Voyeuristic or Virtuous? Debating the Ethics of Slum Tourism

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1ST PLACE TIED—ARGUMENT

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is slum tourism, a practice wherein wealthy tourists visit the slums of the Global South for education and entertainment. This paper argues that slum tourism is inherently unethical. By analyzing various journal articles on slum tourism, this paper claims that slum tourism treats poverty as entertainment, allows a small number of people to determine authenticity for an entire slum, and is embarrassing and dehumanizing to slum dwellers. Additionally, this paper refutes the idea that tourist intentions or the results generated by slum tourism can make slum tourism ethical.

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, the tourism industry has flourished. With the number of tourists steadily increasing, questions have been raised about the rights and duties of tourists. Do tourists have a right to visit anywhere? Do they have any responsibilities to the people living where they visit? These questions are especially pertinent when considering slum tourism. Slum tourism (also known as poverty tourism or poorism) occurs when wealthy tourists visit slums in pursuit of entertainment, education, or authenticity (Selinger, 2009). The ethics of slum tourism have been hotly debated recently, with supporters arguing that slum tourism has economic and educational benefits, while critics claim it is nothing but gawking at the less fortunate. In this paper, I argue that slum tourism is inherently unethical for a multitude of reasons.

The earliest documented slum tourism took place in Victorian England, when elite Britons would tour the poor areas of London for leisure and entertainment. Currently, foreigners to the Global South largely perpetuate slum tourism (Meschkank, 2011). As a practice, slum tourism is no small phenomenon. Over 3,000,000 tourists visited the slums of Cape Town, South Africa in 2006 alone, and an average of 3,000 tourists have visited the Rocinha slum of Brazil per month for the last decade (Freire-Medeiros, 2009; Meschkank, 2011). Today,
slum tourism is particularly rampant throughout the townships of South Africa, the favelas of Brazil, and the slums of India (Meschkank, 2011).

One reason slum tourism is unethical is that it turns poverty into entertainment, which trivializes the very real difficulties associated with living in poverty. This idea of poverty as entertainment is supported by Meschkank's (2011) research on slum tourism in Dharavi, India. According to Meschkank (2011), slum tourism operates like a reality television show, with the tour guides following a predetermined script that casts certain forces in the slum as the villain and certain forces as the hero. This practice is largely due to the tour guides' perceptions of what tourists wish to see when visiting a slum. As Freire-Medeiros (2009) suggests, tourists choose slums to visit based on an “anticipation of experience” that they form by consuming mass media (p. 582). This claim is supported by the fact that tours of Dharavi, India have tripled in size since the release of *Slumdog Millionaire*, and that a similar phenomenon has occurred in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, since the release of the movie *City of God* (Freire-Medeiros, 2009; Meschkank, 2011). In an effort to please tourists, then, tour guides are forced to make their tours as dramatic and entertaining as possible. It must be noted, though, that slum tourism cannot be considered a harmless form of entertainment. As Dürr (2012) reminds us in her work on slum tourism in Mexico, “Slum tours rely on the urban experience of marginalization, spatial segregation, and social deprivation” (p. 720). To the people living in the slums, poverty is not just a form of entertainment that can be “experienced momentarily and then escaped from permanently” (Kieti & Magio, 2013, p. 40). Rather, poverty is an unending hardship, and to market it as anything but is to depreciate communities living in poverty. Slum tourism marginalizes an already marginalized population by using their struggles as fodder for entertainment, and that is inherently unethical.

Another reason slum tourism is unethical is that it allows a few people (tour guides) to determine what is deemed “authentic” for an entire region. In “From Sombreros to Sincronizadas,” Gaytán (2008) claims that authenticity is a social construction that “reflects a group’s common origin and sense of unique collective solidarity” (p. 338). Authenticity serves many purposes, in particular to “forge structural and relational hierarchies that reproduce knowledge about particular groups of people” (Gaytán, 2008, p. 338). Because authenticity reflects on a group, it is concerning that slum tourism enables a few people (the tour guides) to determine the authenticity of the entire slum. As Rolfs (2010) points out, many slum tourists visit slums in search of an authentic experience. These tourists embark on the tours with hardly any prior knowledge about the slums, other than what they may have seen in Hollywood movies. With that in mind, tour guides can easily mold the tourists’ perceptions of what makes a slum “authentic”. Although Rolfs (2010) acknowledges that some tour guides take this opportunity to paint the slum in a positive light, many tour guides also purposefully feed into tourists’ stereotypes. Rolfs (2010) notes:

Some favela tours more or less openly stress and market those risks of crime, drugs, and violence. Crime and violence thus become a mode of
observation activated in favela tours and characterising the everyday life situation in the poor quarters. (p. 440)

Thus, tourists on those favela tours would learn to associate a favela as being “authentic” if it is dominated by violence. Some may argue that slum tourism is only unethical then if the tour guides present a negative view of the slums as “authentic.” I argue, however, that regardless of whether tour guides present a slum in a positive or negative view, it is unethical to engage in an activity like slum tourism that allows so few people to determine the authenticity of an entire area. To engage in such an activity is to endorse the silencing of voices of the poor, which is especially egregious when the subject is their own community.

