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Reforming the Unreformable: The Peace Corps, Neocolonialism, and the White Savior Complex

LILLY W. WILCOX

The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook tells many stories of Peace Corps volunteers who overcome prejudice and discomfort to fulfill their obligations to their host communities and learn about themselves, actualizing Peace Corps founder John F. Kennedy's dream of the American frontiersman.¹ However, one story in the workbook stands out because it does the opposite. An unnamed Peace Corps volunteer who worked in Guatemala details how much he struggled in his role in the community. He was mocked by local kids who constantly called him ugly, no one attended the meetings he organized about farming techniques, and trees he planted for the community were intentionally uprooted.² While this story is presented in the workbook to remind volunteers that working in another culture can be a challenge, it also undermines the idea that the Peace Corps is effective. If a volunteer can be so unwelcome in their host community, it seems obvious that the Peace Corps needs changing.

The Peace Corps is an integral thread in the fabric of American foreign policy.³ As criticism of the U.S. military for excess intervention in foreign countries becomes more mainstream, it is important to look at the Peace Corps with a similarly critical lens. While the Peace Corps is a largely well-liked organization domestically, their mission of uplifting so-called developing countries can be interpreted as unnecessary, unwanted, and harmful. There are many

negative aspects to aid and development, which are often overlooked in favor of the inspirational stories of those who lift themselves up by the bootstraps with the helping hand of an American volunteer.⁴ Development and aid are temporary solutions that do not result in meaningful change because the problems they try to solve are systemic.

The Peace Corps is an institution that helped create a system of reliance on the Global North during the development era of the 1960s, and it therefore has an obligation to shift its goals to help dismantle this system. This paper will explain the theory of neocolonialism, argue that the Peace Corps is a neocolonialist institution, and discuss the systemic and individual reforms that the Peace Corps should take to divorce itself from its harsh legacy.

The legacy of colonialism has created a lasting power imbalance between formerly colonized countries and their former colonizers, often represented by the terms the Global South and Global North.⁵ Based on the economic categorizations of the United Nations and the World Bank, the Global North includes most high-income countries, and the Global South includes most low and middle-income countries, while also accounting for geography.⁶ This language represents a dichotomous—and therefore not totally accurate—picture of world economies, but the terms are more appropriate than First/Third World and Developed/Developing Countries—distinctions that imply a clear inferiority. The language of the Global North and Global South fit this paper best because they represent the geopolitical dynamic most respectfully and are founded on the research of prominent international organizations that are relevant to discussions of development and aid. The Global North and Global South will be used in this paper to describe

colonialist and formerly colonized countries in general terms.

The empires of the Global North lost their political grip on territories in the Global South during the period of decolonization in the 1950s and 60s.⁷ Colonialism was an economic boon for the Global North, imposed through direct occupation of the Global South, and decolonization threatened to wreak havoc on western economies. As former colonies became independent, colonialist countries lost capital and sought new ways to control the Global South.⁸ Looking for a solution to these ails, former colonialist countries adopted the practice of neocolonialism, which used economic and cultural means to control formerly colonized countries.⁹

Neocolonialism's roots in culture and the economy allows it to masquerade as a positive practice that leads to development in the Global South and equity with the Global North. This phenomenon is described by French Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who originally coined the term and the idea of the "neocolonialist mystification." In his 1956 essay "Colonialism is a System," Sartre argues that neocolonialists are those who have a positive perspective of the colonialist system as a whole, viewing themselves as messiahs. These neocolonialists blame the failure of the colonial system on a select few ill-intentioned colonists.¹⁰ Based on his critique of French colonialism in Algeria in this text, Sartre outlines several key features of colonialism.¹¹

