Talking tourists

The intimacies of inter-cultural dialogue

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The study of tourism is riven with paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas invoking innately moral questions surrounding both the actions of the tourism sector and the practices and behaviours of tourists themselves. The field of critical tourism studies is overflowing with cases that highlight an extensive variety of effects attributed, in part at least, to the ‘doing’ of tourism. In the main, and indeed what makes such cases worthy of attention, is that they direct us to consider the negative consequences of tourism as a form of social action (exclusion, marginalisation, erosion of identity, disempowerment and various degrees of degradation of the natural and built environment, etc.). Scholarly consideration of such consequences points to a wider recognition of the importance of tourism as a global phenomenon now firmly embedded in the developed and developing worlds as a leisure practice and in the lesser developed world as an important livelihood. It also points to further traits which seem to accompany the study of tourism. First, there is significant attention given to tourism as an agent of negative disturbance rather than positive change in a rather narrow interpretation of the term ‘critical’. Second, there is still a tendency to isolate tourism as a discrete category of social activity more than occasionally lapsing into the actions of tourists as being a precise cause for environmental and social impact, despite recent work amongst anthropologists and cultural geographers attempting to locate tourism within life’s more complex patterns and processes (see, for instance, Edensor 2001; Crouch 2003; Larsen 2008). Third, often accompanying the above, the study of tourism has tended to be centred upon the destination as the key space of interaction and as a crude signifier of tourist typology (people are cultural tourists because they are in Venice!).

Such characteristics mark out tourism, in operation and study, as decidedly binary, working with generic conventions of ‘work and play’, ‘home and away’, ‘hosts and guests’, along with the more spatially oriented ‘East and West’, ‘developed and developing worlds’. While in a post-structuralist vein the academic community has sought to create ways to break from the narrow intellectualism of these binaries and their ‘violent hierarchies’ (Derrida 2002) by invoking notions of ‘third spaces’ and ideals of the cosmopolitan tourist (Swain 2009; Picard this volume). However, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which oppositions do permeate the tourist world and how they are embedded in the meta-narratives that structure tourism. They have a reality precisely because they are essential to how we think of the world and how we communicate the world through language. Language, and how it is used in dialogue, is the under-researched
dimension of tourism, partly as we are frequently locked into our own realms of comprehension, which are of course cultural as well as linguistic, and partly because access to moments and meanings of dialogue is often problematic for researchers. Adjusting the label of cultural tourism to the more meaningful ‘tourism as cultural’ points to the importance of dialogue and the conditions in which it is practised.

Engaging with otherness

Tourism is emblematic of the liberating and dramatic global mobilities that have marked the past decades. While globalisation is a larger category still, able to operate at more remote levels of represented knowledge and rapidly communicated imagery, tourism is essentially involved with the actual being there, providing the opportunities for embodied encounter and engagement with difference and the ‘other’. While questions remain regarding the extent to which tourists actively seek to engage with difference, some aspect of direct engagement is embedded in the desire to travel. Material and immaterial differences (buildings, landscapes, artefacts, food, dress, events, behaviours, etc.) are sensed, absorbed, processed, compared and memorised to varying degrees by the tourist. Frameworks of performance and play are helpful in understanding how tourists negotiate the differences with which they are faced, producing rituals of practice and ways of coping that are often extensions of normative social practice exported to ‘new’ situations. The everyday and the habitual ground the tourist, so that one can make sense of otherness. Edensor (2009: 553) outlines various means by which tourists engage with and perform their encounters with the ‘other’ in multi-faceted and embodied ways, embracing the senses in ‘an interactive and contingent process’. Tourists learn competencies for dealing with the alien, which are themselves transmitted to other tourists. An expanse of guides, websites and a vast informal knowledge network are employed to effect ways for the tourist to access the ‘other’ and it is within such mediation and communication where there are opportunities for hegemonic asymmetries to manifest themselves, consciously and unconsciously. Hollinshead (2009) uses the term ‘world-making’ to encapsulate a ‘normalising’ process whereby the authority of tourism is established and implicitly, and often imperceptibly, channelled through the tourist. Moreover, scholars such as Jaworski and Pritchard (2005) and Thurlow and Jaworski (2010), amongst others, have pointed to the scripting power of tourism discourse and the ‘talk’, which filters through to the tourist and which is the currency of representation and the imagined. Notions of a ‘contact’ or ‘border’ zone (Pratt 1992; Bruner 2005) help to make sense spatially of where tourists do encounter difference. While we can acknowledge the circulation and imposition of dominant scripts, however, the exercise of power and the ways by which tourists are (often unknowingly) implicated as agents of a sort of temporary colonialism, there still remain questions as to what are the actual mechanisms of tourists engaging with the ‘other’? Of what does interactivity consist? What is involved in the face-to-face aspect of ‘world-making’?

