Ethics and Poverty Tours

Evan Selinger

A new word has entered into travel discourse: “poorism.” “Poorism” refers to organized tours that bring predominantly middle and upper class people to impoverished regions. Programs exist in Brazil (South America), Soweto (Africa), Mumbai (India), Rotterdam (Netherlands), and New York (United States). According to a recent *Newsweek* article, the poorism market already is “booming.” Poorism attracts attention because advocates characterize it as a moral enterprise, a form of conscientious consumerism. But poorism is at best a morally complex endeavor.

The Poorism Debate: Advocates

Just as advocates of ecotourism associate nature-based tourism with environmental education and environmental justice, so too do champions of poorism associate their endeavor with education (raising awareness of global suffering) and justice (providing needed funds to destitute regions either by direct transfers to the poor themselves or by targeted spending within the impoverished areas visited).

The *Newsweek* article focuses on trips taken by Kevin Outterson, a law professor at Boston University. Outterson offers the following observations on the

The slogan “We should not avoid” seems to capture an appropriate attitude toward activities such as poorism that reveal large-scale degradation that the privileged may be complicit in.

consciousness-raising potential of poorism, as well as its capacity to promote service learning and beneficent volunteerism: “We live in a world of both poverty and abundance. Many universities encourage foreign study programs as part of a globalized curriculum. But it is possible to visit middle-income countries like Brazil and Mexico without actually encountering poverty, other than chance encounters on the streets. I took my

students into Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro because the residents of Rocinha make the tourist experience of Rio possible. . . . Rocinha residents are the workers, cooks, maids, street sweepers, waiters, store clerks and street vendors who serve Ipanema, Leblon and Copacabana. To understand how Brazil works, you need to experience more than one perspective, especially if you can do that with the permission of the community. My students have generally been impressed with many aspects of Rocinha, especially how the community has self-organized in response to government neglect.”

Generalized further, advocates who adopt Outterson’s outlook insist that poorism should be an obligation that all tourists accept. Mainstream tourism ostensibly idealizes geographies and further insulates people from awareness of the extent of existing inequality. Poorism can provide a needed glimpse into the underbelly of geopolitics. Dramatically put, then, if the slogan “We should never forget” captures an appropriate attitude concerning the immorality of turning a blind eye toward the barbarism that occurred during the Holocaust, then the slogan “We should not avoid” seems to capture an appropriate attitude toward activities such as poorism that reveal large-scale degradation that the privileged may be complicit in by virtue of their ignorance of human rights violations.

Timothy Engström, co-editor of a recent book on theories and practices of imaging, offers the following insight into the problem of ignorance applied to his own experience touring a favela. Engström remarks that in order to appreciate why some poverty tours can affect participants in powerful ways, it’s useful to consider how visual technologies and cultural habits of sight shape what we perceive or consider worth perceiving in the first place, and to consider how these technologies and cultural practices mediate the “presence of the real” when experienced.

In this context, Engström focuses on the disparity between experiencing a favela first-hand and learning about the damage done to New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. In the latter case, typical Western media presentations framed the disaster as a catastrophe by

favoring a grand scale of presentation through sweeping images, including panoramic helicopter shots of flooding taken at a distance, and the billboard politics of stranded residents holding up signs requesting assistance. By contrast, Engström's favela tour was conducted on a small scale, with a guide and only a handful of people. According to Engström, "the favela's design is resistant to the camera's intrusion; it does not offer . . . a safe distance, or a grand spectacle to capture and consume." The experience of being embedded in the midst of poverty can differ significantly from being exposed to poverty through media representations. While still framed within a tourist script, the evidentiary power of embedded experience is difficult to replicate.

The Poorism Debate: Detractors

Just as ecotourism has detractors, who highlight a range of problems, including the promotion of a consumerist attitude toward the environment that leaves the financial structures that have contributed to pollution and global warming unchallenged and the creation of environmentally deleterious infrastructures to

"Maybe you give 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 percent of the profit back to the community, but now you've commodified these people, you've turned them into a product in the service of an industry."

support tourism, so too does poorism have critics. The *Newsweek* article, as well as essays in *The Observer* ("Slum tours: a day trip too far?") and *Smithsonian* magazine ("Next Stop, Squalor") note that critics decry poorism as exploitative voyeurism.

In a *Globe and Mail* article, "On the left, notice the poverty," we find the following account of a contrarian's position, quoting David Fennell, author of *Tourism Ethics*: "Maybe you give 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 percent of the profit back to the community, but you've now commodified these people, you've turned them into a product in the service of an industry. I'm not sure that's ethical." Fennell continues: "We feel we have the right to go anywhere we want on the planet . . . Everest. Antarctica. The Amazon. Wherever. If you put your money down, you have a right to go."