First, colonialism is an explicitly capitalist system, designed to benefit only the colonists. The ultimate goal of the colonial system is not to create new industry in colonized lands; the goal is to enable colonists to take advantage of the land and the existing industry to benefit their home country.¹² Algeria had a thriving agriculture industry that sustained the country's

population before the French occupation. The focus of the French agriculture industry in Algeria was the exportation of goods back to France to make a profit.¹³ The French forced Algerians to less fertile lands in the south and overtook their fertile lands in the North. In the northern lands, the French developed wine grape crops and overtook the grain market. These crops had no use to the Algerians because it was against their faith to drink wine. While French colonists exported their products back to France, Algerians starved as their grain crop diminished in the south and they were forced to work for the French to survive.¹⁴

Additionally, the colonial system disempowers workers. During the industrial era, modern technology was accessible to French colonists in Algeria, and employing machines was cheaper than employing Algerians. Algerians were already impoverished by the French system and could not benefit from the technological advancements of the modern era themselves. The final act of the colonial system, after the occupation of native land and exploitation of the worker, is the complete redundancy of the worker.¹⁵

Sartre also touches upon the imposition of culture as a tool of colonialism. Language and education are tools of empowerment, and the French outlawed the use of Arabic in Algeria to oppress the Algerian people. In 1956, 80 percent of Algerians were illiterate after France made French the primary language of Algeria.¹⁶ Additionally, the French pushed their values of individualism onto the Algerian population, undermining the country's original collective living system.¹⁷ Colonialism assumes a hierarchy of both knowledge and values that places the colonist on top without considering those who are colonized.

The colonial system relies upon the exploitation of the colonized to benefit the

colonist. The neocolonialist who believes that the colonial system can be reformed is wholly incorrect because injustice is inherent to colonialism.¹⁸ Sartre argues that there are three potential outcomes to any attempt at reform: the reforms will benefit the colonists and not the colonized people, the colonialist government will deceptively undermine the reforms, or the colonialist government will patently undermine the reforms.

To explain the first outcome, Sartre brings up the potential irrigation of the less-fertile, southern lands left to the Algerians. Ultimately, this would benefit the French because French law in Algeria stated that colonists had the right to three-quarters of irrigated land. This conundrum proves that exploitation is built into the system. The second outcome manifested when the government required that French colonists return small portions of their land to be mortgaged to Algerians to repay the State for the added benefit of irrigation. Rather than enacting aggressive reforms that actually helped Algerians, the government opted to keep themselves in control of land redistribution so not to hurt the colonists. To prove his third point, Sartre references French elections in Algeria, which were openly corrupt to benefit the French.¹⁹

While Sartre's "Colonialism is a System" focuses explicitly on colonialism, rather than neocolonialism, the two systems have a similar focus—economic and cultural control. Colonialism emphasizes direct exploitation of labor and land, and neocolonialism depends upon the grooming of economies and value systems of other countries to serve the Global North.²⁰ While colonialism is clearly an oppressive system, it is harder to see the negative effects of the reformed system due to the neocolonialist mystification.

Neocolonialism allows colonized states more autonomy, but, as Sartre argues,

only those who have been colonized truly understand how to counteract the negative effects of the colonial system.²¹ An example of this dynamic can be found in the map of development aid distributed by the World Bank. The distribution of aid is concentrated in many countries that were formerly under a colonial regime, which have had to rely upon the assistance of the global hegemony following decolonization.²² Formerly colonized countries need aid to repair their countries from the harms of colonialism, but that necessary reliance fuels neocolonialist attitudes. Neocolonialist countries do not fully cede power to formerly colonized countries, and the same assumed hierarchy of values remains in place.²³ That harmful hierarchy is evident in the development projects that were established during the period of neocolonialism in the mid-20th century and still last today.

Historically, the first two outcomes of ineffectual reform—benefit to the colonist rather than the colonized and deceptive undermining of reforms by the colonialist government—have befallen the Peace Corps. Its foundational motivation was to win the Cold War, while masquerading as an altruistic organization that heralded "modernization" in the countries in which it intervened.²⁴ The Peace Corps was founded following the collapse of traditional colonialism, but its failings reflect the outcomes that Sartre cautioned of colonialism.

