

# Tourism and cultural change: an empathic understanding approach an introduction to tourism, anthropology and ethnicity

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The latest annual conference of ASA (the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, 10-13 April 2007) discussed thoroughly different issues about the nature and the impact of tourism. The panel streams around the main objective of "Thinking through Tourism" were organised around several topics, such as "tourism as an ethnographic field" (series A), "political economy/development" (series B), "identity, memory, imagination" (series C), "mobility" (series D), "enchantment" (series E), "material culture" (series F), and "landscapes" (series G). Furthermore, there were some poster and film/video presentations.

The initiative was – considering the many enthusiastic reactions of ASA members – undoubtedly a success. Indeed tourism looms large on the map in the human sciences. It is a noteworthy fact that social and cultural anthropologists and other social scientists increasingly provide case studies in a wide range of time/space settings. Various aspects of tourism are in these approaches richly discussed by analyzing concrete field data and thereby creating a fruitful platform for deeper insights in the complex phenomenon of tourism.

However, some anthropologists studying tourism can not resist making rather caricaturist comparisons between ethnography and ethnic tourism. “From ethnographer to tourist and back again: shifting subjectivities and positioning in the anthropology of tourism”, was one of the running titles at the above mentioned ASA conference. Some scholars as P.L. Van den berghe (1994) insist strongly that – in the long run or in the end – anthropology is the ultimate form of ethnic tourism, the endless quest for self-understanding through the exotic “Other”. It is obvious that anthropological fieldwork offers each fieldworker diverse introspections of her/his being and ideas. But those who believe that ethnic tourism or ecotourism is a quest for self-understanding, know little about the daily praxis of organised ethnic tourism and lose themselves very often in abstract speculations.

It is also noteworthy that the ethnographic study of tourism as ethnic relations in tourism research is for the time being a rather unexplored field. The concept of hospitality has been an underlying theme in many anthropological studies, as convenor Peter Lugosi of the Bournemouth University (UK) underlined at the tourism ASA conference. Hospitality, in both its social and commercial manifestations, is also central to the production and the consumption of tourism. Hospitality involves a wide range of social processes that are used to define communities. The ways in which hospitality is practiced is therefore a reflection of the values of people and their cultures. To understand hospitality, it is necessary to question how notions of identity, obligation, inclusion and exclusion are entangled with the production and exchange of food, drinks and the provision of accommodation. Through the concept of hospitality ethnic relations between groups living in so-called host cultures and groups of tourists visiting those host cultures, become indeed very visible.

Tourists come and go but their collective identity of “touristhood” remains in the host culture, certainly in the so-called bulk destinations. The typical behaviour of tourists with typical tourist acts – to get a tan, to hunt for souvenirs, to visit tourist sanctuaries, to stroll in the streets, even “the tourist gaze” – makes them in the eyes of the inhabitants of host cultures a homogenous and particular “people”, an ethnic group. In many cases, the locals have to share their territory for more than six months each year with their “new friends” and in some cases the sharing lasts for the whole year.

In numerous Mediterranean and Caribbean tourist resorts international tourists even claim an own tourist history in the host culture, often stating that “we, the tourists”, bring prosperity and money to the place. In creating such a narrative,

often based on the historical dimension the tourists strengthen the process of tourism as ethnic relations, certainly if they construct – or interfere in – political parties to defend their interests as they already do in some Spanish islands in the Mediterranean. At present there is worldwide a strong tendency that tourists with second homes in host cultures are organizing themselves in various clubs with different memberships, in this way creating special ethnic categories with clear boundaries towards other tourists and locals. British tourists with second homes in Malta are a good example of such ethnic inspired patterns.

From the perspective of host cultures in confrontation with mass tourism, the panelstream “identity, memory, imagination” (series C, tourism ASA conference) for sure promotes and further elaborates tourism as a specific form of ethnic relations. Peoples and places, ways of life and past narratives (cultural heritage) are increasingly created, packaged, shaped or transformed fostering and nurturing mass tourism. In this process tourism thus renews identities and allows ethnicities to emerge. This complex process deeply influences host cultures although tourists are seldom considered or experienced – at least at a first stage – as a menace for the values of the own culture. In contrast with local demands concerning large groups of immigrants, there is no vehement demand that visiting tourists should assimilate the social and cultural values of host cultures.