Fennell draws our attention to three problems that advocates of poorism may not have fully considered. The first problem concerns intention. Fennell questions whether altruism is the primary motivator of poorism: "In assessing the legitimacy of poverty tourism it would seem helpful to recognize—as a starting premise—that tourism by nature has proven to be

more about greed, power and superiority, and much less about altruism. If this type of tourism further emphasizes the tourist's freedom to go anywhere, any time and at any price, and the service provider's willingness to capitalize at the expense of others, poverty tourism would seem to be generally exploitative."

The second issue concerns distributive justice. Fennell questions the value of the financial assistance poorism provides: "Local people may be induced to support poverty tourism enterprises if they themselves somehow stand to gain. However, it seems improbable that the collective would rally around poverty tourism because of the inability to spread benefits equally among members. If very few stand to benefit in the face of so many others, there is the danger that such inequalities would compromise community cohesion."

The third issue concerns unintentionally induced suffering. Fennell questions whether misunderstanding could arise during poverty tours: "Even those tourists who sympathize with the plight of the impoverished, irrespective of the reasons for being there, they run the risk of being identified as part of the crowd communally responsible for the hardship in the first place—the divide between the haves and the have-nots."

Practical Difficulties

Criticisms of poorism fall into two categories: (1) clearly specifiable practical difficulties and (2) dilemmas that have deeper subjective dimensions. Let us begin with the first. I do not intend to cast these problems as refutations of poorism, but as concerns that a moral defense of poorism must be able to address.

The first difficulty concerns initial justification. How can someone justify poorism as a moral enterprise when, instead of going on any vacation at all, they could simply refrain from going on holiday and donate the funds they would have spent to a reputable charitable organization, such as Oxfam?

How can someone justify poorism as a moral enterprise when, instead of going on any vacation at all, they could simply donate the funds to Oxfam?

The second difficulty concerns assessing the impact of the practice on the tourist. How can the impact of poorism be measured? Even if an immediate and informative survey of tourist responses were given, it is unclear how the results would be assessed. Moreover, given the potential for a tourist's immediate emotional responses to weaken over time, it is unclear how much significance should be granted to their initial reaction in the first place.

The third difficulty concerns assessing the impact of poorism on poverty. While the financial benefit that accrues from poorism may help particular individuals, skeptics ask whether supporting suffering individuals in the context of poorism is a self-refuting endeavor, reinforcing the underlying social and financial structures that give rise to poverty and perpetuate it. For example, supporting poor people by purchasing inexpensive goods that they make may disincline them to demand access to enhanced education that could better alleviate their poverty.

The fourth difficulty concerns tourist intent. Is someone planning a poorism tour primarily going to increase awareness of global misery, rather than embarking on adventure designed to provide interesting and self-aggrandizing cocktail party fodder? Might the main allure be the seductive promise of an "authentic" and "real" experience coveted precisely because the middle or upper class world has become so mediated by technology that life itself has taken on a virtual flavor? (Lest this concern about authenticity seem hyperbolic, we should recall that in the early 1990s, Massimo Beyerle, an Italian travel agent, offered "war zone" tours for \$25,000. The trip entailed a two-week tour of a war zone, accompanied by security forces and doctors. Arguably, the war zone tour appeals to people who find televised coverage of war to be too mediated to overcome the distance between spectator and spectacle.)

The fifth difficulty concerns the tour guide's intent. Given the lack of regulation, how can potential poverty tourists be assured that a particular tour guide or tour company has beneficent motives and is not taking advantage of the perceived morality of their enterprise for the primary purpose of enhancing personal

Is someone planning a poorism tour primarily embarking on adventure designed to provide interesting and self-aggrandizing cocktail party fodder?

finances? How can poverty tourists be assured that the areas visited were not selected over alternatives because representatives from that area cut a special deal with the tour company?

The sixth difficulty concerns the danger that endorsing poverty tours can be interpreted as legitimating other, more morally problematic kinds of tourism. According to a BBC News article, some Jewish settlers have offered special "terror tours" of the West Bank and Gaza where tourists receive training in hand-to-hand combat and weapon use (how to drive a tank and use M16s, Uzis, pistols and Kalashnikov machine

guns), view Palestinian "terror enclaves" from a helicopter and suicide bomber belts that the Israeli army seized, and, finally, engage in a paintball fight in a simulated Arab village containing simulated Arab terrorists. This practice raises questions about the extent to which tourism can exacerbate extant prejudices, rather than improve one's understanding of the world.

The seventh difficulty concerns the problem of profit. Should poverty tours be entirely non-profit, or is it morally permissible for tour operators to make money? Unless some tour money is given to the poor

We can ask whether the benefits of poorism become tainted by accruing through the underlying capitalization on human suffering.

community, it becomes difficult for a poverty tour operator to make a compelling moral case for the activity. But even if it is permissible to turn some profit, we can ask whether the benefits of poorism become tainted by accruing through the underlying capitalization on human suffering.