The Peace Corps is one such development project that has lasted into the 21st century and is considered as an organization of the highest caliber.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is still marked by its neocolonialist history, and the remnants of its nationalistic beginnings still shape its modern mission. Some have argued that the United States cannot be considered a neocolonialist country because it did not traditionally hold colonies; however, other

countries do have an economic and cultural dependence on the United States, fulfilling the criteria for neocolonialism.²⁶ It is not necessary for one country to have a history of colonialism to subsequently become a neocolonialist country.

In his essay, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, former President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah defines neocolonialism as the subjugation of one country by another through either “economic or monetary means” or “through culture, politics, ideology, literature and education.”²⁷ Nkrumah critiqued the United States as a neocolonialist country heavily in this essay, arguing that traditional foreign policy organizations were supplemented by international aid organizations like the Peace Corps.²⁸ Nkrumah described the Peace Corps as a “new instrument to cover the ideological arena,” of the United States’ “plan for invading the so-called Third World.”²⁹ Nkrumah, who is considered one of the foremost scholars of neocolonialism, designated the United States as a neocolonialist country in spite of the fact that it never traditionally held colonies and included the Peace Corps in his critique.

The Kennedy administration founded the Peace Corps during the Cold War in 1961 as a tool urgently needed to combat the spread of communism and bring more countries into the United States’ fold.³⁰ As Kennedy administration officials brainstormed how to create an organization of such scale and importance, Warren Wiggins, a State Department official, turned to John F. Kennedy’s own words from his 1961 State of the Union speech. Speaking of the United States, Kennedy argued:

Our role is essential and unavoidable in the construction of a sound and expanding economy for the entire non-communist world...the problems in achieving this goal are towering and unprecedented—the response

must be towering and unprecedented as well.³¹

This quote was the backbone of Warren Wiggins’ memo, “A Towering Task,” which became the founding document of the Peace Corps, illustrating that the motivation for founding the Peace Corps was hardly altruistic. Instead, foreign policy and economics were driving factors, which allowed neocolonialism to shape the organization.

Modernization theory of the 1960s justified the Peace Corps’ development work as altruistic assistance that would bring so-called developing countries into the 20th century, giving the organization an excuse to intervene in the Global South for the United States’ benefit. Modernization promised economic parity with the superpowers of the Global North, albeit under the watchful eye of the United States. Gendered language permeated the Peace Corps’ arguments for modernization. Developing countries were marked either as the “little brother” waiting to be taken under the wing of the United States, or as shamefully effeminate, needing the masculine United States to bring them into the capitalist brotherhood of the West.³² The United States used the seductive idea of development to convince other countries that American involvement in their affairs was the best way forward, embodying the same principles of the neocolonialist mystification. Modernization theory presented the United States with an alternative to traditional colonialism, which allowed the United States to become a global superpower through social control of developing countries.³³

The rhetoric of American masculine stewardship pushed by modernization theory was rampant in the fight against the Cold War and is best represented by the debate about the concept of domestic containment. President Nixon argued that domestic

containment, the idea that embracing rigid gender roles, the nuclear family, and traditional American values, would propel the fight against the Soviets in the Cold War.³⁴ In his presidential campaign against Nixon, Kennedy strongly rejected the domestic containment ideal and campaigned upon the fear that the United States was losing its masculine ruggedness, a quality that the Soviets wholeheartedly embraced. Kennedy's establishment of the Peace Corps was an attempt to remedy the growing American "softness," which he thought would cost the country the Cold War.³⁵ The motivations for the foundation of the Peace Corps were to benefit the American volunteer more than their host country, embodying the same principle that Sartre argues is the outcome of failed colonial reform.³⁶ Peace Corps host countries became the playgrounds at which 20-something-year-old American men could embrace their masculinity through physical labor and leadership, while lifting up their host countries into the American capitalist brotherhood.³⁷

