



Centre for Ethnicity & Racism Studies

The anthropology of dark tourism
Exploring the contradictions of capitalism

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February 2015

Introduction

Dark tourism is a phenomenon widely studied over the last decades. More substantial research has been advanced as fieldwork in dark tourism sites (Seaton, 1996; Stone, 2012; Shapley, 2005; Korstanje & Ivanov, 2012; Korstanje, 2011b). However, such studies focused on methodologies that use tourists as the analysis' starting point. Sometimes, interviewees do not respond with honesty, or simply are not familiar with the basis of their own behaviour. In Latin America people in some regions with histories of mass-death are reluctant to accept tourism as their main profitable resource. Some destinations exploit death as the site's primary attraction, whereas other ones develop a negative attitude towards tourists.

A more helpful way to advance this discussion, as relevant literature suggests, is that dark tourism is defined by the presence of “thanatopsis”: the possibility to understand one's own (future) end through the death of others. This allows us to think of dark tourism as a subtype of heritage, even connect it to pilgrimage (Poria, 2007; Seaton, 1996; Cohen 2011). Yet, even these studies ignore the real roots of the debate on “thanatopsis” and its significance for configuring the geography of dark sites.

The concept of “thanatopsis”, which was misunderstood by some tourism scholars, such as Seaton or Sharpley, was originally coined by the American poet William Cullen Bryant (1817) to refer to the anticipation of one’s own death through the eyes of others. Those who have read Bryant’s poem will agree that the death of other people make us feel better because we avoided temporarily our own end. We both want to retain life and are suffering because death is inevitable. To overcome this existential obstacle, we have to listen to “nature”. Our death is a vital process in the transformation of the life cycle on earth. To be more precise, Bryant alludes to “thanatopsis” as the recognition that life is the primary source of happiness, which only is possible by accepting our own death. Yet, curiosity or mediation over other people’s death was not present in Bryant’s viewpoint –something that begs some more questions.

We may ask for example: what is the connection of dark tourism and late capitalism in the First World? Is dark tourism a practice commonly accepted in “third world” cultures? What are the commonalities and differences between pilgrimage and dark tourism? Lastly, do “first” and “third world” conceptual gaps point to the generation of links between “dark” entertainment and racism?

Conceptual discussion

One of the primary aspects to take into consideration is the role played by death in our modern world. Thanatology has shed light on human interpretation and acceptance of death. Sociologically speaking, religion and religiosity are mechanisms that alleviate human beings from the trauma of their inevitable death – mechanisms that are absent from secular societies, in which there is no expectation of afterlife (Bardis, 1981). Death is neglected by the social imaginary of industrial societies, in which life is valorised to pathological levels. Phillipe Aries (1975) contended that secularization has expanded the boundaries of the life expectancy but paradoxically uncovered the wilderness of death. In middle times, death was something that happened to others; its exotic qualities allowed people to accept it. Death’s nature was disciplined in modern societies with the help of

religion, arts, science and social institutions dealing with it. Today mortality rates diminished but death terrifies society more than ever.

In his early work Phillip Stone explored why death has become a criterion of attractiveness. He argues that dark tourism has gradations ranging from darkest to lightest expressions of death. While the former are characterized by devotion to sites of extreme suffering, such as genocide, mass-murders, or disasters, the latter concern spaces of cultural entertainment, such as Dracula museums. The differences between these types are detailed below.

Darkest type

Orientation Education

History Centric

Perceived authentic

Location authenticity

Shorter time scale to the event

Lower tourism infrastructure

Lightest type

Entertainment orientation

Heritage Centric

Perceived inauthentic

Non location authenticity

Longer time scale to the event

Higher tourism infrastructure.

Source, Stone 2006. A Dark Tourism Spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attraction and exhibitions". *Tourism* Vol 54 (2): 145-160

Stone explains that darker and lighter products are differentiated according to the degree of suffering they offer to sightseers. Dark tourism may be defined as a sort of pilgrimage or experience of looking at sites of suffering, but what seems to be important is the function of sightseeing as an attempt to contemplate the death of the self (Stone, 2012). The visitors are not sadists enjoying the suffering of others; they only experience the possibility of death through that of the other. This instils a message to society, allows us to learn a lesson from a tragedy, a trauma ever-remembered by survivors in visited sites of suffering. The fascination with death corresponds to a quest for new experiences that leads visitors to strengthen their social bonding with the suffering community (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Nonetheless, a closer look suggests another interpretation.

