The Changing Faces of Contemporary Tourism

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Abstract Tourism, a domain of considerable importance in the contemporary world, has long been overlooked by social scientists, but has recently become a field attracting a growing body of research. In sociology, the relation between tourism and modernity at first constituted the issue of principal interest, the discourse focusing on the extent to which modern Western tourists seek authentic experiences on their trip. The article discusses the changes in the terms of the discourse, contingent upon the growing similarity of the world in the wake of globalization, the emergence of the “post-tourist,” and the diversification in the composition of tourists, with the growth in the number of travelers from non-Western countries. The question of the limits of the future expansion of the tourist system is raised in conclusion.

Keywords Tourism · Social change · Globalization · Authenticity

Remember the camera totting, cigar chomping, gross American tourist, stumping the European hunting grounds half a century ago? Comical, he was a common butt of jokes, aimed at his boorishness and superficiality (“An American has done Rome in half a day; on leaving at the airport he said to his wife: ‘A wonderful place this Rome; I could spend a whole day here!’”). Going into the elevator to the Sistine Chapel in 1965, I overheard one of those American tourists complain: “A scandal! To charge a dollar for a church!” The American tourist became the icon of mass tourism of the post-war age—a tourism, which was commonly perceived as exogenous to “real” life, lacking in depth and seriousness, and unworthy or serious intellectual or scientific concern. Few social scientists at the time realized that, though tourists might be comical, tourism is a serious business.

Much changed in the intervening half-century. The iconic “American tourist” is long gone. His place was taken by a medley of travelers from all the continents, varying considerably in the degree of their sophistication, their motivations, mode of travel, and in their particular pursuits. In the absence of a dominant prototype, the stereotype of “the tourist” has been diffracted into many, more specific ones, of particular nationalities or travel styles. Tourism became recognized as a major domain of contemporary life, a huge international industry, reaching out into ever more remote corners of the world, and preparing to reach into space. Rather than an exogenous force, the tourist industry came to be perceived as a major agent in processes of environmental, social and cultural change, especially in many countries of the non-Western parts of the world.

Social scientists were somewhat belatedly drawn to the study of tourism, but in the last three decades tourism became a respected specialty in sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, economics and some other disciplines. Even philosophers and theologians began recently to show interest in the deeper, spiritual meaning of tourism. Sub-specialties, like the study of backpackers or of tourist arts, began to appear. Close to a hundred journals, from many countries, are presently devoted to the field. Rather than either glorifying or denigrating tourism, social scientists study its various manifestations, their dynamics, consequences and the conditions for their sustainability, and
seek to determine the distribution of their benefits and costs for the life, culture and environment of the people at the destinations. There was also much applied research on tourism, directly or indirectly industry driven, but there is also a good deal of critical research, devoted to the elucidation of the problematic effects of the industry, rather than to the increase of its profits. Current research struggles to deal with the processes of transformation, which contemporary tourism is undergoing under the impact of some major recent historical events and global socio-economic forces, particularly, the spreading economic and cultural globalization, the opening up of the post-communist countries, and the emergence of a newly prosperous middle class in some parts of the so called “developing” and “post-communist” world.

Social Change and Tourism

Tourism was a modern Western cultural project. The core of modern tourism lies in the Western world; the industry was developed, owned and managed by Westerners; modern tourists were predominantly Westerners; Westerners shaped the principal tourist routes and destinations, styles of travel, of accommodations and of auxiliary services.

The sociological investigation of tourism was from the outset dominated by the question of the relationship between tourism and modernity. Tourism has at first been deprecated by intellectuals, and epitomized by the social historian, Daniel Boorstin, in his biting critique of American society, The Image, as “the lost art of travel.” Ironically, however, that essay, more than any other, triggered the principal sociological controversy on the nature of modern tourism. The principal bone of contention was the question, what makes moderns travel?

In a challenge to Boorstin’s deprecation of the tourist, Dean MacCannell proposed in the early 1970s, that moderns depart on sightseeing tours in a quest for authenticity, which they miss in their own phony, alienated world. Rather than comical, their serious quest is tragically frustrated by the locals, who deceptively stage their own authenticity, thus preventing the tourists from experiencing the “real thing.” The quest for authenticity was thus posited as the principal, culturally approved motive for modern travel.