Entry into this brotherhood was contingent on the adoption of American values by host countries. The economic structure of the Peace Corps embodied the idea of individualism, and the Kennedy administration used the person-to-person development work of the Peace Corps to push this value onto host countries. If the foremost goal of the Peace Corps was the economic development of host countries, the organization would have been a tool to redistribute the United States wealth equitably. Instead, the organization was shaped around volunteers doing development work for their own betterment. Person-to-person work sent the message that economic growth started on an individual level and did not recognize the structural inequality of the world economy shaped by centuries of colonialism.³⁸

This individualistic practice prevented the Peace Corps from making significant changes in the communities volunteers entered. Nanda Shrestha, who wrote about his experience with the Peace Corps when they came to his Nepali village in 1962, describes that he felt "bewitched" by the new Peace Corps school, which was nicer than any classroom he had ever seen. Nevertheless, Shrestha returned home to hunger and poverty. Because of the stark contrast, "Poverty had rarely been so frightening, or so degrading, in the past."³⁹ Volunteers who worked in the school in Shrestha's village did not have the systemic understanding of problems that would have allowed them to help the whole community. Issues were treated individually, which led to further degradation in communities that did not have the tools they needed to create holistic change. These misconceptions of modernization theory and the organization's Cold War roots allowed neocolonialist practices to become the center of the organization. The early Peace Corps was both a publicity stunt and a foreign policy tool for the United States.

The Peace Corps has three specific goals that have not changed since its founding in 1961. The first goal is "to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for skilled individuals."⁴⁰ This goal, although paternalistic, made sense during decolonization in the 1960s. Many countries did not have well-established university systems following the end of colonial rule, and Peace Corps volunteers could provide support in fields that required additional training. However, this is no longer the case. Now, most Peace Corps host countries have university systems, yet jobs that could be done by host country nationals are still filled by Peace Corps volunteers.⁴¹ In the current system, only United States citizens can serve as Peace Corps volunteers, further limiting options

for host country nationals who could perform skilled work.⁴² Karen Rothmyer, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya, outlines the problem. Following her Peace Corps volunteer experience, she went on to teach at the well-established University of Nairobi, where she found that university graduates struggled to get jobs, while Peace Corps volunteer positions were constantly filled.⁴³ One of the main principles of colonialism, argued by Sartre, is the disempowerment of the native worker.⁴⁴ The Peace Corps delegitimizes the skill of citizens of host countries and prevents sustainable development by continually placing Americans in the roles of Peace Corps volunteers.

The second goal is “to promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.”⁴⁵ When looking at the motivations for the founding of the Peace Corps, this goal is more harmful than it seems. This goal ties back to the early motivations of the Peace Corps, which hoped that interpersonal relationships with Americans would strengthen Cold War allegiances to the U.S. Now this goal perpetuates neocolonialism in a more discreet way. Americans disrupt the cultural stability of their host communities. Through their work as Peace Corps volunteers, Americans become associated with wealth and education, solidifying the hierarchy of values that is central to neocolonialism.

Finally, the Peace Corps hopes “to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.”⁴⁶ This goal shows that Americans, and Peace Corps volunteers by proxy, tend to think of other cultures as different and underdeveloped. The placement of Americans in the role of educators working to lift host country citizens out of poverty is a manifestation of the idea of the white savior complex.⁴⁷

The white savior complex is the view of citizens of the Global North as

themselves as a messiah for the Global South as they embark on “voluntourism” trips.⁴⁸ This perspective is rooted in colonialism, which began the common portrayal of the Global South as inferior to the Global North.⁴⁹ “Voluntourists” partake in overseas charity work often for selfish purposes and without considering the true effects of their actions, effectively supporting the neocolonialist system.⁵⁰ While voluntourism is often used to describe short-term work or missionary efforts, humanitarian aid and development also encounter similar problems relating to the motivations and outcomes of their work. By nature, they perpetuate the white savior complex because they depend on the paternalistic good will of the Global North towards the Global South.⁵¹

The white savior complex is evident in the testimonials of Peace Corps volunteers—66% of whom are not minorities—and example perspectives written by the organization itself found in the Peace Corps’ pre-departure workbook.⁵² One volunteer who worked in Turkey describes how his experience was tainted by local conventions, which he found were not “natural and logical.”⁵³ While the Peace Corps workbook points out these perceptions to combat them, the idea that other cultures are different is ingrained in the third goal of the Peace Corps.