Grand narratives and meaningful contact

Tourism, as both a social and cultural practice, and also as a political act, has been recognised as having a critical role to play in facilitating and shaping inter-cultural dialogue (Viard 2001). Facilitation refers to the rather superficial aspect of tourism of encouraging new mobilities across space and cultures rather than considering the detail of any dialogue. Whether this represents any more than a superficial ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanism’ (Szeszynski and Urry 2006) or ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ (Haldrup 2009), is debatable. Certainly, at the level of intergovernmental politics, the term ‘intercultural dialogue’ is seen as a way of exploring complex themes of
cultural diversity and plurality and is now central to the humanistic agendas of the United Nations (UN) agencies, most notably the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which since its founding has worked to foster dialogue between cultures in acknowledgement of this being a fundamental basis for a culture of peace. The premise of UNESCO’s work relates to concepts such as mankind’s ‘common heritage’, ‘shared values’ and ‘cultural pluralism’, and is enshrined in the 2005 Convention on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2005). However, whatever the intentions behind grand and worthy projects, there has been limited attention to the micro-realities of dialogue as it exists between tourists and host communities. This is peculiar given that tourism arguably represents the leading opportunity for cultures to come into direct contact with one another in any significant way.

Within the world of the ‘other’, bearing in mind that the ‘other’ is not solely the exotic, but rather manifests itself in someone else’s ‘ordinary’, the tourist is frequently exposed by the absence of cultural reference points, the most fundamental of which is language. Though as tourists we may journey into otherness armed with pre-tour knowledge and accumulated imaginaries, we often underestimate the extent to which we need to engage in dialogue with our hosts. Following the work of Bakhtin (1981), dialogue is taken to mean discourse that is able to increase our understanding of differing perspectives, create new understandings, and which generates a change in a situation. For Bakhtin, it is dialogue that has the potential to transgress cultural borders. Dialogue refers to a social process of meaning-making through ‘language in action’; going beyond the spoken word to include aspects of tone, sound and body language. Dialogue between cultures is a learning process, a form of pedagogy concerned with both actions and values. Accepting the obvious, manufactured locatedness of the tourist, it implies a fundamental form of human exchange which is still relatively spontaneous and exploratory. The goal of dialogue is a deeper understanding of the ‘other’, bearing in mind that the tourist is also the ‘other’. A counter-argument to this invokes the obvious ephemerality of the tourist visit and as a body, passing through a place tourists may not be presented with need, or opportunity, to engage in dialogue outside of their immediate peer group. However, there would always seem to be room for adjustment in understanding and the acquisition of new meanings.

Context and operations of inter-cultural dialogue

The so-called tourist ‘bubble’ (Cohen 1972; Jacobsen 2003) is relatively rare in its pure conception. Even enclave destinations and inclusive packaged holidays, despite their attempts to streamline the experience of otherness, nonetheless contain exposed and fragmented insights into cultural difference; waiters and hotel staff retain their foreignness in appearance, accent and behaviours; food and drink concede some attempt to bear the mark of difference; and excursions allow for more direct, if contrived and managed, cross-cultural contact. Accepting the need to contextualise exchanges between tourists and locals, there is generally an expanse of both opportunity and necessity for contact with the ‘other’. Indeed, for many tourists the pleasure of being in a non-familiar environment presents itself as a series of experiences always with possibilities for some degree of inter-cultural dialogue; a satisfied sense of communication and a moment of human connection. The foreign holiday is accompanied by distortions of time and space routines so that we may sleep less or longer, eat at different times and so on. The routine tasks of daily life thus take on a new significance. It is instructive to examine the ways that recent holidays are remembered. Increasingly these are publicly reported in great detail through online blogs, complete with photographs and intimate reminiscences. The holiday is recounted as a story, and while we may find reference to gazing at buildings and landscapes, the most discussed aspects relate to encounters with people – local people in ordinary situations. Ordering a coffee,
having a meal, buying toothpaste, getting on a bus, all become significant occasions. In part, the significance is a function of having to communicate outside of our own language, thus being forced into a position of directly negotiating and mediating with others. The sense of personal achievement is striking when, as a tourist, you break free of the script and start composing the story yourself. The difficulties of coping with ‘otherness’ are also sometimes our reward. As Phipps (2007) has argued, learning the language of the ‘other’, in the most functional of ways, opens up experiences that can sustain and strengthen inter-cultural dialogue.

