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Dark Tourism: Revisiting Some Philosophical Issues

The concept of dark tourism has been widely explored by tourism scholars because of two main reasons. First, it signals a new practice that takes death as the main attraction. Second, dark tourism may be useful to revitalize and reconstruct destinations in post disaster contexts. This essay discusses to what extent medieval pilgrimage and dark tourism practices may be likened.

Keywords: Dark Tourism, Thanaptosis, Tourism, Modernity.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the media has portrayed “landscapes of disaster”, which often were characterized by the presence of mass-death, suffering, total destruction and so forth. Some communities have taken the opportunity to exploit these sites commercially for international tourism. Widely studied, dark tourism still fascinates scholars, researchers and professionals (Korstanje 2011; Stone & Sharpley 2008; Korstanje & Clayton, 2012; Seaton, 1996; Cohen 2011; Stone, 2012; Korstanje & Ivanov, 2012; White & Frew, 2013). Methodologically, dark tourism studies place excessive focus on visitors’ opinion, representing a problem because interviewees often adulterate their ideas about dark tourism when they self-report. Our implicit norms about dark tourism condition our responses. Secondly, an additional misunderstanding is surfaced due to our particular post-spiritual way of interpreting “thanaptosis” in the context of dark tourism. In this context, some questions arise: Are dark tourism and pilgrimage interlinked?; What is the role of thanaptosis or heritage in this process?

The goals of this review are twofold. On one hand, we explore the differences between pilgrimage, which is a religious act, and the secular dark tourism. It is important to provide readers some alternatives that are informed by the differences in the ideological discourses framing the contemporary dark tourism concept and the bygone medieval pilgrimages to sites of death and burial. Undoubtedly, in medieval ages many people traveled long distances to be close to spaces of deaths such as cemeteries, Saint Tombs and so forth; however, these types of pilgrimages were determined by the loss, the suffering or the frustrations of believers. Curiosity was not a valid option for medieval travellers (Huizinga, 1993). A historically integrated understanding of contemporary dark tourism should be informed by thanaptosis, which has a solemn meaning akin to ‘meditations upon death’ (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Secondly, we place the concept of “thanaptosis”, which has been widely cited and used by scholars, under a lens of scrutiny.

Our main thesis is that “dark tourism”, far from being a type of pilgrimage, is enrooted in secular logic, where visitors not only are frightened of death, but are also essentially driven by Western philosophy and values. The others’ death gives them a sentiment of happiness because it makes them aware that they still have possibilities. Dark tourism is a postmodern practice that ultimately has nothing to do with pilgrimage.

Preliminary Discussion

One of the primary aspects to take into consideration while discussing dark tourism is the role played by the idea of death in our modern world. Industrial societies valorize life to pathological levels while doing everything to veil life from its regular discourse. Secularization of life that came with the positivistic ideals of the industrial era has eliminated the spiritual aura from our understanding of death. On the contrary, in the Middle Ages, where conflict and violence were the order of the day, in order for solace, people had to give layers of spiritual attributes to death. Not only was the life expectancy considerably shorter than in our times, but also the concepts of paradise and eternal life served as catalysts that kept the order in society (Aries, 1975).

Dark Tourism Today

Dark tourism has woken up a hot debate in recent years. While some experts have focused attention to the phenomenon as a sign of cultural entertainment based on repressed sadism (Bloom, 2000; Baudrillard, 1996; 2006; Koch, 2005), others emphasized the mediated nature of tourism so that visitors may understand their own death (Lennon & Folley, 2000; Miles, 2002; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Beyond the debate, Dark-tourism sites denote territories where mass-death or suffering have determined the identity of a community but no less true is that under some conditions these sites are commoditized to sell the other’s death as a product (Poria, 2007; Chauhan & Khanna, 2009). In this token, Stone & Sharpley (2008)

address the need of distinguishing dark tourism from other similar issues. The curiosity or fascination of death seems to be one of the aspects that define thana-tourism, or dark tourism. But it is important not to lose sight of how these experiences are framed under shared values that tighten the social bond (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). In this respect, Dark tourism may be defined as a pilgrimage or an experience but what seems to be important to remember is that it can be an attempt to contemplate death of the self, by sightseeing the other dead (Stone, 2012). What are the methodological limitations of dark tourism research?

Like heritage-seekers, dark-site visitors like to expand their current understanding of history. The epistemological limitations of research are given by the ignorance of site-interpretation experienced by tourists or visitors. To study the motivation of dark-seekers one might ask to reconstruct the subject experience. At a closer look, dark tourism not only entails fascination for death as a primary reason of attraction but a quest for authentic experiences (Poria & Oren 2011). The experiential approach catches the evolution of experience at diverse stages, as well as the combination with the symbolic resource of subject interpretation. Cohen (2011) has explained that dark tourism serves as an educational instrument which gives a message to society. The meaning conferred to territory plays a vital role at this stage. Visitors tend to think as authentic those sites where the memorized event took place. Whether museums or shrines are built for allegorical reasons on sites that have nothing to do with the founding trauma or not, they are pondered as inauthentic. Cohen's outcomes not only reveal the political root of dark tourism, but also the importance of location whenever the self encounters tragedy.

A whole portion of specialized literature focused on the role played by heritage as a key factor of dark tourism sites (Cohen 2011; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). By means of the imagination of others' death (thanaptosis), visitors become "heritage seekers", whose interests are aimed at expanding the current understanding of history. Visitors of dark tourism

sites emulate their own death through the Other's deaths. This curiosity for heritage is the point where medieval pilgrimage and dark tourism converge, according to some experts. Unfortunately, the literature neglects that historians have not found any archeological or historical evidence of dark tourism sites in medieval times or earlier. Although civilizations have developed their own rites to understand death, naively associating visits to saints' tombs with dark tourism practices is problematic.