The second and third goals are positive in intent, but not necessarily in impact. The organization hopes to break down cultural barriers by sending American volunteers into foreign countries. This would work if the Peace Corps was a volunteer exchange. Because it is not, it perpetuates the idea that host country nationals cannot do worthwhile work in the U.S. and allows the American volunteers to fill the role of the white savior.

Currently, volunteers apply to work in one of six sectors for the Peace Corps—

agriculture, community and economic development, environment, health, youth in development, and education.⁵⁴ Agriculture volunteers work with host country citizens to teach farmers sustainable farming techniques with an emphasis on climate change and conservation, as well as food and nutrition education.⁵⁵ Volunteers who work in the community economic development sector teach entrepreneurship and business best practices to host country locals, often working with other development organizations and NGOs. Environment volunteers teach about climate change and sustainability in host communities.⁵⁶ The health sector focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention and education, as well as hygiene, water sanitation, nutrition, and maternal and child health.⁵⁷ In Youth in Development, volunteers educate young people from host communities about social, health, and environmental issues.⁵⁸

Finally, in education, the largest Peace Corps sector, volunteers teach a variety of subjects in schools of all levels. There is an emphasis on English language education, and volunteers can become certified in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.⁵⁹ As Sartre points out, assimilation through language is a common tool of neocolonialism, which reinforces the hierarchy of ideals that values the culture of the Global North.⁶⁰ While teaching the English language is not negative in itself, it is important to recognize the assumptions that the program makes about the weight of one language over another. Volunteers do learn local languages, but that is out of necessity for their two-year assignment. In contrast, the locals learning English is seen as a necessary tool for modernization.

The language used in the Peace Corps' description of these sectors emphasizes the idea of empowerment. Volunteers are there to empower host country communities, an aim that was not

present in early Peace Corps documentation.⁶¹ Through language, the organization subtly recognizes its past failings. If empowerment had always been the goal of the organization, the organization would no longer be necessary. Despite this turn in language, the organization still has not escaped its paternalistic past, and some volunteers still harbor this attitude. Common issues that Peace Corps volunteers have is the perception that they know better than the locals with whom they work.⁶² The Peace Corps emphasizes teaching in the language used to describe volunteers' roles without emphasizing the learning they will do. As Sartre argues, local people know their communities best—neocolonialism assumes the opposite.⁶³

By pushing capitalism on developing countries with the promise of becoming a member of the U.S. economic brotherhood and by promoting American ideals through education and the other sectors of the Peace Corps, it is clear that the Peace Corps perpetuates neocolonialism through both the economic and cultural control of other countries. The Peace Corps must be reformed using the theory of transformative redistribution and recognition to divorce itself from neocolonialist attitudes and better serve host countries.

Scholar Nancy Fraser theorizes that justice can be broken down into calls for either redistribution of wealth or recognition of culture.⁶⁴ Issues of cultural injustice seek remedies of recognition, the practice of revaluing particular groups that are culturally marginalized. Alternatively, the solution to economic issues is redistribution of wealth to rid the system of economic injustice.⁶⁵ Development and aid are functions of the liberal welfare state, which recognizes the need for redistribution and recognition but attempts to solve immediate rather than structural issues, embodying the theory of affirmative redistribution and

recognition. This approach to change means that development organizations cannot truly solve the problems they claim to address. The alternative to affirmative redistribution and recognition is transformation, which is more effective because it takes a systemic approach to combating injustice.

