

The 'Real Experience' industry

Student development projects and the depoliticisation of poverty

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ABSTRACT

Participation in development projects in the Global South has become one of the most sought-after activities among American and British high school graduates and college students. In the United States this often takes the form of Alternative Spring Break trips, while in Britain students typically pursue development work during their 'gap years'. Development projects offer students a way to craft themselves in an alternative mould, to have a 'real experience' that marks them off from the cultural mainstream as 'authentic' individuals. The student development craze represents an impulse to resist consumerist individualism, but this impulse has been appropriated and neutralised by a new logic of consumption, transforming a profoundly political urge for change into a form of 'resistance' compatible with neoliberal capitalism. In the end, students' pursuit of self-realisation through development has a profoundly depoliticising effect, shifting their attention away from substantive problems of extraction and exploitation to the state of the inner self.

KEYWORDS

authenticity, charity, consumption, gap year, service learning, social movements, undergraduates, volunteering

Introduction

Participation in development projects in the Global South has become one of the most sought-after activities among high school graduates and college undergraduates in the United States and Britain. In the U.S., one of the most popular ways to be involved with this kind of initiative is to join student-led Alternative Break programmes, whereby small groups of students spend school holidays – usually slightly more than a week – volunteering abroad



rather than simply travelling for fun, doing anything from building wells in Peru to teaching English in Ghana. The primary stated goal of these trips is to promote ‘active citizenship’ or ‘service learning’ among students (see Handler 2013). The concept of Alternative Break first emerged on American campuses in the early 1980s and spread quickly after the founding of an organisation called Break Away in 1991, which sought to help students across the country establish their own projects. In 2010, Break Away alone processed more than 72,000 American students into development projects abroad (Break Away 2013).

In the United Kingdom, the ‘gap year’ phenomenon operates as a rough equivalent to Alternative Break. Many students take a year off after completing their A Levels and before beginning tertiary study, and increasingly seek to spend that time not simply working or travelling, but also volunteering abroad – usually as individuals rather than in groups of peers. Students who do not take full gap years participate in such projects as well, taking shorter trips abroad that are sometimes known as ‘snap gaps’. The number of British students that participate in development projects has grown rapidly over the past two decades. A 2004 study estimated that some 250,000 students were engaged in gap year projects of at least three months, nearly double the proportion of students from a decade before (Jones 2004; see also Birch and Miller 2007). A more recent study estimates that, including students engaged in shorter-term projects, the number of participants is now as high as 2.5 million each year, or 34 per cent of the country’s total population between 16 and 24 years old (Market Wire 2011; see also Student Times 2012).

In this article I analyse the rise of the student development phenomenon as the product of changing ideas about personhood, politics and labour markets among Euro-American youth. I show that participation in development projects offers a way for students to craft themselves in an alternative – even rebellious – mould, to have a ‘real experience’ that marks them off from the cultural mainstream as more ‘authentic’ and ‘rounded’ individuals than their uninitiated peers – a characteristic that carries significant social capital and provides increased traction in a job market that has become viciously competitive. I discuss the paradoxes that students negotiate as they attempt to construct a sense of non-conformist authenticity through an activity that has become not only normative and highly structured but also ultimately managed by a profit-making industry. I argue that the student development craze represents an impulse to resist consumerist individualism, and that this impulse has been appropriated and neutralised by a new



logic of consumption, transforming a profoundly political urge for change into a form of 'resistance' that is emptied of any meaningful political reference and rendered compatible with global capitalism. Finally, I show how students' pursuit of self-realisation through participation in development has a profoundly depoliticising effect, shifting attention away from substantive problems of extraction and exploitation to the state of the inner self.

Of course, not all students who go abroad go to developing countries – some participate in projects closer to home, in the United States or Western Europe – but this seems to be the ideal that most pursue, for reasons that I will explore in the following pages. This article does not pretend to convey findings in the manner of an exhaustive, large-scale empirical study on the topic (e.g., Jones 2004; Birch and Miller 2007). Rather, it offers a series of critical reflections – pertinent to both sides of the Atlantic – gleaned from more than a decade of my own everyday experience interacting with undergraduates whose desires focus on development. My interest in this topic began with observations I made while teaching in the United States at the University of Virginia and participating in development projects with Americans, but here I draw mostly on observations in the United Kingdom between 2011 and 2012. The quotations I present derive from extended personal interviews with eight British undergraduate students at the London School of Economics (LSE) who had recently returned from development projects in the Global South. Five of these were women, three were men, all were middle class, and all but two were white. From their narratives I draw out themes that are broadly representative, in my experience, of undergraduate discourse on student development. I also draw on promotional material used by development organisations that recruit student volunteers, interviews with staff and volunteers at five of those organisations, and discussions I had with students at a development fair at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

