children of poor families:

But when orphanages become volunteer tourism destinations, they create incentives to direct children with living parents away from their homes, 3 out of 4 Cambodian 'orphans' have a living parent. Studies show family-based care is a far better solution for these kids.

A 2011 Cambodian government report from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation shows that Cambodia has 269 residential care facilities housing 11,945 children, an increase of 75 percent since 2005 (MoSVY, 2011: 12). The report highlights a number of issues pertaining to voluntourists visiting orphanages:

Residential care appears to be the first-stop solution of individual overseas donors who, with the best intentions, provide support and funding to children in orphanages, often unaware of community-based care options. Since almost all residential care centres are funded by individuals from overseas, many centres turn to tourism to attract more donors. In the worst cases this becomes the basis for an *'orphanage tourism'* business, in which children are routinely asked to perform for, or befriend donors, and in some cases to actively solicit the funds to guarantee the residential centres' survival. Residential centres have also turned to international volunteers in the hopes of raising money. As a result, short-term volunteers, who have not undergone background checks, are frequently given access to children, which poses a protection risk. (MosVY, 2011: 8)

Voluntourists are often asked to teach English to orphans, whether or not they have teaching experience. Countless examples on blogs and various feedback sites testify to English teaching as one of the more prevalent practices for those recruited to work with children. The threat to Indigenous cultures is considerable, particularly through the loss of Indigenous languages through the enforced teaching of English in many orphanages and schools in voluntourism 'hotspots'. Again, the discourse of voluntourism promotes the 'given' that all cultures want to speak English, that English speaking is a valuable commodity, and that people in developing countries should learn English in order to improve their socio-economic situation.

## **Voluntourism, public pedagogy and the lure of the CV**

While it is crucial to examine voluntourism's political dimensions and effects, we are also interested in the effects of student recruitment as a pedagogical practice that unashamedly and explicitly solicits youth with guarantees of 'adventure', 'making a difference' and a positive addition to one's CV. Giroux's work on public time and corporate time differentiates the temporalities of time ascribed to what he sees as processes and practices of democracy, where time can be fully considered and understood in relation to planning, questioning, critical inquiry and so on. This is contrasted with 'corporate time' where interests, institutional and individual, are marked by the accelerated and fragmented temporality designed to expediently 'train' students rather than produce critical, democratic citizens (Giroux, 2011: 113–20).

This form of corporate expediency is enshrined in a very specific pedagogical practice that echoes in many ways Paulo Freire's (1996) concept of banking pedagogy, which produces what he calls a 'necrophilic staticism', whereby students are transformed into passive receptacles of knowledge. To illustrate: an 'expert' speaks in the institutional space of the university and students listen; the speaker enunciates a doctrine of 'helping' the 'helpless' and the students, already inculcated with the belief that they can 'make a difference', listen, respond and act. Pedagogy in this context is depoliticised; 'helping' is a 'good thing' and 'goodness' just *is*; a thing in itself beyond comment or critique.

When the lecturer asked the students in her Indigenous Studies tutorial what their thoughts were about the voluntourist spiel, few were critical. Most said that 'we' (the West) should be 'helping', that it was our 'duty'. As we noted, the discourse of voluntourism is framed by a liberal human rights agenda. While all students had a similar response to the spiel, female students, inscribed with notions of 'care' and 'nurture', were visibly enamoured by the promise that their labour would be beneficial, especially to 'poor children'. Mary Mostafanezhad has discussed in some detail the gendering of volunteer tourism, noting that 80 percent of voluntourists are female (2013: 485–9). Further investigation is required to better understand the gendered nature of the voluntourism recruitment process.

Indigenous Studies in this instance refers to an interdisciplinary approach to Indigenous struggles that applies a strong sociological focus. Thus, the visit by the voluntourism organisation took place in the course of an academic program in which students are encouraged to think critically about Indigenous issues, histories and contemporary struggles, and to consider asymmetrical relations of power from a sociological standpoint. Freire reminds us that '[P]edagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression' (1996: 36). Any lack of critical engagement by the students does not point to a general lack of engagement with the politics of development, social justice or ethics. On the contrary, their responses to the spruiker and the sales pitch of 'doing good' demonstrates a concrete example of Giroux's notion of the effects of corporate temporality in pedagogical practices, and is testimony to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology and to the operation of what Gramsci (1971: 234) termed 'common sense' within a hegemonic paradigm.

Dependency theory argues that development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin: wealth requires poverty. Voluntourism is part of a *system* of neoliberal development that requires inequality so that some may reap the beneficial effects of the market. Voluntourism is lauded as 'a good thing', and the point we make here is that it is difficult to speak outside of the discursive 'logic' of goodness that constitutes the 'catechism of ethics'. Having better educated voluntourists will do nothing to effect structural change as voluntourism, as an activity, reinforces the paradigm of need without enabling agency by local communities.

The spruiker's comment that a voluntourism adventure would not only help others in the development process, but would also strengthen the civic engagement aspect of one's CV is central to the success of voluntourism. In this manner voluntourism claims to convert the cultural capital acquired by undertaking work in a developing country into economic capital in the western employment market (Jones, 2011). Historically, civic engagement on a CV has been viewed as an indicator of good character. As a device for endorsement as a fully fledged citizen, the CV is a box-ticking document of self-promotion for prospective employers, an assurance that its owner will not only work hard and acquiesce to the norms and values of the workplace, but that she will also demonstrate social responsibility. A CV that testifies to time spent with poor people in developing nations could make a difference between prospective employees, if some lack evidence of civic engagement. The act of voluntourism keeps on 'giving', but not to the poor in developing countries. The beneficiary is rather the voluntourist herself. Her CV is now differentiated from others in the pile when a prospective employer seeks a new hire with that most fashionable of qualifications, a social conscience.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Voluntourism fits neatly with neoliberal ideology; it is run by private organisations and corporations, and appeals to the individual sense of ‘goodness’ articulated through the broader discourse of liberal human rights. Recruiting privileged young people to ‘make a difference’, voluntourism operates using a simplistic discourse of goodness to seduce an attentive cohort of students already conversant with the discourse of human rights. Voluntourism promises adventure, authenticity and the chance to set oneself apart from the herd in the job market. In a neoliberal society where the individual and her personal goals and accomplishments are the dominant concern, even when expressed through seemingly altruistic ventures, severing the insidious link between doing good and dependency requires time and effort. Offering students the prospect of a safari in return for a couple of weeks labour in their ‘gap year’ or sessional break leaves intact colonial relations of power. Voluntourism also reinforces such relations precisely because it does not offer the opportunity, time, space or imagination to consider the reasons for, or the effects of, ‘helping’ those whose poverty is the value-added attraction.

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## Notes

1. See: [givevolunteers.org](http://givevolunteers.org) (consulted 26 September 2013).
2. We recognise that students are quite capable of negotiating the messages presented by voluntourism advertising, and are not simply passive recipients of information. Indeed, the critical responses and writings of former voluntourists are testament to their reflexivity and ability to exercise agency within the voluntourism paradigm. See for example the advocacy work of Daniella Papi (2012).
3. See: [www.edventureintl.com](http://www.edventureintl.com) (consulted 26 August 2013).
4. The irony of academics critiquing those who seek to enhance their CVs through the medium of a refereed journal article is not lost on us. Academics are under pressure to publish to enhance their own CVs and constantly seek to differentiate themselves from their peers so to enhance their careers and gain economic capital.

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