First and foremost, historians have not found any archeological or historical evidence of dark tourism sites in medieval times or earlier. This means that tourist visits to sites of death and suffering are a new phenomenon. We must also explain why some travellers engaged in pilgrimage in cemeteries, and consider the possibility that their goals and psychological motivations have nothing to do with dark tourism.

Towards a theory of dark tourism

It is often assumed that dark tourism sites exhibit spaces of great pain. To what extent these spaces are conducive to a spectacle of horror, as some sociologists put it, is one of the themes that remain unresolved. Analysts of dark tourism have criticized the fact that suffering is commercialized (Foley & Lenon, 1996; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Baudrillard 1996). Recent investigation has posed the question on the economic nature of dark tourism. In late modernity, post-industrial societies, far from correcting the problems that led to disaster, recycle obliterated spaces to introduce new business by facilitating the building of infrastructure for tourist incoming. Affected families are not economically assisted and are pressed to move away, to live to the peripheries of the city. Death and mass-suffering seem to be employed to reinforce the pillars of capitalism. At this stage, tourism seems to be conducive to logic of exploitation where death is the primary resource of attractiveness. Particularly, this makes tourism a resilient industry (Korstanje & Clayton, 2012; Klein, 2007; Korstanje, 2011a; Tarlow & Korstanje, 2013b; Verma & Jain, 2013). Some scholars have explained that dark tourism is praised as a pedagogical pursuit, giving a message to survivors of tragedies. This message is subject to the degree of authenticity the site can generate (Cohen, 2011). One wonders whether dark tourism has evolved now with the help of business mobility to a new resiliency mechanism – a way to face trauma.

In an early study, M. Korstanje & S. Ivanov (2012) delineated a strong connection between dark tourism and psychological resilience, arguing that the former was developed by a community to overcome adversities. Disaster and historical trauma teach a lesson to survivors and their community, thus re-structuring it politically. The function of dark tourism consists in situating death within the human understanding of past, present and

future. Death generates substantial changes in the life of survivors. A community that faced disasters or experienced extreme pain runs a serious risk of disintegration, if a profound sentiment of pride for its adversities is not developed: otherwise put, to reassert unity, its society tries to find ways to narrativise (explain) the disaster. Dark tourism is conducive to that, but under certain circumstances as practice it may instigate chauvinism and ethnical superiority that may lead to racist and ethnocentric tendencies. This happens simply because the feeling of superiority helps survivors to balance the frustrations and the sentiment of losses in a post-disaster context. Survivors feel that after all, not everything is lost. Gods gave them another opportunity because of their moral strengths. If this sentiment of exceptionality is not duly regulated, survivors develop pathological attachments to suffering, by blurring pain with pleasure.

White and Frew (2013) suggested that dark tourism sites are politically designed to express a message to the community historically, politically and emotionally connected to them. Victims and their families proffer a variety of interpretations of such messages and the very social trauma that they experienced. There are no clear boundaries or indicators to mark a unified site of memory; heritage is shaped by political interests and sometimes centralised national discourse around dark sites is not accepted by the community in unison.

Sather Wagstaff (2011) presents an original thesis based on her auto-ethnography in the Ground Zero in New York. She argues that dark tourism sites incite sentiments of loss and mourning, but the very definition of loss is at large. Dark tourism shrines such as that of Ground Zero are reminders of the paining event, given that death is not only irreversible, but also inevitable. Visitors are invited to feel what victims felt –even though these emotions are unauthentic. From the Hiroshima disaster to the collapse of the World Trade Centre, Sather Wagstaff argues that disasters should tell a story that helps control the trauma or sense of loss. The solidarity offered to the US after the terrorist attack in New York was a clear example of how people are united in context of uncertainty. Death's function is to strengthen the social bond. By introducing human suffering, dark tourism breaks the influence of ideology. As carrier of ideology, heritage imposes a one-sided

argument created externally to enable consumers to accept governmental policies they would otherwise reject. Where heritage is politically rooted, pain induces disinterested empathy. Death wakes up the society from its slumber, creating the conditions to adopt substantial changes. Emotions transcend national boundaries, questioning the ethnocentrism of heritage. One wonders if dark tourism is a continuation of medieval pilgrimage, which was based on unmediated experiential connection to the visited (sacred) site.

