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THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISM

BY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework for viewing the social psychology of international tourism. The concern will be with reviewing selective works of sociologists and extending some of the themes growing out of this research. Special emphasis will be placed on the book by Dean MacCannell (8) entitled The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class and Eric Cohen's (2) typology of international tourist. The symbolic meaning of tourism is placed within the context of psychological modernity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MODERNITY

The conditions under which people live in the later part of the twentieth century differ in several important respects from those of any previous century in history. Through mass communications, the millions of people comprising large viewing audiences become aware of much more than they could experience directly. The availability of higher education has increased the overall levels of knowledge and awareness within the general population. The private automobile has permitted an increase in the freedom of movement, enabling large

numbers of people to travel over long distances for work and pleasure. Under these conditions, access to information, entertainment, and materialistic lifestyles have promoted the entry and integration of millions of people into forms of social living that were not possible previously. Local areas are not isolated, self contained units of meaning but instead are influenced by the decisions and events occurring in the world around them. Through developing an awareness of broader events, the individual seeks a firmer linkage with the totality of modern social life. It is partially through internationalism tourism that these linkages with modernity occur.

We no longer have a society in which the place of the individual in the broader scheme of social affairs is clear and definite. A sense of social purpose, a sense of personal control, and a sense of belonging increasingly depend upon deliberate choices and rational decisions. Traditions as blueprints for behavior have been weakened by industrial and technological developments, and new forms of freedom have emerged. The stability of social ties that may have characterized our historical past have been broken, and increases in our freedom of movement have increasingly uprooted us. We neither know who we are

collectively nor where we are headed historically. The sense of freedom in modern life is accompanied by a sense of alienation, fragmentation, discontinuity.

International travel permits people to detach themselves from their local communities, to develop a sense of being-up-to-date, and to establish their social identities. The scope of events and the range of activities that can become objects of interest are substantially greater than they used to be. Remote places and happenings intrude into consciousness with increasing frequency, and accordingly the activities of everyday life become refocused and extended. In this process, international tourism permits a blending of "fact with fiction," "illusion with reality," "appearances with facades." The public displays that bombard our senses on an everyday basis serve as models of what to do, how to live, and what is possible. The trivial and the incredible tend to be dramatized, and the search for a collective identity becomes a never-ending quest.

The interest in extending one's awareness of broader social events has contributed to the emergence of travel and tourism as an important form of leisure for a large number of people. This is evident in the emergence of tourism as a major industry in numerous regions of the United States and in several other countries. Tourism has become a prominent form of leisure due to the increases in the efficiency of transportation, the wealth and affluence of the masses, and the general interest in having experiences unavailable in one's usual locale.

Tourism refers to using personal resources and available time to travel to places offering attractions that are not available in one's native habitat. The quest is for adventures that will extend one's direct

awareness of places and events. As an observer, the tourist seeks first-hand knowledge of objects and event publicized as noteworthy attractions. The tourist seeks the experiences, however, as an outside observer who comes to observe but not to be involved in creating or shaping the places or event of interest.

Prior to the twentieth century, long-distance travel was uncomfortable, difficult, and expensive. Because of the time requirements and the expense, tourism up until the last part of the nineteenth century was primarily a leisure activity of the very rich. As a result of increased efficiency in transportation technology and a significant increase in per capita income, Americans have become the most traveled people of our time, or of any time in human history. Daniel Boorstin (1, p. 79) observed that "what is remarkable, on reflection, is not that our foreign travel has increased so much. But rather that all this travel has made so little difference in our thinking and feeling.

THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

We may ask, why go through the inconvenience of long distance travel to find out about remote places? We could learn about the lifestyles of other people and about historical places and events by reading about them, or by watching videos, movies, or television programs. Why travel rather than using other forms of information-seeking behavior? MacCannell's (8) answer is that "being there" provides more of a sense of an authentic experience than can be derived from reading a book or watching television. Books are abstract, and the television experience is vicarious and

illusory in a way in which direct encounters are not. While television is much more than moving dots on an electronic screen, it is incomplete as compared to the experience of actually being there.

Being there is a way of obtaining expert credentials on remote places. In any conversation about China, for instance, the tourist who has been there will have an upper hand over the person who has only read a book about China. Whether actually being there actually makes one an expert is not so much the issue as the political implications in everyday life of having had direct international experiences. We note in the current political campaign that Bill Clinton's international experiences was described by his political opponent as being limited to the International Pancake House. The travel to Vietnam by congressional investigative committees during the war was a way of giving them expert credential. By looking in on the situation, they came back with expert knowledge on the progress we were making and what was needed to win the war. Those who were opposed to the war, and believed that it was a war we could not win, could easily be discounted. They lacked direct knowledge of the total situation.