Affirmation is ineffective because it provides surface-level solutions to problems rooted in structural inequality, essentially informing the principles of the liberal welfare state. It also values the concept of multiculturalism without acknowledging the ways in which economic problems prey on it.⁶⁶ Wealth is redistributed to those who have less of it, but the structural reasons behind the imbalance of wealth is not examined. Multiculturalism is valued without understanding the harms that are produced by emphasizing differences. Cultural value is ingrained into unjust economic structures. By maintaining identity groups, there is room for groups to be othered, and the root of economic issues remains untouched. Affirmation creates an “aid addiction,” through which the Global North controls developing countries economically.⁶⁷ The Peace Corps is a tool that perpetuates aid addiction in the form of human capital outsourced from the United States. The organization continually supplies host countries with aid and American Peace Corps volunteers, who are essentially employed by the United States’ government and take roles that could be filled with qualified candidates from host countries. This furthers the perception that the Global South is inferior to the Global North, when it is actually the fault of unjust economic structures.

The Peace Corps should be reformed to embrace the theory of transformative redistribution and recognition. Transformation is a more serious restructuring of society, which entails deconstructing identity dichotomies to

achieve true economic parity.⁶⁸

Transformation recognizes that sustainable change cannot happen without restructuring the economy to rid it of cultural injustice. The Peace Corps depends on the dichotomy of the rich Global North and the poor Global South to justify its affirmative work. To create sustainable change in host countries, the organization should focus on combating this perception of superiority and focus on collaboration with its host country partners. Economic parity cannot exist while the Peace Corps fuels the aid addiction system.

If the Peace Corps wants to function as a tool for achieving economic and cultural equality, its ultimate goal should be that the organization becomes obsolete. It should work to redistribute capital in a sustainable way, rather than attempting to solve structural economic problems without changing the structure itself. Actions like teaching agricultural techniques or business skills are helpful on a small scale but do not address the economic inequalities and cultural hierarchy between the Global North and Global South that remain from the colonial era. While this structural inequality remains, the Peace Corps will continue to inadvertently other the cultures and individuals of host countries due to entrenched perceptions about the Global South.

The Peace Corps is a function of neocolonialism and the liberal welfare state associated with affirmation, and it is ingrained in the American consciousness, so it is unlikely it will be completely abolished anytime soon. Realistically, change to the system will happen gradually, so the American public can acclimatize to the idea of transformation of the Peace Corps. There are three policies that the Peace Corps must adopt to divorce itself from the neocolonialist system.

The Peace Corps could do significant good by redistributing the country’s wealth

with the resources of the United States' government at hand. As of 2010, estimates show that even a 2% redistribution of wealth could eliminate extreme poverty.⁶⁹ However, organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which were created to address economic inequality, fund foreign governments with the expectation that they adopt neoliberal economic policies, while fueling their aid addiction and preventing true global equity.⁷⁰ If the Peace Corps pivots to redistributing wealth to other governments, it will likely fall into the same pattern of promoting aid addiction by providing conditional loans like the IMF and the World Bank, rather than how it does now through the practice of sending volunteers. It would not be able to avoid the critiques of capitalism while under the charge of the United States government. In order to radically rethink redistribution, the focus of the Peace Corps should first be transformative recognition. By confronting its neocolonialist past and altering its organizational structure to become more collaborative, the Peace Corps will be better equipped to supply monetary aid and volunteers to host countries in ways dictated by host countries. As Sartre argues, only formerly colonized countries—not formerly colonial countries—can undo the damage done to their countries by colonialism.⁷¹

The Peace Corps insists that it is an independent agency that does not carry out the foreign policy goals of Congress or the White House, but critics acknowledge that it is in fact a form of American soft power.⁷² It does not function like a traditional foreign policy tool because it is collaborative in some ways with foreign governments—host countries must agree to be a part of the program. However, the goals of the Peace Corps show that it is an attempt to promote a positive image of the United States, bolstering traditional foreign policy

objectives through public relations. While the American government does not write the organization's goals, its financial capacity for good is regulated by the budget set by the federal government, and therefore it is not fully independent.⁷³

Many critics argue that the Peace Corps should transition to a mixed funding model in which it would be partially government-funded, and partially funded through private grants and donations.⁷⁴ In this scenario, the federal government would still have a financial stake in the Peace Corps, and the agency still would face the dilemma of—at best—reflecting or—at worst—carrying out American foreign policy. Complete privatization is also an untenable solution. If the Peace Corps was in the hands of private American citizens, the issue of cultural misrecognition would likely go unaddressed. The worst outcome of privatization would lead the Peace Corps further down the damaging path towards the white savior complex or cause it to become more similar to damaging missionary organizations. The best outcome would see it still solely in the hands of the American people who alone cannot rectify the organization's past or their own misconceptions about host countries. If the Peace Corps becomes a private institution, it will not be able to embrace the structural change needed to comply with the principles of transformation.