Even though in medieval times death was present in almost all institutions and representations of the daily life, medieval pilgrims should not be equated to contemporary dark tourists. Unlike modern sightseers, medieval travellers would visit sacred sites so as to redeem their sins, ask for forgiveness or supplicate Saints to negotiate with God a solution to their pains or big troubles. Although venerated, for medieval travellers death was not a problem but the beginning of a new better life. In this respect, contemporary dark tourism exhibits the opposite dynamic. “Secular tourists” are not interested in the life of others, nor in their heritage, or biography. They want to avoid their own death. The present thesis contends that tourists exorcise death by ritualizing the death of others so as to symbolically expand their own life expectancy (Tzanelli, 2014).

Michel Foucault’s conception of biopolitics can be mobilised to explain how this works: using Nazism, Foucault argues that biopolitics is derived from the concept of “bio-power”, which plays a pervasive role, because on one hand it expands the life but on the other it imposes mass death. Nazis improved their technique of bio-technology by manipulating the life of others - dubbed under-humans or *Unter-mensch*. Divested of their rights, some ethnicities and minorities were subjected to the Nazi’s systematic bureaucratization of death (Foucault, 1969; 2007; Lemke, 2001). The end of WWII resulted in the collapse of Nazism, but its ideology persisted in indirect, insidious ways. The ideal of the “superhuman” – the man of outstanding powers destined to deter corruption and evilness - persisted alongside the scientific fascination with eugenics, cloning and bio-technology.

As Jeremy Rifkin put it, “the coming age of commerce” resulted from the Nazi’s ideology of a selected race. This ideology, introduced by British eugenics, never died in the US (Rifkin, 1998). In a world where people are commoditized as bio-resources to laboratories to prolong the life of elites, death is expended to peripheral world zones. As Naomi Klein explains, capitalism allows for the recycling of affected communities in post-disaster areas into new forms of consumption. The experience of shock is used by governments on their citizens to make them accept policies they would otherwise reject (Klein, 2007). Of course, this argument connects to David Harvey’s (1989) discussion of “creative destruction”: capitalism persists by destroying social landscapes and institutions only to be reconstructed following other ends.

Some philosophical concerns arise around the role played by technology in this process. As Richard Hofstadter puts it, not only did capitalism make use of profits, exploiting the workforce, but also introduced successfully “social Darwinism”, which reinforced the axiom of the survival of fittest as a new ethics. In other words, we “play the game” because the opportunities to defeat our opponents are exaggerated (Hofstadter, 1963). The competition fostered by the ideology of capitalism offers the salvation for few ones, at the expense of the rest. To realise the dream of joining the “selected people”, we accept the rules. Whenever one of our direct competitors fails, we feel an insane happiness. I argue that a similar mechanism is activated during our visit to dark tourism sites: we do not strive to understand, we are just happy because we escaped death and have more chances to win the game of life. This argument is examined in the next section.

The anthropology of dark tourism

George H Mead, one of the fathers of symbolic interactionism, questioned why paradoxically many people show preference to unpleasant and bad stories in the news and the press. What is our fascination with other peoples’ suffering? He assertively concludes that the self is configured through its interaction with others. This social dialectic introduces anticipation and interpretation as the two pillars of the communicative process. The self feels happiness through the other’s suffering - a rite necessary to avoid or think

about one's own potential pain. Starting from the premise that the self is morally obliged to assist the other to reinforce a sentiment of superiority, avoidance preserves the ethical base of social relationships (Mead, 2009).

Mead's reflections could be applied to the act of visiting dark tourism shrines. To understand this we can revert to the myth of Noah and its pivotal role in the salvation of the world in Christianity. The legend tells us that God, annoyed by the corruption of human beings, mandated to Noah to construct an ark. Noah's divine mission consisted of gathering and adding a pair per species to his ark so as to achieve the preservation of natural life. The world was destroyed by the great flood, but life diversity survived. At first glance, the myth's moral message is based on the importance of nature and the problem of sin and corruption. But when examined more carefully, the myth poses the dilemma of competition: at any "tournament" or game, there can be only one winner. In the archetypal Christian myth, Noah and the selected species stand as the only witnesses of everything and everyone else's death. I argue that the curiosity and fascination for death comes from this founding myth, which is replicated in plays to date, stating that only one can be crowned the winner. Even, the "Big Brother" show, which was widely studied by sociologists and researchers of visual technology, rests on this principle. Only few are the selected ones to live forever on the screen, as is the case in religious myths such as those of Protestantism and Catholicism (both based on doctrines of salvation and understandings of death). In fact, Stone argues that the dark tourist experience is conditioned by a similar premise: a reminder that we, the survivors, are in the race and our sole purpose is to finish our journey.