'The Real' in the structure of undergraduate desire

Students in the U.K. spend anywhere from £1,000 to £5,000 (or U.S.\$1,500 to U.S.\$7,500) each to participate in volunteer projects abroad.¹ With sums like this involved, it is clear that students are not just looking to give their labour away for free in the classic sense of volunteerism; they are consciously purchasing a commodity that costs many of them a sizeable portion of their savings. Indeed, many students work in Britain for the first few months of a

gap year specifically in order to pay for the volunteer experience they want to have abroad. So what exactly are they buying that they find so valuable? A quick look at the discourse of the agencies involved in this multi-billion dollar industry provides a few initial clues. Andrew Jones (2004) calculates that at least 85 such agencies operate in the U.K. Some of them organise trips for students (or 'customers', as the for-profit agencies call them) directly, while others connect students to local organisations in the Global South, with India and South Africa ranking as the most popular destinations among students (Go Overseas 2012). Real Gap Experience, STA Travel, Tearfund, Restless Development, Latitude Global Volunteering, VSO, and Volunteer International HQ are some of the more popular agencies that students use today. Many of these agencies promise to sell students not just an experience, but a 'real' experience – a popular term used across the industry to distinguish volunteering from 'normal' travel or tourism.

Mirroring this terminology, students explained to me in interviews that they wanted to do something more 'real' or 'deep' than just simply travelling around, because sightseeing is 'temporary', 'self-serving', and does not allow you to 'really experience the culture'. Ideas about 'connecting', 'building relationships', and 'engaging' or 'interacting' with 'locals' 'on the ground' or 'in the community' crop up frequently in students' discourse, as they do in the marketing materials of the agencies. Of course, it is clearly possible to build relationships like these nearer to home, by volunteering in the U.K. But this is not a satisfying solution for most students for a few main reasons. First, they claim that they desire to serve poor people, and second, they claim that they desire to experience dramatic cultural difference. When I point out that poor people and cultural difference can be found within the borders of the U.K., students tend to resort to a third reason: that they desire the 'challenge' and 'risk' of travel abroad. When I suggest that Kosovo or Moldova might fit the bill on all three counts, I find that most students admit they will only be satisfied going to Africa, Asia, or Latin America. In other words, it seems that brown and black people are pivotal to students' fantasies of the real experience, even though they avoid stating this outright. This is reflected in the marketing materials that development agencies use, which almost always feature images of British students (usually white) among brown or black people; images of students among white people, even if they are obviously impoverished, simply do not work in the same way. Agencies realise that the important thing for students is to encounter the needy, third-



world Other – the modern instantiation of the 'savage slot' reconfigured for postcolonial sensibilities (see Simpson 2004).

The key dimension of a real experience is that it should have a personally transformative effect on the student volunteer – an effect that can only be achieved when the conditions I have listed above are in place. Many of the agencies sell volunteer experiences on this basis. Tearfund's tagline reads: 'Are you ready for a journey that will change your life?' accompanied – on their website and promotional material – by photographs of brown and black children with various white students (almost all female) superimposed as interchangeable cut-outs in their midst. Another popular agency, PoD, claims to provide 'life-changing volunteering'. A surprising number of others rely on phrases along the lines of 'develop yourself, develop the world'. That self-development comes ahead of development itself is telling. As a recruiter at one agency confessed to me, 'We're giving students their own experience ... we're not actually doing much development'. The notion of life-changing experience frequently carries overtures redolent of the kind of personal transformation normally associated with religious conversion. One Tearfund staffer told me during an interview that 'We want people to go out and be changed... [to] come back from these experiences transformed'. While Tearfund is a Christian agency that draws on progressive evangelical language, this same orientation towards personal transformation appears in the discourse of even secular agencies. Many agencies devote resources to counselling volunteers upon their return, helping them develop ways to think about their experience, maintain the momentum of their personal transformation, and communicate their new life insights to their peers in the U.K.

Students reflect this language in their own discourse. They say they want to have their 'horizons broadened' and their 'perspectives changed' – two phrases that appear repeatedly in students' narratives, and which they use to identify the commodity value of development projects as opposed to that of tourism. As one student put it: 'When you're involved in one of these projects you try and learn the culture, you try and understand them [the locals] in order to help them, and that kind of changes your perspective, you get a lot more out of it. Instead of us going in to help them they're helping us in some form as well. They enrich our thinking and broaden our perspectives and stuff like that, and that's more rewarding than just tourist sightseeing'. According to another, 'People do these projects in order to appreciate and get perspective on their own lives. I know that was one of my reasons. I

think that's a big one. People consider it an enriching experience, an enlightening experience'. When I pushed students to explain what they gained from the experience in more specific terms, they insisted that they returned home with a greater appreciation for the things they had. According to one student: 'When I came home I really appreciated the value of money ... it [also] really made me appreciate my education, and it really made me want to work really hard in uni [colloquial term for university] and really hard in life. It made me realise that I have these opportunities for a reason. And it made me realise that we are so lucky'. Another student put it this way: 'I can't think of a better way to appreciate [the privileges we have] than to go somewhere where they don't have those benefits'. Others would talk about how they returned with a greater appreciation for family relationships, and less of an interest in material things.