The reward of inter-cultural dialogue does not just reside with the tourist. Hosts engaging in dialogue with tourists are frequently involved in a learning process – culturally, linguistically – to which otherwise they are never exposed. Within toured societies there is symbolic capital – what Salazar (2010) refers to as ‘cosmopolitan capital’ – to be gained by entering into dialogue with tourists as a way of temporarily appropriating them, and by association gaining or maintaining status in the community. This manifests itself in opportunities for economic exchange. In the daily markets of Cairo or Istanbul tourists are frequently approached by stall-holders in their native tongue. This linguistic dexterity, which often extends well beyond a common greeting to complicated exchanges and remarkable conversations, is not usually the product of a formal education or firsthand experience of another country, but is, nonetheless, part of daily life. It is easy to dismiss this phenomenon purely as part of the ritual surrounding the need to make a living through trade, but beyond some minor annoyances on both sides, this is also a very humanising form of engagement. To be approached by strangers in your own language offers an invitation, however momentary, into the world of the ‘other’.

As a tourist, not speaking the language of the host generates vulnerability and dependence. Tourist guides and interpreters can reduce this sense of exposure, but it seldom leaves the tourist completely. The apparent dominance of the tourist can readily be exposed through his or her inability to read signs, or ask for the most ordinary of items. From the perspective of the host, the tourist becomes the exoticised ‘other’, different not only in appearance but as a function of a visible insecurity in dealing with difference. As Giddens (1991) notes, this difference itself can become a means of inter-cultural dialogue.

**Smoothing angst**

Even within the formalised settings of organised travel, with guides and translators to mediate, and in the relative comfort of a tour bus or resort hotel, tourists rarely fail to engage with the ordinariness of the other and vice versa. Julia Harrison, who has studied the experiences of Western, middle-class tourists, emphasises the moments of contact between tourist and local, however fleeting or unpredictable, and which go toward redefining social relations. In Harrison’s (2003: 50) words, ‘no matter how brief these touristic encounters were, they left lasting impressions in the tourists’ minds. People in places far from home became something other than complete strangers’.

The actuality of being a tourist places us in various states of angst which, it is argued, help to drive processes of redefining social relations. The word ‘angst’ was abstracted from the German language to the English language in the mid-nineteenth century and was used by religious and secular thinkers struggling to articulate feelings associated with the rapidity of change brought about by modernity. For tourists, angst relates to the act of finding the toilet through signs in another language, to ordering a meal from a menu they cannot understand, to worrying about whether the public bus they are on actually goes back to their hotel. In such ways angst is, as Heidegger (1962) used the term, the fear of metaphysical insecurity and testimony to the authenticity of experience.
One of the ways we negotiate our angst is to trust in the immediate. Lingis (2004), in his discussion of trust, suggests that when we travel, particularly within the non-signed world, we are bound to momentarily give over our lives to others. Though we may have read of procedures and practices at some point, we have to let go and allow ourselves to be taken into the differences we seek. Getting into a taxi, taking a turn into an unsigned street, eating outside of the hotel, are all instances of trust; a state of commitment which depends upon inter-subjectivity and which cuts through any binary concepts of ‘us and them’ and allows true hospitality to flourish. In moments of angst, and in line with notions of trust, tourists fall back on intuition and humanity. Tourists do not just occupy spaces; they create them for the purposes of negotiation, reflection and understanding to overcome their angst. These are the spaces of dialogue and mediation. Cronin (2006: 135) warns that, ‘To remove the space of mediation, the intermediary zone of time and difficulty which is the attempt to get to know another culture and another language, is to move from the triangular space of negotiation to the binary space of opposition’. In the context of understanding tourist behaviour, and through dialogue, these are also moments of belonging, when the tourist attains empathy with those around and is able to project his or her own humanity. These may only be instants, but they act as metaphorical roads or bridges (Jackson 1998), allowing the transcendence of worldviews and, at very least, the selective forgetting of binaries. Understanding the conditions, content and mechanisms of inter-cultural dialogue amongst tourists assists with grander objectives to bridge cultures and recognise the joy of difference.

References