According to MacCannell (8), the quest for authentic experience and knowledge bears an affinity to the religious pilgrimage or the sacred journey that has been prominent in other times and places. The pilgrimages of the past, as well as those of today, offer opportunities for establishing a sense of personal linkage with a set of ultimate values. The sacred journey facilitates separating the genuine from the spurious, the illusion from the reality, and the authentic from the inauthentic. People need to actively participate in a meaningful

cosmos. Both the needs of the soul and the needs of the body must be satisfied. In this context, tourism provides the symbols through which individuals give meaning to their lives.

In support of MacCannell's thesis, we may note the relationship between the concepts of "the holy day" and the "holiday." Historically, the term "holiday" was a derivative of the term "holy day." The holy day involved a temporary suspension of everyday activities and the performance of special rituals in order to tune up a set of cultural values. In the modern world, the term holiday has an added emphasis on personal renewal; exemption from going to work, being able to relax in the sun, escape from the dreariness of everyday life. While at the conscious level the holiday is defined in secular terms, at the latent level the sacred meanings of the holiday are to be found in the quest for renewal and personal rejuvenation.

The notion of international travel as a sacred journey bears an affinity to the initiation rites into adulthood that may be found in other cultures. For example, in "the vision quest" of the American plains Indians, the adolescent was required to leave the village and travel out into the desert in quest of a supernatural experience. The quest sought a basis for developing a self-identity, to answer the question "who am I," and to establish a firmer linkage between oneself and the broader scheme of human affairs. The quest was for contacting the supernatural in order to give sacred qualities to oneself and to one's relationships with others (5).

In other cultures, such as among the aborigines of Australia, the sacred trip required tracing the journey of a mythical,

legendary, ancestor in order to enhance one's understanding of the world and one's place within it. Making such a journey was regarded as both dangerous and necessary. The trip required traveling through unfamiliar territory and encountering people who were strange and unknown. The basic task in these encounters was that of establishing some kinship link with other peoples. If no kinship link could be established through reciting genealogies (sometimes going back as far as 125 generations), the only safe and appropriate thing to do was to kill the stranger, since he was not human and thus was dangerous (3).

Along these lines, the sacred journey may also be undertaken by adults in many cultures under conditions of personal crisis. The sacred quest may be undertaken when everyday life has lost a sense of meaning, when a difficult decision has to be made, when knowledge is sought about something that may have happened, or when a great deal of uncertainty prevails about what is likely to happen next. These are among the conditions in traditional societies for going out alone, away from the community, in order to contact the supernatural (4).

While at the manifest level, we fail to recognize the sacred character of international travel, at the latent level the awesomeness and extraordinary character of long-distance travel is evident. Alex Haley's travel to Africa in search of his social heritage and his family roots is a well-known example of the modern sacred journey (9). The preferred places of international travel for Americans reflects a similar principle. What are the places of preferred international travel for most Americans? Canada, England, Australia, and New Zealand. Why these places? In part it's because the people in those countries

speaking our language. But more importantly, a common social heritage is shared, and international travel permits developing a better grasp of our own origins and the extensive elaborations outwardly from a common cultural core.

Tourism as a sacred journey is reflected in the major attractions within the United States. What are some of the places most frequently visited? The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been one of the more important and interesting ones in recent years. Others include Arlington Cemetery, the Lincoln Monument, the Washington Memorial, Mt. Rushmore, Civil War battlegrounds, and the Little Big Horn. While by purely objective criteria, these are mundane places and there is nothing particularly special about them, the meanings imputed to them are of a different order. For example, studies of tourists at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial indicate that most of the visitors have an intensely emotional reaction resembling a sacred or a religious experience. They see themselves in the mirrored reflections from the wall, and whether they opposed or supported the war, they are not able to remain indifferent or unaffected.

What is suitable for an attraction? It could be virtually anything that is promoted and embellished as having special, extraordinary, or sacred qualities. Travels to national parks provide opportunities for communion with nature, for observing the beauty of the physical world, and for reflecting on the relationship between humans and their physical environment. We are reminded of our own mortality. As humans we come and go as we move through the life cycle from birth to death; but the mountains, the lakes, and the rivers remain. We can know and understand the

Grand Canyon only by being there. Its meaning cannot adequately be captured by postcards, pictures or books about it.