When pressed to explain how living in rural Tanzania, for instance, is more 'real' than living in England, students fall back on what we might recognise as a Romantic model of the Noble Savage. Many insist that life among poor, rural brown people is less complicated than life in the West, less individuated, less consumer-oriented, less concerned with superfluous wants than necessary needs, less mediated by technologies – like Facebook and smart phones – that they say 'disconnect' people from 'real' human relationships and community. Students also say that they feel more 'natural' in this context. As one put it: 'there's something more natural when you're in that environment because you're not surrounded by the constraints of "oh you have to be at school at this time" or "I need to do well in my degree" ... And you're closer to nature as well in that kind of setting'. Others report that they are less concerned with their 'image' and other 'superficial' matters, they can 'be themselves' without the usual demands of daily life in Britain, which they represent as artificial 'constraints'. In this discourse, 'the real' is imagined as a state situated closer to 'nature', with nature – again, the savage slot – defined as the 'third world' inhabited by poor brown people, and particularly poor brown children, who symbolise a kind of innocence. Some students set up a binary that casts 'traditional' life as good or innocent and 'modern' life as bad or corrupt, momentarily inverting the narrative they use to describe the imperatives of development (in this sense a profound ambivalence about the 'traditional' exists at the centre of student development discourse). Students like to reminisce about conversations shared during long evenings without television and care-free time spent playing with children who did not have video games to distract them. These idealised



representations of life among the poor are possible because student volunteers do not have to experience the stressful pressure of everyday responsibilities that their hosts do.

Students claim that this context facilitates 'meaningful relationships', implying that such relationships are more difficult to achieve at home because of the ubiquity of technology (again, they blame Facebook and smart phones), the pressures of performance at school and the stress of everyday responsibility in London. This discourse does contain a critique of alienation and social fragmentation that students feel in Western society, but it does so only by disavowing the fact that in most instances – given barriers of language and culture and relatively short time spans – the 'meaningful' relationships that students develop with people in their host regions (relationships that, again, are usually with children, and are rarely maintained after the student's departure) never approach the level of intimacy that is possible with their peers and relatives in Britain. One student who went to Ghana for seven days reported that: 'I think we had really meaningful relationships with the people there. I don't know how much of that is because we were the first group to go [to that community], so they probably made more effort. But particularly with the children ... we got a lot of attention from the children.' It is interesting that students use the term 'meaningful' instead of more concrete terms, such as 'intimate'. The term 'meaningful' becomes useful because its vagueness permits a rhetorical sleight of hand: when students say that their relationships with their hosts were meaningful it *seems* as if they mean intimate, but in fact they mean simply that the relationships carried meaning – that the encounter was personally transformative, for example, or that it facilitated their sense of having a real experience. In other words, the important thing is not the content of the relationships they form abroad, but what they come to symbolise in students' narratives.

Students tend to explain the value of volunteering abroad in terms of becoming more 'authentic', a term that relates closely to the conception of 'the real' that they invoke. One student put it this way: 'It's the first experience that takes you out of your usual context and puts you in a completely unfamiliar scenario that forces you to figure out who you really like and who you don't like, and figure out the things you really enjoy'. What is at stake here for students is that volunteering abroad operates as a sort of ritual of self-realisation that they find exceedingly valuable. It provides a sort of liminal phase through which they must pass in order to emerge as a fully formed person ready to reintegrate into their home society. In the words of

one student: ‘There’s this expectation that your gap year will change you and you’ll become the person that you are supposed to be. You find yourself; it’s all about finding yourself’. This seems to make intuitive sense to most Euro-Americans given longstanding associations between experiencing nature and achieving self-realisation, and given common cultural notions about the value of separating oneself from a familiar context and embarking on a challenging journey in order to gain perspective and maturity. But it seems strange that students should believe that living in foreign countries among resource-poor brown people should make them more authentically themselves. Indeed, it seems more likely that being in a context where one does not know the language and is ignorant of basic cultural rules would make one *less* oneself – less capable of ‘authentic’ self-expression – than being in a context where one is fluent in the language and culture.²

Many students I have encountered frame their experience in terms of becoming ‘deeper’ people than their peers, who they cast as ‘superficial’ by contrast. Female students often represent this surface-depth model with reference to make-up and clothing. For instance, two of the students I interviewed reported that prior to leaving for their volunteer experiences they used to be ‘classic uni girls’ who partied a lot and were into shopping. But during their time abroad they ‘stopped caring about those things, the makeup, the straighteners’ – they became less ‘materialistic’. As one of them put it, ‘You never wear make-up when you first come back. And even though that doesn’t last very long, for a while it’s in your mind that there’s something that’s changed, but you can’t really say what that is. It’s the way you view stuff and think about stuff that changes’. Another student used similar terms to explain her experience: ‘no one was really that fussed about what they looked like, we, like, didn’t wear make-up for the whole time, and it didn’t really matter what you wore ... I think there’s something free and independent about not being dependent on your foundation or whatever, and not feeling like you have to look a certain way every day’. Once again, what comes through here is an urge to resist materialism, certain forms of consumerism, and Western social norms and expectations.