The open and closed-ended questionnaires applied today on Dark Tourism seekers reveal that heritage is a key factor of their motivation. However, this does not mean that they understand what heritage is. Another additional problem is the gap between what people do and think. This happens simply because sometimes we are not familiar with our inner emotions, while in other cases, we hide the real intentions to protect our interests. To solve this, a much deeper discussion is needed. As Tzanelli put it, heritage seems to be one of the pillars of capitalism. Mediated events and games connote to dual structures. Local identity is expressed in view of global values, cities are cloned so that consumers have the same experience from Japan to Buenos Aires (Tzanelli, 2013; Korstanje, 2013). If Tzanelli is right, there are no commonalities between pilgrimage and modern heritage, or dark tourism.

Old and New Thanaptosis

Most likely, the confusion of those who validate the commonalities of pilgrimage with dark tourism consists in a particular interpretation of "thanaptosis". For many scholars it means the possibility to imagine their own death through others. This definition assumes death can be part of the heritage, symbolized through the building of shrines and tombs. Following this reasoning, medieval monuments can be seen as expressions of dark tourism.

However, the term thanaptosis was not delineated by Sharpley and Seaton in view of what the literature suggests. It derives from the American poet William Cullen Bryant who expressed his emotional needs of anticipating his own death through others (Bryant, 1817).

Those who have read this poem will agree that other deaths make us feel better because we avoided temporarily our own end. While we want to retain life, we 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 life upon earth. We die for others to live. This is not the thanatopsis, needless to say, dark tourism sites exploit in the late modernism. To be more precise, Bryant alludes to “thanatopsis” as the happiness for life, which is possible only when accepting death as the outset. Thanatopsis was not applied to denote the curiosity for others’ death. Rather, in Bryant’s text, the concept activates the cyclical future of the human species. Life and death are inextricably intertwined: *We live because others die.*

In sum, the interests of pilgrims and dark-seekers remain substantially differentiated. In sharp opposition to the medieval traveler, dark tourism consumers seek to reinforce their life as the Other’s death. We may explore the thesis that dark tourism likely reinforces the modern egocentrism which enjoys the other’s fall (something that symbolizes life as a great race where only one can be the winner).

Dark Tourism Vs Medieval Pilgrimages

George H Mead, one of the fathers of symbolic interactionism, questioned why many people, despite their apparent dislike for bad news, actively sought to listen to them. He asserted that the self is configured by its interaction with others. This social dialectic alludes to anticipation and interpretation as two pillars of the communication-process (Mead, 2009). In medieval times, imageries of death were embedded in almost all social institutions; but, pilgrims were not dark tourists. Unlike modern sight-seers, medieval travellers move to sacred sites looking for the mediation of Saints to negotiate with God for the solution of their pains resulting from sins. Although venerated, for medieval travellers death was not a problem like modern tourists, but also the beginning of a new and better life in paradise. In

this respect, dark tourism exhibits the opposite dynamic. ‘Secular tourists’ want to anticipate but avoid their own death. Modern tourists understand death through the lens of others. They exorcise death ritualizing other’s death to expand their own life expectancies. This is a noteworthy difference between the old and the new varieties of thanaptosis and we need more research to bring the minute nuances of it forward.

In the bible, one of the oldest antecedents of this is the myth of Noah. At a first glance, as the myth was ethically formulated, a formal message is based on the importance of nature and the problem of sin, corruption. But unconsciously, it poses the dilemma of competition. At any tournament or game, there can be only one winner. Not only the creation but also Noah is witness to others’ death, others’ mass-death. The curiosity and fascination for death comes from this founding myth. It can be observed in plays, where only one will be the winner. Even the Big Brother TV show that was widely studied by sociologists and detractors of visual technology rests on this principle. Only few are the selected ones to live forever. The doctrine of salvation, which is based on Protestantism and Catholicism, claims for (though in diverse ways) understanding death. In the dark tourism experience as Stone put it, we find similar conditions of exploitation. The other interpreted death reminds us that we, the survivors, are in the race and the main thing is to finish. What is the difference between a dark tourism site, and the medieval pilgrims touching the Saint’s tombs?

In medieval times, as discussed earlier, death was present everywhere and its influence was in almost all institutions but paradoxically, pilgrims may not be equaled to dark tourists for many reasons. Unlike modern sight-seers, medieval travellers travelled to sacred sites looking for important aspects: to redeem their sins, to seek forgiveness or the mediation of Saints to negotiate with God, or for a solution to their pains or big troubles. Although venerated, for medieval travellers death was not a problem like for modern tourists, but also the beginning of a new, better life. In this respect, dark tourism exhibits the opposite dynamic to medieval pilgrimage. While medieval believers sought to change the adverse conditions of

their families or communities, “secular tourists” are not interested in the life of others, nor in their heritage, or biography. They, moved only by curiosity, want to avoid thinking of their own death. The existing dark tourism literature focuses on how these modern tourists understand death through the lens of others. Rather, our thesis goes in the opposite direction, arguing that dark tourism is a distraction from one’s own mortality.

Conclusion

This is not an attack on current applied research, nor a criticism to any particular scholar; rather it is aimed at discussing in detail the anthropological roots of dark tourism, providing a new fresh conceptual framework to expand the understanding of “thanaptosis”. The present essay provided a new allegory of “Thanaptosis” to understand substantial differences between dark tourism and pilgrimage. Undoubtedly, this would help delineate a new wave of investigation of these issues.

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