It is indeed interesting to discover that Brussels, the capital of Belgium and Europe – in the different shades of the city culture and in the different realms of the urban space – is not only shaped by the presence of foreign immigrant communities but equally by the inflow of millions of tourists each year. Therefore, a study focusing on well defined subcultures – in terms of real cases – to understand the profound impact of tourism on the life and thoughts of people is highly urgent. The concept of host culture proves to be too vague to capture the dynamics between host culture and the tourists. In this process divergent actors and voices are creating a discourse and generating a debate about the local, regional or national “we-consciousness”.

This special KOLOR number attempts to fill this gap in the literature by providing five young researchers an opportunity to present their work. Four of them Diederik De Bruycker, Myriam Fierens, Liesbeth Valkeners and Marjon Valkeners graduated last year with a degree in tourism, the Flemish Master in Tourism. This master is a recent initiative of different education organisations in tourism in Flanders (Belgium) under the guidance of the Faculty of Science at the KU Leuven. The fifth researcher Tobias Lancsweert graduated

in social and cultural anthropology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven. At the anthropology department there is an increasing interest among students towards the impact of tourism on culture in the broadest sense of the term. Professor Dr. Dominique Vanneste, programme director of the Flemish Master in Tourism discusses the objectives and the set up of the multi- and interdisciplinary approach of the master education. Finally, the reader will find a brief presentation of the Expeditions international summer school in Malta, held in the Maltese sister islet of Gozo. Expeditions, Research in Applied Anthropology is a growing worldwide independent network of scholars in the human sciences, offering anthropological fieldwork and studies. In this annual organised summer school the participants are facing a rapidly changing and challenged Mediterranean culture, mainly due to the shift of a peasant, conservative and face-to-face society into a tourist economy.

Although our young researchers adopt different perspectives to study their specific topic, the common objective is to gain an empathic understanding of the impact of tourism on daily life in specific empirical cases. Empathic understanding refers to a wide scale of “understandings” as hermeneutic methodological treatises put forward. The meaning of the German word “*Verstehen*” – here translated as “understanding” in English – has indeed different aspects and levels (see Schweizer, 2000).

There is the understanding of meanings, knowing the significance of terms or gestures. The determinative understanding is about grasping the meaning of an event or process by revealing its aim or the pattern within the larger canvas that it belongs to. Knowing why an event happens because one knows its causes, is generally classified as causal understanding. Rational understanding is knowing the reasons why an actor chooses a certain behaviour given her or his preferences and her or his knowledge of the probability of outcome. In contrast to rational understanding, intentional understanding does not invoke the idea of an efficient means/ends scheme; it is about knowing why an actor chooses certain behaviour.

Knowing what something contributes to the working of a larger system refers to an integrating understanding. Genetic understanding is knowing how an event has become transmitted as an outcome of a temporal sequence.

These different usages of understanding co-occur in most research where often three routes are followed: the discovery process, the description of results and the final generalizations. Most anthropologists agree that empathic understanding is a powerful heuristic strategy for

detecting patterns of meaning, for finding out what other people think and feel and how their subjective – but to a certain extent internally shared – beliefs structure meaningful action.

In the field, the empathic understanding leads to the study of narratives. Generally spoken, a narrative is a story, an interpretation of some aspect(s) of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by a human personality. Humans frequently construct narratives in their daily exchanges as a means of making sense of idiosyncratic and at first sight disjoint and unrelated peoples, places, events, changes, etc. Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm even states, at its broadest level, that all communication is a form of storytelling. Fisher therefore describes the concept of narration as symbolic actions, words and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them. Semiotics begins with the gathering of individual building blocks of meaning (signs) to study the way in which those signs are combined into codes to transmit messages. All this is part of a general communication system using both verbal and non verbal elements, creating a discourse with different modalities and forms. To end this introduction, some aspects of narratology in the context of tourism as meeting place for ethnic relations need to be highlighted.