It follows then that when considering the ethicality of slum tourism, it is important to take into account the perspectives of the people most directly affected (that is, the slum dwellers). Thus far, there has been very little research conducted on how locals perceive slum tourism (Kieti & Magio, 2013). This is concerning in and of itself. To ignore the locals when discussing the ethics of slum tourism is to imply that their opinions are not as important as the tourists’ opinions. Although it may not be surprising that an industry that is built on the backs of poor people ignores their opinions, it certainly does no favors for the argument that slum tourism is ethical and even favorable to the people living in the slums. In addition, the small amount of research available on locals’ opinions of slum tourism is certainly not complimentary. In a recent study, Kieti & Magio (2013) found that the majority of slum residents in Kibera, Kenya viewed slum tourism negatively, with many residents referring to slum tourism as “embarrassing” and “not ethically acceptable” (p. 49). In the words of a pastor from the Kibera slums:

Life here is hard and very funny and challenging…of course some [tourists] come in the name of commissioning country projects and helping to improve people’s lives but the truth is that they come to see how funny life is here. (Kieti & Magio, 2013, p. 51)

With this statement in mind, it is clear from the local perspective that slum tourism succeeds more in making a spectacle of locals than helping them. Perhaps there is not stronger proof that slum tourism is unethical than its condemnation by the people it is meant to benefit.

In contrast, however, supporters argue that slum tourism is not inherently unethical because most tourists are motivated by good intentions. In her research that surveyed tourists to the slum of Dharavi, India, Meschkank (2011) found that many people engage in slum tourism in order to gain insight into the “authentic” side of a country or to educate themselves on poverty. In fact, some of the slum tourists surveyed viewed themselves as better than traditional tourists. As one tourist stated:

A lot of people that like to come to India like to buy their souvenirs, like to go to Goa lying on the beach and they like to have food served to them in restaurants. But at the same time maybe most of the people don’t want
to see [the slums], because it is quite upsetting to see, but it is there and it is also reality and maybe it is good to see that that’s how some people live. (Meschkank, 2011, p. 53)

Thus, in this tourist’s view, he is actually behaving more ethically than other tourists who visit a country and purposefully avoid the poor areas, because he is forcing himself to see that side of the country. According to David Fennell (2006) (the author of the seminal work *Tourism Ethics*), however, the intentions of slum tourists do not negate the ethical problems of slum tourism. In fact, Fennell (2006) posits that tourism is inherently selfish. He states, “Tourism by nature has proven to be more about greed, power and superiority, and much less about altruism” (Selinger, 2009). Fennell (2006) defends this statement by claiming that tourism is built upon the idea that the tourist is entitled to visit anywhere, and that the tour provider is allowed to capitalize on anything or anyone. With his statement in mind, I argue that because tourism as a practice is inherently selfish, the individual intentions of the slum tourists cannot be a basis for the argument that slum tourism is ethical. Regardless of individual intent, slum tourists are perpetuating a practice that is based on greed and entitlement, and that is unethical.

On the other hand, another argument in support of slum tourism rests on the idea that results are more important than intention. Essentially, supporters of this argument claim that regardless of intent, tourists are helping slum communities by inputting money into the local economy, and thus slum tourism is ethical. Although this claim is widely believed by the public, it is only partially supported by research. According to PBS, certain slum tour companies use the money from their tours to fund schools and community centers in the slums. To cite a specific example, Reality Tours and Travel, a slum tour company in Dharavi, India, has reached over 2,500 Dharavi residents through the charitable arm of its organization (Nuwer, 2015). However, this assumption that tourist money benefits slum dwellers seems to rely on the generosity of the operating tour companies. This is evident in that the majority of surveyed slum dwellers in Kibera, Kenya, reported that outsiders benefited more than locals from slum tourism (Kieti & Magio, 2013). As one area chief said, “most of the benefits are retained by the slum tour operation companies who organize trips for the slum tourists, some are foreign owned and the Wazungus (the whites) are the directors of those organizations” (Kieti & Magio, 2013, p. 50). Thus, there is simply not enough research currently to know how slum tourism generally affects the local economy. I argue, however, that regardless of whether future research shows that slum tourism has positive effects on local economies, slum tourism remains unethical. To borrow from Kant, I believe to act ethically one must treat humans “always at the same time as a end, never merely as a means.” Slum tourism uses the slum dwellers as a means for tourists to learn about poverty, entertain themselves, etc. It places slum dwellers’ lives on display without their consent. In doing so, it strips slum dwellers of their autonomy, and consequentially of their humanity. Such a practice is inherently unethical, regardless of its results.

In summary, I argue that slum tourism is inherently unethical for a multitude of reasons. First, it creates a dynamic where poverty is viewed as entertainment,
which trivializes the hardships of living in poverty. Additionally, slum tourism allows the authenticity of a slum to be determined by a small and privileged subset of the population. This results in the silencing of the poor, who are already silenced too often. Further, the small amount of research on locals’ opinions on slum tourism shows that they find it embarrassing and dehumanizing. I also argue that regardless of tourists’ personal intentions, or the money generated by tourists, slum tourism remains unethical. This is because slum tourism is inherently a greedy, entitled practice that uses slum dwellers as nothing but means for the tourists’ pleasure. As tourism continues to grow and develop as an industry, I hope that there is a movement away from slum tourism.

References