The eighth difficulty concerns informed consent. What assurances do poverty tourists have that the people being observed consented to be observed? If photography is permitted, is the consent offered to it genuine? Given the conditions of poverty, token gestures of consent may be undermined by asymmetries of power and capital.

The final difficulty concerns the educational prerequisites needed to ensure that poorism actually serves an educational function. Despite the experiential benefits of embedded observation discussed above, what tourists see will still be informed by their preexisting conceptions of culture, race, history, economics, and justice. Since poorism is not a regulated industry, what guarantee do tourists have that guides can provide appropriate background understanding? Or that even expert guides can provide the needed information, given the limited amount of time at hand? Or that the presentation of new information will be sufficient to overcome detrimental background prejudices that can have affective as well as intellectual dimensions?

On this last possibility, it is instructive to consider lessons already learned from philosophical analysis of ecotourism. In conjunction with researchers from the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Robert Figueroa, a philosopher at the University of North Texas, conducted case studies of the joint management effort between indigenous and non-indigenous stake-

*Slums built on swamp land near a garbage dump in East Cipinang, Jakarta, Indonesia
(Jonathan McIntosh, 2004, Creative Commons Attribution)*

holders in Australia to oversee Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. The explicit goal underlying the park tours is reconciliation (between the former and latter groups) through conveying appreciation of the park's heritage. Despite this good intention, Figueroa and his collaborators learned that it is exceptionally difficult for tourists to attune themselves to the experience, such that they can experience the park as a "moral gateway." Even some of Figueroa's own students found it difficult to respect indigenous values, despite elaborate formal instruction on the tour.

Voyeurism and Negatively Dramatizing Difference

Having just reviewed some of the practical difficulties that are of general import to poorism, we now can turn to some deeper dilemmas. The charge of voyeurism can be combined with a related criticism concerning the negative dramatization of difference.

A voyeur is someone who watches others and often objectifies what he sees. If the tourist's gaze reduces complex lives to mere economic status, then perceptual and conceptual simplification may entail dehumanization. The negative dramatization of difference is a phenomenological corollary to the problem of voyeurism. It refers to the specific ways in which tourists stand out from the people they observe when they engage in their acts of observation. When poverty tourists dress in expensive clothes, travel in expensive vehicles (such as air-conditioned SUVs), reveal themselves as having leisure time available to take a tour and disposable income to spend while touring, they risk making the poor feel even worse about their situation. It can be one thing for poor people intellectually to know that well-off people exist, and quite another for them to see significant wealth disparities for themselves—particularly in a context where the poor are, even if only implicitly, identified as inferior.

The advocates of poorism dismiss these reservations as incorrectly presupposing that poor people lack agency. They point out that under conditions of poorism, many of the destitute who are observed take an ironic attitude toward the situation; instead of feeling ashamed by the tourist's gaze, they play with it subversively, allowing the tourists to project their own thoughts onto the situation, in exchange for material benefits that follow. However, not every poor person is capable of assuming a subversive stance, and even if such objectification is not directly harmful to the poor, it can remain morally problematic.

Consider our reactions to the following two examples.

The first example is fictional, but it does not take much imagination to conceive of its occurring in real life. The movie *My Man Godfrey* (1936) opens in a city dump where two upper-class sisters compete to find a "forgotten man" to bring to the Waldorf-Ritz hotel. When a homeless person inquires into why one of the society girls is willing to pay for his company, he's informed that he's being recruited to participate in a game: "A scavenger hunt is exactly like a treasure

Advocates of poorism must be able to respond to the skeptic's dual retort that it promotes objectification and the negative dramatization of difference.

hunt, except that in a treasure hunt you find something you want, whereas in a scavenger hunt you find something that nobody wants." Although this arrangement could bring financial benefit to an indigent person, the scenario still would repulse many viewers. By reducing a human being to a "forgotten man," the sisters challenge dignity through objectification. One of them even refers to the act of "playing games with human beings as objects" as "sordid." Additionally, by inviting a homeless person to a gathering of the wealthy, the sisters risk exacerbating shame by dramatizing difference. The homeless man thus quips: "Shall I wear my tails, or come as I am?"

Moving from fiction to fact, let's turn our attention to the opening of "The Foreign Legions," Laura Pappano's recent *NY Times* article on college study abroad programs: "For a student at the University of Ghana in Legon. . . electricity is not a given. Nor is running water. Students might have to fetch buckets of water to flush the toilet and wash clothes." But now "the country, and its flagship university, have become a newly popular destination for studying abroad: about 300 American students, representing dozens of campuses, take classes at Legon. But American students expect a standard of food and housing . . . that is

not typical in West Africa. So New York University has imported the creature comforts of home. Its nearby complex has air conditioning (power guaranteed), 24-hour security, an on-site nurse, wireless Internet." Some students think the accommodations are superior to those at NYU.