Some students confessed to me that when they returned from their time abroad they felt ‘self-righteous’ and ‘superior’ and sometimes tended to look down on the people they had left behind at home, as though they had experienced something that no one else could understand. They told me that reuniting with their friends proved to be difficult. One student explained that when she got back her friends threw her a welcome-home party, and



became upset with her when she seemed depressed and unhappy to see them: '[My time in India] was just so amazing and I really missed everyone there [in India], it was just amazing, and they [my friends at home] couldn't understand'. One student told me that her experience was so 'rich and profound' that she couldn't talk about it with most people, because 'I'm not gonna pretend that they can connect on that level'. Another put it in terms of 'real' versus 'fake', or 'deep' versus 'shallow', saying: 'I know it's bad because it sounds like you're being really superior; I went back home to York and thought "Oh these Yorkies, they have no idea, these people are so shallow and superficial, they need to go and do something". I know that sounds bad, but that's what I felt'.

The paradoxes of authenticity

The language that young British natives use to describe their experiences abroad indicates that participation in development projects provides a way for them to separate themselves from what they perceive to be the cultural mainstream: they want to 'find themselves', to cultivate a sense of unique identity, to get in touch with their 'authentic' desires, to 'get off the beaten track', to do something 'wild' and 'dangerous'. The reason that gap year travel – or its snap gap equivalent – becomes a useful way to accomplish this has to do with the meaning it continues to carry over from an earlier era. For most of its history, the gap year has been associated with drop-outs: youth who failed or refused to secure a university place and consciously rejected 'the system'. Students who took gap years were stigmatised within mainstream opinion, but celebrated by the anti-establishment fringe who, following the counterculture movement of the late 1960s, sought ways to revolt against what they perceived to be the suffocating constraints of middle-class society with its established life trajectories.

As I have argued elsewhere (Hickel and Khan 2012), the countercultural movement assumed a fundamental antagonism between the individual and society, and saw the former as repressed by the latter. This logic first gained popular traction during the 1960s with the rise of the New Left: Herbert Marcuse and others decried capitalism not only for exploiting labour and appropriating workers' surplus (the staple critique of the Old Left), but also for promoting mass conformity and the 'suppression of individuality'. He noted that capitalism in an age of mass consumerism teaches individuals 'to love and hate what others love and hate', and thereby suppresses the individual's

‘true’ desires (Marcuse 1964). Following the work of Freud, which was popular at the time, the New Left considered the individual to have ‘inner’ or ‘authentic’ desires that existed prior to social norms and expectations (see Strathern 1988; Sahllins 2008). For them, freedom became about allowing each individual to recover their own desires and express their inner selves. The object of revolution became self-realisation, or the recovery of *authenticity* (see Taylor 1989, 1991; Keane 2007), as in the figure of the ‘strong poet’ that Nietzsche championed against the ‘slave morality’ of mass society.³

Gap-year travel was a central component of the counterculture movement: hippies used it to signal their rebellion, freedom and originality, but also because, by putting them in close proximity to ‘nature’ (or the perceived absence of Western civilisation), it allowed them to cultivate a sense of being in touch with their inner selves in a space where they were free from the ‘repressive’ social constraints of their home society. Since the 1990s, however, gap-year travel has moved from the fringe to the mainstream, from being stigmatised to being actively encouraged by parents, schools, and employers (see O’Reilly 2006). Indeed, every British student I spoke to indicated that they felt it was expected of them to do volunteering during their gap year – it has become so institutionalised, so ritualised, that it is now written into the established pattern of the modern British lifecycle. In other words, the whole process of rebelling and dropping out has become *normative*. Establishment culture has found ways to envelop – and thus neutralise – what was once one of the primary forms of resistance against it.

In this sense, the gap year has become a form of ‘diet’ rebellion – a form of rebellion that, like Diet Coke, has been conveniently stripped of its unpleasant elements so that consumers can get the sensation of experiencing the real thing without suffering any of the difficulties normally associated with it (see Zizek 1999). This sublimation of rebellion allows students to ‘drop out’ while retaining (even, as we will see, bolstering) their position within mainstream society (see Ansell 2008). Some students recognise this quality of institutionalised rebellion with a certain degree of chagrin. As one put it to me: ‘At the end of the day, it’s just a year, you still have a timeline, you still have expectations afterward, it’s not as dangerous and wild as people think, because you’re going back, you have your university place before you leave, there’s the expectation that you get back onto your track’.