People have the same two abilities in judging either the rationality or the modality of the narrative (Fisher, 1984). To test for narrative coherence and probability, in particular to see whether the narrative as a story is “good” in the sense of sound or valid, it must hold together as a credible sequence of events, making sense in real world terms. Secondly, if the narrative matches the values, beliefs and experiences common to the audience, it will be a reasonably representative portrayal of the real world and thus it will “resonate” with soundness.

The sentence “common to the audience” is crucial in this matter. In cultures where the business of tourism is vital for the economic survival, local narratives are often reshaped by the state (Minister of Tourism) or by private initiatives whereby the contents change dramatically. The narrative becomes a staged narrative, a heroic tale, offering an imagined world. Of course, local narratives may be not as genuine as their local tellers tend to believe. But there is still some control by the locals themselves – or other locals in terms of subcultures – just by using common sense, as everyday communicated oral history of a community shows. That “human nature” control mechanism concerning the objectivity or “the making sense” aspect of the narrative, is absent in the asymmetrical relationships between locals and tourists.

Today, international tourists in Greece are present in tourist brochures but also in oral narratives of many guides, forced to believe that Alexander the Great is still walking in the streets of present-day Athens or at least, that his spirit is still among the modern Greeks. All over the world, tourist brochures, tourist books, tourist guides describe host cultures as brave, courageous, unique, attractive ... and relate locals with their real or alleged glorious pasts in order to attract tourists and foster international tourism, which proves to be a highly profitable sector. The staged narrative in tourism about host cultures is quite often linked with a presumed national identity, enlarging national stereotypes or glorifying national myth-symbols.

On the other hand, it also happens that such staged narratives become more than a nuisance for national governments because they promote more and more local places and identities. Once again in the case of Greece, national policy makers of different political parties in the capital of Athens are not pleased with the promotion of Crete and Rhode in tourism as having their "own identities", captured in colourful staged narratives and travelling all over the world in expensive marketing campaigns. There is a deep suspicion that through this process both islands will demand for more autonomy or even worse independence.

Some researchers underline that the contents and the signs of staged narratives in tourism about host cultures are not taken seriously by the members of the host culture themselves. Reading a tourist guide of your own home town, makes you wonder if you are really living in the same place. Staged narratives alienate one from one's own place and life. About that impact of tourism in host cultures, from our experience, it depends on the specific subcultures.

Misiria is a small village located at the northern coast of Crete, a few miles from the city of Rethimno. In the imagination of most villagers of Misiria in past or even nearby times, Rethimno was far away. Today the village is each year from April till October 'invaded' by international tourists. Modern Misiria is now "a part of Rethimno", literally linked with the city for some years now by a new asphalt road crowded with various hotels, restaurants and bars. As a consequence of this new economy, a lot of the Misiria villagers are at present working in tourism. One tourism business in Misiria is called: "Zeus, Rent a Car". Although a lot of villagers are mocking the owner in their narratives ("Look, Zeus is going for a pint"), this sign is used by some local females, mostly lowly educated and subscribing to more traditional thinking in terms of gender roles and in terms of the village Misiria. In fact, they know little about ancient Greek history and mythology, mixing up historical events and per-

sons, often uttering true nonsense ("Zeus defeated the Turks"). In addition in their aversion of foreign female tourists, in their narratives often described as "wicked women with shameless behaviour", they use messages as "Zeus, Rent a Car" to define themselves as "the carriers of the real Cretan (Greek) culture", recreating cultural traditional patterns that are shocking Greek feminists. For them, the sign "Zeus, rent a car" is incorporated in their lives as one can easily detect by studying their narratives.

In this special issue about research in tourism, however, the focus does not go to traditional forms of tourism (Crete, Sicily, etc.). There is a preference for new forms of tourism. This choice is reflected in the selected articles. In what follows, the reader will get informed about the tourist behaviour of highly educated young Turkish immigrant women; about a case of tourism among refugees; and host-family tourism in developing countries. These articles are followed by two more traditional sites of tourism, notably Barbados and Bruges. In the case of Bruges, it is about tourists as seen by local children. It goes without saying that much more can be said about tourism. However the aim of this issue is to wet the general appetite for the study of new forms and practices in the expanding area of tourism and thereby contributing to the field of anthropological tourism studies.

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