



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT

15th June 2015

Jim Butcher, Canterbury Christ Church University

Volunteer Tourism: Development, Altruism or Narcissism?

Volunteer tourism has grown rapidly in the last decade as a niche for tourists who want to make a difference on their holidays. It differs from the post-World War Two tradition of development volunteering exemplified by the US Peace Corps and VSO in that it requires far less commitment, skill and time, and that it explicitly links assisting development to leisure travel.

For its advocates, it can contribute meaningfully to development. This perhaps depends on a fairly recent conceptualisation of development as wellbeing. It chimes with contemporary interest in care and citizenship in both academic human geography and in commentaries on development. It is argued that volunteers are able to 'care at a distance', and develop themselves as global citizens better able to act ethically in relation to global issues. Yet critics have accused volunteer tourists of naivety, and even of unwittingly perpetuating colonial attitudes. Others criticise what they see as a market for conspicuous altruism that plays to a narcissistic focus on personal identity.

The talk will examine volunteer tourism as an expression of altruism in the context of today's politics of ethical lifestyle. It will be argued that it is important to separate out the private humanitarian impulse of volunteers from a lifestyle oriented politics of development in order to consider what is and what is not progressive in volunteer tourism.