MacCannell’s thesis was highly influential in the formation of the sociological discourse on tourism, which continues, in various permutations, to this day. However, recent developments in tourism make the issue of “authenticity,” for various reasons, increasingly less relevant. Perhaps the most obvious reason is that the Western domination of the tourist system is in the contemporary world increasingly challenged under the impact of a rapidly growing number of travelers from non-Western counties. These come principally from the wealthy Middle East, and from Asia, where the new middle classes of Japan, China, India, South Korea and Thailand developed a taste for international travel.

Students of tourism have for long been oblivious to the significance of this rising trend for the sociological analysis of tourism. We know little about the motivations and desires of the growing numbers of non-Western tourists; but it is reasonable to assume that they did not share the Westerners’ “art of travel” in the past; nor are they necessarily impelled by a quest for “authenticity” at present. The question, what are the culturally justified motives for travel of non-Western travelers, and how these help to fashion their style of travel, and their choices of destinations and activities, is one of the major issues, presently facing the sociological study of tourism.

However, even in the contemporary West, tourism motivations are in a process of flux. There exists a widespread perception, that under the impact of globalization, the natural and cultural diversity of the world is decreasing. Post-modern philosophers, like Jean Baudrillard, asserted that the contemporary world is dominated by “simulacra,” without originals. As a consequence of past imperialist expansion, globalization and the post-modern hybridization of cultures, no authentic sights allegedly remain to be discovered or admired by tourists. True enough, the stagnation, revealed by the opening up of the post-communist world, has facilitated the survival of little touched natural sites and cultural life ways, to which Western tourists soon flocked, in order to explore their “authenticity.” But even these are rapidly disappearing, under the impact of brutal capitalist development and adaptation of Western life styles in those countries.

Remarkably, rather than contracting under the impact of the growing sameness of the world, Western tourism continues to expand, and not only into the post-communist world. This may be superficially accounted for by the growing prosperity, which leaves Western upper and middle classes with ever more disposable income. But this does not explain why they should spend their money on travel, rather than on other activities. The question then arises: why should an apparently ever less interesting world attracts ever more travelers?

One suggested explanation is that a major transformation may be underway in the West, from the modern, to the post-modern tourist, or “post-tourist.” While this is certainly not an all-embracing process, it may have wide-ranging effects on the nature of contemporary tourism. Resigned to the futility of a quest for authenticity in the contemporary world, the “post-tourist,” instead of being concerned with the origins of supposedly “real” attractions, ironically or playfully prefers to enjoy the surfaces of often manifestly
in authentic ones. Instead of pursuing different experiences, he may choose to visit places which offer familiar ones, but in a greater variety, of a higher quality, in a more agreeable ambience (or at a lower price), than those available at home. Sheer fun and enjoyment became, in this view, a culturally approved, sufficient reason for travel.

“Post-tourism” thus tones down the “extraordinariness,” which used to be the distinguishing mark of modern tourism - a relatively rare break, even reversal, of everyday life. Even as it increases in importance, contemporary tourism is becoming de-differentiated, and losing its distinctiveness, merging seamlessly with ordinary, everyday leisure and entertainment. It is becoming increasingly difficult, if not meaningless, to ask whether a given activity is a touristic one, or just plain leisure.

The growing prominence of fun and enjoyment, rather than “authenticity,” as the principal motive for travel, may help to explain the remarkable growth in the number, size and technological sophistication of “contrived” or “man-made” attractions, which have risen in popularity, even as the quality of many established “natural” attractions declined in recent decades. The Disney Worlds obviously constitute the prototype of such “contrived” attractions, but a wide variety of other theme parks, entertainment centers, large-scale shows and festival events have cropped up in many localities around the world.

The emergence of such popular “contrived” establishments had a paradoxical effect on many long-standing destinations. Under the impact of globalizing forces, their distinctive “placeness,” a major factor of their attractiveness in the past, is rapidly diminishing. However, as new, contrived attractions, unrelated to their specific ambience, are implanted in them, they acquire a new kind of reputation, and in some cases – as in the case of Las Vegas – an artificially induced “placeness.”

Under the impact of these developments, the tenor of the discourse on authenticity has recently changed. The earlier preoccupation with the veracity of the “objective” authenticity of attractions has been replaced by a growing concern with the tourists’ experiences of “subjective” authenticity on their trip. These, according to some authors, may, at their highest point, possess an “existential” quality, resembling that found at the climax of intense erotic or religious experiences. While in the past researchers have tacitly supposed that intensive experiences could be found primarily in the presence of overwhelming sights, such as magnificent mountains or supreme works of art, contemporary researchers believe, that such experiences can be independent of the nature of the tourist’s surroundings, and may occur even in blatantly inauthentic situations, such as hilarious beach parties or simulated space rides.