To solve both the issues of cultural misrecognition by the Peace Corps and the issue of its funding, the United States government and the governments of host nations should work collaboratively, similar to the structure of the Fulbright Program.⁷⁵ As an international institution based on the principles of partnership and representation, the Peace Corps will be able to combat misrecognition and structural inequality within the organization. While international institutions can still carry out neocolonial

missions, the checks and balances established in a cooperative international institution will help mitigate this. The Peace Corps should be funded by the government of the United States and the governments of participating countries, so that it cannot be regulated by the foreign policy objectives of the United States alone. As the organization functions now, it is unlikely that other governments would consent to this. Host countries receive aid from the Peace Corps, but their citizens do not participate equally in the organization.

The Peace Corps would benefit from having host country nationals in Peace Corps leadership and volunteer positions within their own country, which would give host country governments more reason to back the Peace Corps economically.⁷⁶ This would help to solve issues of misrecognition by the U.S. Peace Corps volunteers and of the first goal of the Peace Corps, which aims to supply skilled individuals to Peace Corps host countries. The language of empowerment that the Peace Corps uses to describe their own work should be translated into real change. The organization should empower host country locals by putting them in leadership positions, rather than relying on the myth of the benevolent American volunteer who knows best. In this case, the American volunteer would become unnecessary, furthering the Peace Corps towards its own dismantling.

As an agency that works collaboratively between countries, the Peace Corps should set up an exchange program with the ultimate goal of dismantling the United States' Americentric mentality.⁷⁷ The Peace Corps faces the problem of the white savior complex; the goals of the organization allow volunteers to see themselves as superior to the locals with whom they work in their host countries. If cultural exchange becomes the norm, Americans who volunteer with the Peace

Corps will have a more complete understanding of cultures other than their own. Misrecognition can be combated through familiarity, which will blur the lines drawn to distinguish culture and prevent economic disparity from again taking root based on cultural prejudices in the fashion of transformative justice.⁷⁸

Once the Peace Corps becomes a collaborative, multinational organization, it can be reformed in the manner of transformative redistribution. Armed with the resources of the United States' government and the guidance of decolonized countries, the Peace Corps will be able to fulfill Sartre's expectation that formerly colonized countries dictate their own healing from the harms of colonialism.⁷⁹ As an international organization, the Peace Corps must work towards transformative recognition that dismantles the hegemony of the United States and the Global North. Effective redistribution must be dictated by each host country without the threat of neoliberal capitalism and with any American volunteers under the supervision of their host country. Additionally, American leaders within the partnership of the Peace Corps must undergo a complete shift in mindset regarding neocolonialist hierarchy. The organization's transformation cannot afford to be hindered by the backwards thinking of a few American leaders mystified by neocolonialism.

Individual actors within the Peace Corps system, including the leaders who work collaboratively with host countries, must be educated on sustainable allyship in addition to systemic change, so they can work within the system to create global equity. For the institution of the Peace Corps to undergo transformational reform, American neocolonialist mindsets must be shifted. International organizations have the tools to prevent neocolonialism but are not neocolonial by nature. Without the

cooperation of leaders who have decolonized their perception of global politics and economics, neocolonialism could take hold through the influence of the countries deemed powerful.

