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Book review: Nichole Georgeou. Neoliberalism Development and Aid Volunteering

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Abstract

As Nichole Georgeou explains at the start of her book, the gestation of this study was her immersion and experiences in the field of aid volunteering in Japan and North Vietnam (pp.xv-xviii). This was during the early 1990s, when she was in her early twenties; they were experiences that left her asking huge moral, ethical, political questions about volunteering.

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responding to that call now exists. Hopefully readers of Jane's book may be inspired to check it out.

Nichole Georgeou

Neoliberalism, Development and Aid Volunteering

Routledge, New York, Oxford, 2012, pp. xviii + 239,
hardback edition \$188.

Reviewed by Rowan Cahill

As Nichole Georgeou explains at the start of her book, the gestation of this study was her immersion and experiences in the field of aid volunteering in Japan and North Vietnam (pp.xv-xviii). This was during the early 1990s, when she was in her early twenties; they were experiences that left her asking huge moral, ethical, political questions about volunteering.

It was a questioning that brought her back to Australia, and eventually to academia. This book is the result of her facing down these demons, unpacking them intellectually to find answers and solutions. In the process she validates the work of NGOs and on-the-ground civilian volunteers, and seriously questions the aims and priorities of state led aid initiatives.

Pricey though it is, *Neoliberalism, Development, and Aid Volunteering* was not intended by its author to simply become a library shelf-dweller, career enhancer, or footnote-quarry, though it will become the latter, such is the quality of the work, its breadth of scholarship, its insights and challenges. Georgeou intended her work to be used, to challenge and to help formulate aid/volunteering approaches and policies at individual and organisational levels, in what is globally a multi-billion dollar economic sector (p.xviii). This is a sector which makes claims to altruism and humanitarianism, utilises the input of growing numbers of volunteers, but is increasingly volatile, conditional, militarised, privatised, and politically riven.

Neoliberalism, Development, and Aid Volunteering is an enormously complex text, an interdisciplinary blend of history, politics, sociology, social anthropology, and ethnography. At times the author reaches back to the 18th century to understand the philosophical, economic and political roots of the contemporary/current situation she explores. Georgeou lays out her case and develops her account with nuanced scholarship. That said, she avoids the coded and cold impenetrability of much academic writing, and her work is at once scholarly, personal, and accessible to non-specialists.

Given the complexity and intellectual breadth of her work, it is difficult to summarise the paradigm she addresses, but believe I do justice as follows: individual and organisational volunteer impulses and empathies to 'do good' internationally have, since the 1970s, been variously harnessed and transformed by neoliberal understandings and processes to serve the agendas of global capitalism and the national interests of donor-state agendas, what Georgeou broadly terms "a wider hegemonic project of global governance" (p.55).

This is a complex, multi-faceted process, one encouraging a symbiotic relationship between donor organisations and processes, and the problems being addressed. In turn this encourages the development of a self-perpetuating volunteer industry, promoting "citizenship without politics" (p.74) in recipient communities/sites, the neoliberal agendas masked and camouflaged by the language of humanitarianism. In this situation there must be human 'casualties' of personal, psychological, political kinds-- amongst those who in good faith volunteer to 'do good' in the world, and amongst aid recipients, all of whom are, in effect, being groomed as pawns of global capitalism.

There are two dynamic aspects of Georgeou's study. First is the mainstay of the book: a micro-study of the Australian International Volunteer Sending Association, Palms Australia, an NGO with over 50 years experience in aid volunteering. In this she explores the tensions in, and pressures on, an aid/volunteer organisation and its integrity, one in the field with a Christian-based humanitarian impetus. Using the micro-study as her constant reference point, she launches out to examine macro-global perspectives and contexts.

Related to this is data sourced from interviews she conducted in 2006-2009 with Palms volunteers with recent experience of working in Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea. Georgeou's sensitive and nuanced

treatment of this material reflects her concerns for the safety and the broad welfare, including psychological aspects, of volunteers (Chapters 4, 5, 6). Not only this. Georgeou demonstrates the ways aid programmes involve complex relationships between aid givers/suppliers and aid recipients. Power, perceptions, histories are involved here, and Georgeou's study is also concerned with the human, cultural, psychological, political welfare of the recipients or targets of aid/volunteering programmes and efforts (pp.155-166).

Georgeou's book is radical. She understands matters pertaining to class and hegemony. Then there is her stance as a scholar. Biographically, she came to academia late, and did not take the well-beaten path of swapping school for campus; thus she avoided the institutional grooming and timidification that often ensnares those who travel this path. Rather she models engaged scholarship. The scholar is not some sort of seminarian elitistly dealing with 'higher things', but seeks rather to engage with the wider world beyond the academy, which in Georgeou's case is the world of human dignity, human rights, social justice.

Add to this her forensic account of the ways in which neoliberalism is embedded in modern aid/development programs, which, along with 'new managerialism', comprises a form of imperialism, tying aid/volunteering recipients to the economic and strategic imperatives of donor states, the managerialism both facilitating and camouflaging the ideological and the political. Citizenship based on consumerism (p.50) is promoted, amongst aid volunteers and aid recipients, at the expense of ideas of "responsible citizenship and collective endeavours" (p. 74).

Radical too is Georgeou's conception and vision of civil society, which is at the heart of her thinking, and advocacy. Civil society is a social construct, a social space, at once democratic and participatory, in which individuals variously clash, struggle, argue, and agree. It is a space in which the individual is empowered to act publicly. Civil society is about people, individuals, human beings, and not about units to be manipulated for state imperatives, or conceived of as foot-soldiers for economic growth.

From my reading of Georgeou's book, I sense much anger and passion guiding her text. But instead of the mailed fist, which is there, she builds her case with velvet gloves. Her book is a significant contribution to the growing literature on the embeddedness of neoliberalism, and she is a voice that should be heard.