The first paradox here is that in order to separate themselves from the mainstream and become unique individuals, students engage in a process that has become undeniably conformist. The second paradox is that students



feel stuck between their desire to have a real, authentic experience and their anxiety about realising that in order to do so they have to participate in an industry geared toward money and profit; that their experience is ultimately managed and mediated by a bunch of middle-men – exactly the kind of ubiquitous commodification that they seek to escape by going abroad. One student I spoke to told of how she paid £4,000 and flew to her host country only to realise that she had been swindled by local profiteers behind a fake NGO. Such outright scams are not uncommon – and are hardly surprising, given the billions of dollars that flow through this industry – and they are cited by students as illustrations of a more subtle anxiety, namely that many development agencies are ultimately more concerned with the experience of the volunteers than with poverty alleviation. After all, experience is the end product that they are selling. Indeed, the Real Gap Experience website markets its volunteer projects with banners that announce deals like 'Get 20% off your Thailand experience now!' (Real Gap Experience 2013). The volunteer is the consumer, and the people in the host community are the (free) raw material that is extracted and instrumentalised toward creating the product. Indeed, the existence of poverty, and the experience of helping to fix it, *has become a commodity itself*, a thing to be bought and sold.

While most students make use of the volunteer placement agencies that dominate the industry, they almost universally disavow alignment with this approach and often speak about how they want to do it differently the next time around. One student complained about how her experience working with an orphanage in Cambodia failed to match up to her expectations because it was so well-managed and well-funded. 'I felt cheated', she reported. 'I thought I was going to have a life-changing experience where I would come back and be completely transformed ... [but] those kids were so well cared for ... something was not right'. 'But if I would have organised it myself,' she continued, 'I think that would have been far more beneficial because ... I would have known what I wanted to get out of it. Whereas this felt so organised, I didn't really know what I was taking from it. You take from it, but not at a deeper level, just really on the surface rather than a deeper level'. The very fact that these experiences are *institutionally organised* – rather than being spontaneous, as they may have been in the 1970s – makes students anxious about the extent to which they are really authentic. Two students I interviewed reported that after a short time with their host organisations they broke away to carve out their own more authentic activities, such as finding an impoverished local school to teach in, which they

found much more satisfying. For many students, surrounding themselves with poor people who appear to be untouched by external interventions is crucial to constructing their experience as ‘real’.

Recognising this anxiety among consumers in their target market, many agencies represent themselves as standing against the commercial model. For example, Operation Groundswell’s promotional video specifically asserts that they refuse to be ‘a big-box company’, which they regard with disdain. Rather, they want to help students ‘plunge headfirst into the world’ in an ‘authentic way’ to connect with ‘real people and real places’ and to have ‘meaningful, genuine experiences that exist in the real world, not in the virtual world’ (Operation Groundswell 2013). In other words, they construct the real experience specifically *against* the commodified version of it, disavowing their own status as a profit-making company.

There is another, even more pernicious threat to the authenticity of their experience that students have to negotiate. In 2010, satirist Matt Lacey uploaded a three-minute comedy sketch onto YouTube that portrayed a posh university student relating stories of his ‘Gap Yah’ – a spoof on the tediously drawn-out vowels of upper-class Britons – to a friend over the phone. The student opens with, ‘That really reminds me of this time on my Gap Yah, I was in Africa, in Tanzanah (sic.), and I saw this woman with malaria, she had, like, flies all around her eyes, and she looked at me with this vacant stare but with a sense of enduring hope, as if to say “you know despite our differences you and I are one, we’re kindred spirits” ...’. By intensifying the kind of story that students returning from volunteer projects so frequently relate, Lacey’s sketch exposes the absurdity of millions of wealthy, white British students imposing themselves on developing countries for the sake of having a ‘spiritual-cultural experience’ – to use the words of Lacey’s character – and to accumulate the social capital that comes along with it. The sketch went viral, with 660,000 views in its first month and 50,000 fresh hits each day, clearly hitting a nerve at the heart of youth culture in Britain. By the end of 2012, the clip had been viewed nearly 5 million times.

Most students who seek to volunteer abroad are aware of the Gap Yah parody. It causes them significant anxiety because it exposes the fact that the very process of distinguishing oneself as a unique individual in this manner has become mainstream, and therefore something to be ridiculed. As a result, students have to work hard to distance themselves from this caricature – they have to find ways to differentiate themselves *within* what has become an otherwise conformist activity. According to one student, the leader of an



organisation at LSE known as Global Brigades (The U.K. equivalent of Alternative Break) that facilitates short-term development projects abroad:

When I got back I kind of felt annoyed that other people thought I had some cliché gap year experience. And, like, most everyone who heard me out would understand that it was a different experience. But the immediate reaction you get is 'Gap Yah'. It [The YouTube video] went viral, so everyone would be like 'ah, so you went on your Gap Yah to Tanzanah (sic.) ... I kind of had to fight that stigma, which was quite frustrating. Everyone kind of brands you like that so quickly.