Pappano casts the Ghana program in a positive light. American students can gain a sense of independence and newfound cultural understanding—which may be beneficial to them in the current economic context where preparation for the global workforce is seen as an asset—without sacrificing the quality of life they have become accustomed to.

We may ask: Should we view the exacerbation of difference exemplified by the NYU Center as problematic—perhaps, as akin to bringing a homeless person to a party filled with wealthy guests? Should we view the construction of an infrastructure that converts African experiences into commodified Americanized versions as objectification—perhaps, as akin to a scavenger hunt, where the unwanted aspects of the impoverished Ghanaian culture are converted to treasures that appeal to the bourgeois American palette? Finally, should we be concerned about the voyeuristic aspects of the NYU experience? After all, the students are not obligated to do volunteer work while studying in an impoverished country. It seems that in good conscience, they can treat the people they encounter as merely resources for cultivating personal aesthetic satisfaction.

Conclusion

Beyond the pragmatic difficulties listed above, advocates of poorism must be able to respond to the skeptic's dual retort that it promotes objectification and the negative dramatization of difference. They also need to have a reply to the skeptic's objection that transferring money that could have been spent on a holiday is better than going on a poverty tour. And, if the advocate of poorism appeals to distributive justice, then the issue of whether poorism further entrenches the structural conditions that give rise to poverty need to be addressed.

Despite this complexity, some instances of poorism may be morally permissible. One defense of this position would center on the idea that while dignity is a crucial moral concept, analysts need to be careful of idealizing it. Poverty can be so dire that in some contexts the very notion of dignity is little more than a Western luxury. Indeed, it seems insufficiently pragmatic to ban poorism in favor of holding out for a perfect solution to eradicate global poverty. The benefits of some forms of poorism may outweigh the costs, despite the poverty tourist's potential complicity with questionable structures, and despite the likelihood that a poverty tourist will have to negotiate with ambiguous motives.

While I am sympathetic to the reasoning just outlined, coming to a final judgment goes beyond the preliminary scope of this essay: to clarify why poorism is morally complex.

Evan Selinger
Department of Philosophy, Rochester Institute of
Technology
evan.selinger@rit.edu

Notes and Sources: I'm grateful to the following people for their assistance with this essay: Richard Dietrich, Timothy Engström, David Fennell, Robert Figueroa, David Kaplan, John Mix, Kevin Outterson, Wade Robison, Noreen Selinger, David Suits, and Kyle Powys White. Some of the material in the article is drawn from personal conversations with Engström and Fennell.

For popular sources, see "Settlers offer West Bank 'terror tours,' BBC News, retrieved on November 6, 2007, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2821391.stm; Shawn Blore, "On the left, notice the poverty," *Globe and Mail*, retrieved on November 6, 2007, at: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LA.C.20070120.REALITY20/TPStory/specialTravel>; John Lancaster, "Next Stop, Squalor," *Smithsonian* magazine, retrieved on November 6, 2007, at: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/10024016.html>; Amelia Gentleman, "Slum tours: a day trip too far?," *Guardian Unlimited*, Retrieved on November 6, 2007, at: <http://guardian.co.uk/travel/2006/may/07/delhi.in.dia.ethicalliving>; Laura Pappano, "The Foreign Legions," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2007; Roxana Popescu, "A Boom in 'Poorism'," *Newsweek*, retrieved on November 6, 2007, at: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/42482/output/print>.

For scholarly sources, see Timothy Engström and Evan Selinger, *Rethinking Theories and Practices of Imaging* (Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming); David Fennell, *Tourism Ethics* (Multilingual Matters Limited, 2005); Robert Figueroa and Gordon Wait, "Cracks in the Mirror: (Un)covering the Moral Terrains of Environmental Justice at Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park," *Ethics, Place, and Environment*, vol.11, no. 3 (2008).

Joseph's Bones

Understanding the Struggle Between God and Mankind in the Bible

Jerome M. Segal

Imagine if someone who had never heard of Judaism or Christianity read the Old Testament. How could the relationship between God and humanity possibly be understood? In *Joseph's Bones*, Jerome M. Segal approaches the Bible from this fresh perspective—one framed by the story of the Israelites' fidelity to Joseph—and finds something unexpected: an account of the human condition that reads like an existential novel about the struggle of mankind against the unpredictable and often unwarranted wrath of God.

"Modest in manner but brilliant in the closeness of its readings, *Joseph's Bones* is a work of stunning originality. Nothing quite like it has appeared in years."

—Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography*
Now available in hardcover and paperback

Riverhead Books
<http://us.penguingroup.com/static/html/riverhead/>