Zygmunt Bauman reminds that life has no meaning without death in *Consuming life* and *Liquid Fear*. For him, the capitalist ethos has changed the mentality of citizens, who do not even fulfil the function of production automata any longer. As commodities, workers are today exploited to sustain the principle of massive consumption, which is encouraged by capitalism. The "Big Brother" is such an example of how people enter competitions as commodities, to be selected and bought by others. Participants in this reality show know

that only one will win, and the rest will “die”. “Big Brother”, for Bauman, emulates life in capitalist societies; it does so by enhancing the lifestyle of the few by “producing” pauperization for the rest. The modern state keeps in pace with the liberal market to monopolize people’s sense of security. This does not mean that states are unable to keep security, but that the market is controlling consumption by the imposition of fear. If human disasters such as Katrina show the pervasive nature of capitalism, which allows thousands of poor citizens to die, the “show of disaster” releases it from the responsibilities of the event. The sense of catastrophe, like death, serves to cover the inhuman nature of capitalism (Bauman, 2007; 2008).

This spectacularised society has only one answer to crisis, when its economic system is at risk. The real causes of the disaster are ignored thanks to the spectacle of death, which is reproduced in the media and famous TV series. What do we really know about the real causes of Auschwitz or 9/11? Could a museum explain the complexity of human nature? Bauman would say it would not. Any attempt to sacralise dying as a spectacle is the prelude of its neglect. Dark tourism is not different from spectacles such as those of the FIFA World Cup, and reality shows, such as “Big Brother”. All of them proclaim ideologically that only one may be crowned winner (Korstanje, Tzanelli & Clayton, 2014).

Conclusion

Dark tourism is characterized by a strange fascination or at least curiosity for what specialists call “death spaces”. The term refers to sites where the death of others is commoditized as a tourist product. Tony Johnston argues that dark tourism research adopts three different models or modular ways of analysis: the first involves “building conceptual models” to explain how death is configured the by social imaginary; the second, prioritises empirical supply of information about the characteristics of sites and destination demands; and lastly, it attempts with the help of the “tourist experience” to explore the psychological drives of visitors as well as the structuration of their experience (Johnston, 2013). Though “thanatourism” or “dark tourism” has gained attention in tourism-led scholarship around the world, its study’s symbolic epicenter still remains England. The rich archaeological

legacy and fascination of ancient Anglo-culture for death may prove key factors in constructing a widely-accepted paradigm. Nonetheless, two major discourses within current research on dark tourism are flawed: on one hand, analysts claim that Catholicism induced a curiosity for death that resulted in medieval pilgrimages to Saints' tombs and shrines. They claim that these types of sacred travels resulted in the orientation of the modern tourist to the consumption of things that have to do with death. Secondly, dark tourism sites are represented as spaces of heritage and pilgrimage which are intensified by the landscape of death. The movement of the tourist to these sites is motivated by their encounter with death. In this thesis dark tourism serves as a mediator between the visitor's future death, the appreciation of their life via the death of others (Stone, 2005, 2008).

The present essay explored not only the anthropological roots of dark tourism but also the influence of late capitalism in shaping the allegory of death. In stark opposition to the medieval traveller, dark tourist consumers seek to reinforce their life via another's death. In contrast to what the specialized literature suggests, dark tourism reinforces the modern egocentrism to enjoy "the brother's tragedy". By replicating the myth of Noah's ark, capitalism introduced in people's lives the necessity of competition as prerequisite for their inclusion in the "league" of the selected few. Life then assumes the function of a great race in which only one can be the winner and the rest will lose. If tragedy confers to survivors the aura of exemplary civilization, it comes at great cost. Happiness for the other's death is a sign we still remain in contention for the final fight. From "Big Brother" to "The Hunger Games", the salvation of one by the ruin of the whole has fed into an all-consuming ideology of our modern world. As such, the ethics of dark tourism emulates a new economic form of exploitation that characterizes the capitalism.

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