Thorough education on the white savior complex and sustainable allyship for American Peace Corps volunteers and leaders will be essential to ensuring that the organization can undergo its transformation. Additionally, because transformation will not happen overnight, this education will help prevent issues of cultural misrecognition by American Peace Corps volunteers who serve before the organization is reformed. While the Peace Corps does conduct three months of training before Peace Corps volunteers begin their work, the white savior complex is not mentioned once in their 266 page workbook.⁸⁰ Training emphasizes how to combat ethnocentrism and practice “cultural sensitivity,” but the workbook does not acknowledge how it systemically perpetuates those problems.⁸¹

One way to combat the white savior complex is to increase training on sustainable allyship for Peace Corps volunteers. Effective social justice allies are “members of dominant social groups who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership.”⁸² Becoming a social justice ally requires constant meditation about one’s role in systems of oppression, and Peace Corps volunteers who wish to force the hand of the organization in favor of transformation must be trained on the statuses of social justice ally identity development.⁸³ Peace Corps volunteers must reject the idea of dominant cultures and use their privilege to work with oppressed groups to dismantle the system, achieving autonomy status as a social justice ally.⁸⁴

To combat the harms of the white savior complex and voluntourism, Peace Corps volunteers and leaders must work towards being an ally for social justice rather than for self-interest or altruism. The white savior mentality is a key part of both self-interest and altruism-motivated allyship. Those who are motivated by self-interest have a sense of pride in their work that prevents them from seeing systemic oppression and view themselves as a savior due to the work they are doing.⁸⁵ While those who are motivated by altruism have little more awareness of systems of oppression, they understand how it functions without recognizing their role in it. Their guilt about systems of oppression manifests in their attempt to be a hero, treating the oppressed paternalistically.⁸⁶

Allies for social justice work collaboratively with the oppressed group and are held accountable by those with whom they work. They understand the ways they benefit from the systems of oppression and understand that dismantling the systems is also an act of self-liberation, in accordance with the principles of transformative justice.⁸⁷ Peace Corps volunteers and leaders who embody the practice of social justice allyship will be essential to the transformative recognition and redistribution that the Peace Corps must undergo.

The question then remains, are current and aspiring Peace Corps volunteers perpetuating the harms of neocolonialism themselves? While they have a hand in the system, they do not control the system. Sartre writes, “I do not consider as colonists either the minor public officials or the European workers who are at the same time innocent victims and beneficiaries of the system.”⁸⁸ In this scenario, Peace Corps volunteers are comparable to the minor public officials or European workers, who have only ever known the system.

The Peace Corps has been touted as a noble way to demonstrate patriotism, gain global cultural experience, and serve others since its founding in 1961. As it stands, the Peace Corps has a good reputation, and in the 21st century it has changed very little. The Brookings Institution published their first critique of the Peace Corps in 2003, and yet the most recent article, written in 2017, called for much of the same reforms.⁸⁹ To reform the Peace Corps and dismantle the economic and cultural systems of oppression that it perpetuates, there will need to be leaders from within the system, acting as social justice allies with a vested interest in the organization. Current and aspiring Peace Corps volunteers must differentiate themselves from colonists by calling for change because of their knowledge of the system.

There is hope for the Peace Corps yet, and that charge must be taken up by those who do care for a globalist future set on equitable terms. While the Peace Corps' legacy may be rooted in neocolonialism and the white savior complex, it has the capacity to lead the charge against those maladies through its reform. The Peace Corps must not be an American institution, but rather an international institution, which will be held accountable by its formerly colonized partners and rebuilt on the principles of international cooperation. American leaders and volunteers in this institution must be educated on sustainable allyship to ensure that the Peace Corps does not fall into the same pattern of neocolonialism regardless of its new international status.

The organization should be a tool for the redistribution of the wealth of the United States into the hands of host country communities, rather than the inefficient practice of person-to-person development. Host country locals should be placed in Peace Corps volunteer and leadership positions, as host countries do not lack in so-

called skilled volunteers. The organization should send volunteers from host countries to the United States to dismantle the perception that the Global South must rely on the Global North for survival. As such, the organization should be funded by both the United States and host countries to separate the organization from the sway of foreign policy. The Peace Corps can have a part to play in the dismantling of the harmful legacy of neocolonialism.

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