Interestingly, I have found that students who are most anxious about the Gap Yah parody seek to distance themselves from that cliché by insisting that they *did not* go abroad to 'find themselves', and by disavowing any form of self-transformation even to the point of denying having had a personally meaningful experience at all. In other words, in order to maintain the authenticity of their experience they have to reject 'authenticity' itself, purging their narratives of anything redolent of self-cultivation. Even the rejection of the pursuit of authenticity flows from a desire for authenticity. In this sense, the system of meanings that structures the real experience industry absorbs the critique without being challenged or upended by it.

Privilege and competition in the labour market

Students' experiences of volunteering abroad relate to recent changes in the labour market and the pressures that students feel as job candidates. When students report their reasons for volunteering abroad, they work hard to distance themselves from the perception that they were motivated by a cynical desire to pad their CVs, which would undermine their ability to construct their experience – and their desire for the experience – as real or authentic. At the same time, however, students display remarkable familiarity with the reasons for which employers might be attracted to candidates that have volunteered abroad. As one student put it, 'I think on a CV it demonstrates a kind of dynamism, I guess, or an energy, a get up and go'. Another pointed out, using similar terms, that 'It shows commitment, it shows independence, it shows a bit of get up and go, that you've actually gone and challenged yourself'. Others point out that they can usefully discuss their experiences in personal statements and during interviews, as a way of illustrating that they are 'global citizens' with an 'international outlook'.

It is not surprising that students pick up on this discourse, given how ubiquitous it has become. At LSE, the Volunteer Centre explicitly peddles development projects as a way for students to boost their careers. The list of reasons that the Centre gives to encourage students to volunteer includes that it will ‘make you shine above others’, it will ‘help you network’, it will ‘help you get a reference’, and it will ‘change your life and help you learn about yourself’ (LSE Volunteer Centre 2011). The idea of cultivating authenticity becomes important here, and is connected to students’ potential career trajectories: the Centre claims that volunteering ‘allows you to discover where your real interests and passions are’. They also cite statistics from recent studies showing that 73 per cent of employers would hire candidates with volunteering experience over those without, and that 94 per cent of employees who volunteered had benefited by improving their salary or being promoted. At the beginning of every term, the Volunteer Centre advertises development projects in the school’s main thoroughfare with banners that lead with the line ‘Improve your CV!’ Even the Global Brigades group at LSE uses this approach in their promotional materials, despite the fact that their participants try to distance themselves from this aspect. In other words, the job market is an ever-present but continually disavowed animus of the real experience industry.

One might imagine that employers find candidates who have worked abroad more attractive than candidates who have not because the former have a broader spectrum of knowledge about the world and better cross-cultural communication skills. But in my years of working with students who have volunteered abroad, I have seen no evidence that they are any more knowledgeable or skilled in this particular sense than their peers. Yet I suspect – although I cannot prove – that this fact does not matter much to employers. My conversations with students who have had job interviews indicate that employers never test their knowledge or skills related to their volunteer experience for content or accuracy. Rather, they seem to be testing for a certain kind of social capital, or personhood: they appear to want people who are in touch with their authenticity, people who have a strong sense of personal identity. The ability to present a lucid narrative of personal development denotes the kind of self-managing, individuated subject that employers in a neoliberal economy seek.

More importantly, ease with this kind of language – the language of self-cultivation – also communicates the aura of class privilege that makes job candidates attractive to elite employers. Shamus Khan (2011) has pointed out



that what characterises the new elite is not exclusivity of taste, but expansiveness – the ability, for example, to create ‘casual connections’ between high and low culture and across cultural spaces. Students who can reference their appreciation for French wine in the same breath as they discuss Brazilian manioc beer, or whose music collections include South African *kwaito* alongside Spanish guitar, distinguish themselves from the masses by their very ‘omnivorousness’, to use Khan’s term. Indeed, elite preparatory schools intentionally train their students to master this kind of self-presentation.

In addition, it bears pointing out that volunteering abroad imparts value to job candidates in a more direct sense as well. The agency staffers I spoke to claimed that volunteering equips young people with qualities like passion, commitment, and initiative; teamwork and cooperation; maturity, confidence and independence; and, most importantly, patience, resilience, adaptability and tolerance. As Bonnie Urciuoli (2010) has pointed out, these are highly valued traits in a neoliberal economy that relies increasingly on immaterial and affective forms of labour. In addition, it strikes me that many of these terms – particularly the last few in the list – refer euphemistically to traits that will allow employers to put young workers in difficult positions with little training and too much responsibility in a context marked by long hours and bare-bones staffing, the hallmarks of the brave new world of labour flexibility that neoliberal theory so ardently celebrates (see Cremin 2007).