Attractions may also be comprised of purely artificial creations. For example, a trip to Disneyland, to Sea World, to Dollyland, or to Cedar Point is a journey into a socially created fantasyland. Symbolic animals take on human-like characteristics, speak English, and address basic human concerns (6). The thrill of roller coasters and other rides provide an opportunity to engage in a certain amount of edgework--to test the boundaries between life and death, between the sacred and the profane, between physical safety and psychological danger (7).

SAFETY, DANGER, AND OPPORTUNITY

There is some mixture of danger, safety, and opportunity that is inherent in all forms of international travel. The accelerated development of international tourism in recent years has been facilitated by the widespread belief that long-distance travel is safe. Yet, there are those who have a fear of flying and thus find themselves trapped in ways in which others are not. Some hold a basic fear and distrust of strangers: They speak a different language, they eat strange and exotic foods, and they do not share our own understandings of the world. It is my thesis that we can clarify Eric Cohen's (2) typology of the varieties of international tourists by drawing upon the concerns of tourists for safety and the concerns of tourist with danger and opportunity.

According to Cohen's (2) typology, the first type of tourist is the organized mass tourist. This is the traveler who subscribes to a guided tour that provides a fixed itinerary in advance. The tour may consist of visiting as

many as eight countries in fifteen days, with activities organized to provide only a superficial exposure to cultural differences. The tour is processed to provide the tourist with illusions of novel experiences, while retaining all the creature comforts of home. For this type of tourist, safety is maximized at the expense of cross-cultural exposure. Personal experiences are deliberately limited in order to keep them manageable. The social value of such a venture is measured by the distance traveled, by the number of pictures taken, and by the number of sites visited.

The second type of tourist is the individual mass tourist. This type of tourist is one who makes arrangements for the trip through a travel agency without being bound by a fixed schedule or by travel with a group. Excursions into unfamiliar areas, however are limited. The traveler restricts his or her activities to low-risk and familiar situations. This type of tourist seeks greater novelty than is obtainable through the guided tour, but also wants the security and safety that accompanies movement within a well-charted territory.

The third type of international tourist is the explorer. The explorer is one who arranges his or her own trip and "seeks to get off the beaten path as much as possible. However, there is also a desire for comfortable accommodations and dependable transportation. The explorer is willing to venture out into novel situations as an observer, while being prepared to rush back into a familiar environment "if the going gets tough." Even the explorer seems to have difficulty in confronting high levels of uncertainty in cross cultural experiences. Apparently, most human beings have a need to live in a secure, predictable, and orderly world.

The drifter, the fourth type of tourist, is an adventurous traveler who has no fixed schedule or well-defined set of plans. He or she regards the usual tourist activities as superficial and thus avoids travel agencies. The drifter tries to live the way of life of the people of the country visited; working at odd jobs, sharing in local foods, and participating in local customs. This type of tourist is a risk taker and seeks to maximize the novelty of his or her travel experiences.

Cohen (2) observed that with the emergence of the tourist industry as big business, most tourists fall into the first three types. As a result, limited changes in attitudes and values occur as a consequence of travel experiences. Mass tourism is organized around visiting attractions, but these become designed to separate the tourist from the everyday life of the host society. The cross-cultural connections of international tourism thus become more limited than otherwise would be possible. As a result, Boorstin (1) is essentially correct. It's amazing with the increase of international tourism how little change it has had on basic American attitudes and values.

DISCUSSION

In summary, the broader scope of social meaning through travel experiences is a function of the limited vision of the individual in modern society in view of the complexity of the totality of social life. Local areas are not self-contained units but

instead are influenced by decisions and events occurring in the world at large. Being a part of the modern world requires that the individual direct his or her attention beyond the limited confines of the daily workplace and community of residence. Through using leisure time to visit exotic places and to have experiences with remote attractions, the individual seeks firmer linkage with the totality of modern social life.

At the conscious level, we have rejected the sacred and mythical nature of the world we live in. But in doing so something is missing. The human spirit requires more than work schedules and the materialistic consumption of consumer goods. Within this context, the travel brochure has come to replace the biblical text; the lure of international travel provides a greater sense of inspiration than the Sunday morning sermon. The world has become more interdependent, and if we are to find a psychological place within it, we must extend our awareness of the cultures and places that are geographically separated from our own. Tourism has been more fully developed in North America and Europe than elsewhere. This is primarily because the conditions that developed in North America and Europe more fully symbolize psychological modernity. The vast untapped sources of tourism are to be found in third world countries.

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