The quest for intense, make-believe experiences of the fantastic, which are available in contrived attractions, is in the “post-modern” world gaining preference over the quest for authenticity in “natural” attractions. “Fantasy” is becoming one of the leading motives for travel: the last resort of radical difference in an otherwise increasingly monotonous, less attractive world.

The trend to prefer the excitement of make-believe fantasy over the “real,” however, is not an all-embracing one, and in fact runs into resistance in various ways in the contemporary world. There are those, like some (though ever fewer) backpackers, who – spurning the established tourist routes – seek out ever more remote, little accessible locations, to experience what to them may appear as the last remnants of an authentic way of life or untouched nature. Paradoxically, however, they thereby unwittingly serve as the spearhead of an expanding tourist system. There are many “special interest” tourists, like bird-watchers, whale-watchers, fishing or yachting enthusiasts and followers in the steps of historical or literal figures. There are the increasing numbers of religious tourists, combining religious or spiritual pilgrimages with other touristic activities. There are the “extreme” tourists, who seek the thrill of danger in such exploits, as free rock climbing or unassisted polar crossing, and, most recently, space travel. Finally, there are those who find the mere pursuit of fun and enjoyment too shallow, and look for a more profound “meaning” on their trip, giving rise to new forms of tourism, such as educational tours, participation in scientific expeditions, like archeological digs, or volunteering for work in different projects, like rural development, nature conservation, or humanitarian aid.

Contemporary tourism is becoming increasingly diversified and segmented, and new specialties are constantly emerging. As it moves into the new millennium, the tourist industry faces a major new challenge: the prospect that space, presently the preserve of the privileged few adventurers, will become the principal direction of its future expansion.

Expansion of Tourism and the Future

The rapid expansion of tourism in the contemporary world is raising some increasingly serious problems. The opportunistic character of the tourist industry is gobbling up and commodifying all varieties of travel, including, paradoxically, even those which have initially been conceived as an alternative to it. The principal example of this process is backpacking. Emerging from the counter-culture of the 1960s, and based on an ideology of opposition to conventional tourism, backpacking is increasingly incorporated into the mainstream tourist industry, in a process which could be dubbed as “from backpacking to back-packaging”: specialized tour enterprises are presently offering low-priced backpacking tours, featuring routes,
destinations, accommodations and activities preferred by this kind of travelers. Another example is volunteering: if in an earlier time, travelers volunteered for certain activities, either owing to intrinsic interest, or as a means to gain a cheap holiday, volunteering recently became another branch of the tourist industry, with volunteers paying specialized tourist agencies for the privilege of doing unremunerated work at their chosen destination. “Untamed” travel, outside the scope of the tourist industry, is becoming an increasingly difficult proposition.

As the availability of potentially attractive, but as yet undeveloped destinations is rapidly diminishing, the very underdevelopment, or stagnation, of a country or region appears to become a potential tourist resource. At present, many governments and local authorities in the less developed parts of the world look at tourism as a panacea—while disregarding the often destructive environmental and cultural consequences of a sudden implantation of tourist enterprises into otherwise undeveloped destinations. The dire experience of “lost paradises,” pristine areas destroyed by insensitive tourist development, in the Pacific islands, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, should serve as a warning against eager developers, who, by coveting the tourist dollar, frequently inflicted irreversible damage to sensitive environments and cultures.

While this is a problem on the local scale, a major problem is emerging on the global scale, namely the limits of tourist growth. It is a problem which tourism shares with the energy industry: the sheer growth in demand. As prosperity spreads in populous countries of the non-Western world, travel demand soars. Tens of millions of Chinese will travel abroad in the next decade. They will be soon followed by tens of millions of tourists from India, Brazil and other rapidly developing countries, even as tourism from the West continues to grow. Current projections of future tourism indicate progressive growth in the coming decades. Though tourism is an elastic industry, able to absorb growing numbers by opening up new destinations, and creating novel attractions, the limits of bearing capacity of the most popular attractions are already being reached. And a point in time may come, when a further expansion of tourism may put unacceptable pressure on the available tourist resources on a global scale.

**Further Reading**


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