Mastering the language of omnivorous taste and neoliberal personhood is indispensable to the kind of personal statements and interview conversations required to earn a spot in the elite, ‘global’ companies that LSE students want to work for. The upshot of this, as Sue Heath (2007) has shown, is that gap year travel and development volunteerism has widened the achievement gap between lower and upper class students: participating in these activities improves one’s employment prospects, but requires resources that generally only wealthy white students have at their disposal.

The depoliticisation of poverty

Of course, one might argue that in spite of the critical points I have developed above, student development projects are not intrinsically bad. Indeed, proponents often insist that at least such projects contribute in small ways towards bettering the plight of suffering humans around the world: more wells have been drilled, more schools built, and more orphans entertained

than would have been the case without the student development craze. But this defence obscures a broader problem that needs to be taken into account, namely that student development as I have described it appropriates the possibility for substantive political critique and engagement among students and transforms it into a passive form of consumerism that not only depoliticises poverty but also distracts attention away from its actual causes.

The depoliticisation of poverty through the student development craze can be understood as the second stage of a double movement in Euro-American culture over the past few decades. When students began to vaunt the values of authenticity and individual self-expression during the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s, it was not long before this ethic was co-opted by capitalism. Many retailers saw the popular passion for individual identity as heralding fantastic new market opportunities: responding to consumers' desire for authentic expression, companies began to market products according to 'identity' niches that appealed to the prevailing ethos of non-conformity (see Lyotard 1993). 'Counterculture' quickly became a marketable identity; to be countercultural, people had to consume the commodities symbolically associated with counterculture – commodities that instantiated the value of non-conformity, that indexed alternative social and political identities, and that signalled rejection of the mainstream. In other words, capitalism found ways to appropriate consumers' spirit of *rebellion* in the service of new forms of *consumption* – a phenomenon that Thomas Frank (1998) has aptly called 'the conquest of cool' (see also McGuigan 2009).

In the 1990s, just as capitalism had triumphed over the counterculture movement by reformulating it as consumerist individualism, the timbre of youth resistance began to change. Students began to develop a critique of consumerism, of over-mediation and hyper-reality (cf. Eco 1990; Baudrillard 1994), and of the social fragmentation brought about by individualism, and they sought ways to perform this critique. But, once again, it did not take long for capitalism to turn this new critical impulse into an industry. The obvious example is the growing fad of 'virtuous commodities' (Hickel and Khan 2012: 213) like Ethos water, Tom's shoes, Product Red, and Whole Food apples, all of which make profit by marketing products under the sign of anti-consumerism. The student development industry works on the same premise (hence the critique of things like smart phones and makeup that appears so frequently in students' narratives). Student volunteers seek to purchase the sense of being redeemed from the consumerist mainstream, and



the sense of being part of a movement or a 'groundswell' of resistance. This process pushes commodity fetishism to new heights. The commodity – be it Ethos water or the development experience – assumes what Žizek (2009) has aptly called a 'redemptive' quality: in the act of consumption the consumer believes they are buying not only their redemption from the evils of mainstream consumerism, but also the redemption of the suffering world.

At each stage of this double movement, youth resistance (first against a repressive establishment, then against consumerist individualism) has been not only neutralised but channelled back into new forms of consumption. 'Cool' has been conquered twice over.

I do not want to overdraw the distinction between youth resistance in the 1960s/1970s and youth resistance today, however. Despite their different referents, both are understood as non-conformist, and both shift critical attention from the problem of exploitation and inequality to the problem of individual alienation – a notion of alienation devoid of any reference to labour and production, in contrast to the Marxian understanding of the term. In both cases, the critique of alienation has been a boon for capitalism; indeed, marketers seek to generate feelings of alienation and then hold up the idea of individual self-realisation as its solution. Individuals seek to achieve full personhood within this paradigm by resisting mass conformity and cultivating the inner self. People think of this as a countercultural process – a process by which the individual resists society – but in fact it has become essential to the reproduction of capitalism, for the primary method of self-realisation has become *consumption*. And since final authenticity can never be fully achieved (authenticity is always unstable, as I described above), there is no end-point. In other words, the critique of alienation operates as capitalism's own recuperative frame (see Hickel and Khan 2012: 210) – it is a form of critique that not only fails to attack the basic tenets of capitalism, but in fact facilitates its expansion.

The present model of student development projects poses a serious problem for the possibility of building a substantive critique of poverty in developing countries. As with the counterculture movement of the 1960s, this model of development transforms a heartfelt political urge – the urge for change, the urge for revolution, and in this case the urge to put an end to human suffering – into a passive form of consumerism. Just as the gap year gradually became a form of 'diet rebellion', student development projects offer up a form of 'diet revolution'. The Break Away website provides a clear illustration of this: the organisation uses the image of a raised fist

in its logo, alongside an icon of silhouette demonstrators holding placards, and refers to itself as a ‘social movement’ – even going so far as to cite the definition of collective action developed by sociologist David Snow (Break Away 2013). They borrow this imagery and language from leftist activism, but their programme includes no such radical content, and never suggests that capitalism might be at issue behind the social problems they purport to solve. Indeed, their mission statement focuses only on ‘personal transformation’, ‘deeper understanding’ (with no clear direct or indirect object), and ‘active citizenship’, which students supposedly gain from a single week volunteering abroad.

What we have here is an invocation of revolutionary activism that is entirely devoid of substantive critique and empty of political referents. This is the vacant shell of the revolutionary sign, so preoccupied with image and identity that it no longer speaks to the crucial question of power. The actual causes of poverty – anti-democratic regimes propped up by Western powers, IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes, austerity conditions attached to World Bank loans, power imbalances at the World Trade Organisation, indebtedness to Western banks, corporate tax evasion, land grabs, unfair labour laws, inflation-targeting, and Wall Street corruption – go unmentioned and unaddressed within the parameters of the real experience industry. Instead, student development projects treat poverty as a static state, as if it lies outside of history and politics: during my interviews, students told me repeatedly that ‘poverty is no one’s fault’. This illusion allows students to pretend to address the problem of poverty without ever having to confront their position within a global class divide, question the scaffolding of their own privilege and the sources of Western wealth, or acknowledge their role as consumers in the capitalist world system. As I indicated above, the closest that most students get to reflecting on the structure of global inequality is to recognise that they are ‘lucky’ in comparison to the poor people they encounter abroad.

Here the full irony of students’ invocation of ‘the real’ becomes apparent. This used to be the language of leftist revolutionary movements, which traditionally saw the process of conscientisation as promoting awareness of the ‘objective’ conditions of existence and the true nature of social relationships (see Althusser 1971; Jameson 1984). In Marxian terms, ‘the real’ points specifically to labour exploitation, class antagonism, and political power. But now even this concept – the concept of ‘the real’ – has been colonised and neutralised by capital. The real, once considered a space of revolutionary



potential, has become an experience to be bought and sold, and 'awareness' has become a state of individual self-cultivation rather than a state of political consciousness. Neither point towards a collective political project with clear class referents. Power falls out of the equation altogether; the personal eclipses the political. This is not to say that the political is *actually* more real than the personal, or that the problem of exploitation is necessarily more important than that of alienation, but rather simply that the latter is much more readily appropriated.

I have painted a bleak portrait of student development projects, but I do believe that there is room for optimism. Regardless of how they frame their experience, students return from development projects newly cognisant of the brute fact of material inequality on a global scale. As educators, we need to help students interpret this fact – to historicise it, explain its causes, and explore substantive solutions. In addition, we need to nourish their potential for a form of critique that stretches beyond the desire for self-actualisation. The first step towards this end is to help students deconstruct the logic of the development projects they participate in – to help them recognise the culturally particular construction of personhood that underwrites the model of authenticity and alienation that sits at the centre of the real experience industry. The second step is to help students situate themselves with respect to the operations of global capitalism and equip them with the tools with which to understand political economy. The third step is to encourage them to imagine alternatives to predominant forms of apolitical engagement and to find their own political voice. As I like to remind my students at LSE, what if the 2.5 million young people that leave Britain's shores each year used their energy and money (billions of pounds, remember) to tackle the ultimate causes of global poverty? To challenge the pathologies of power and imagine new ways of organising international economics? Another world might be possible after all.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Richard Handler for organising the panel on which I presented an initial short version of this paper during the American Anthropological Association meetings in 2011, and to Bonnie Urciuoli for investing the time and energy required to transform some of the panel's papers into this special issue. I would also like to thank Arsalan Khan, who in an earlier co-authored piece (Hickel and Khan 2012) helped me develop some of the

ideas that underpin my argument here. Richard, Bonnie, Arsalan, Penny Welch, Susan Wright and three anonymous reviewers all offered helpful comments on earlier drafts. Finally, I want to thank the students at both U.Va. and LSE – particularly those who agreed to interview with me – for bringing some of the more interesting facets of the student development experience to my attention.

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Notes

1. Bank of America estimates that parents alone contribute £950 million each year to help cover the costs of U.K. students volunteering abroad (Market Wire 2011).
2. One way to understand this phenomenon is that when in a context of cultural difference students experience themselves as more authentic because their beliefs run up against local norms. Given this contrast, students experience norms and values that they have been taught since birth as 'authentic', as if they spring freshly from their inner selves. In other words, what is conformist in one context becomes authentic in another. The fact that students often object to local norms (such as gender roles) gives them the sensation of being radical non-conformists.
3. It bears pointing out, as an aside, that anthropology was enamoured of this assumption in the 1990s, when ethnographers were eager to excavate the agency of the subject and celebrate its capacity for resistance against repressive social norms, which were imagined to be somehow external to the self and its inner kernel of authentic desire (see Abu-Lughod 1990; Sahlins 2002; Mahmood 2005).

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