Chapter 8

Death and Culture: Is Thana-Tourism Symptomatic of the End of Capitalism?

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ABSTRACT

Taking cues from the surging popularity of thana-tourism, this paper argues that its prevalence echoes the end days of capitalism. The predominant forms of tourism in a society reflect the ethos of that society. What we once called ‘mass tourism’ reflected the spirit of classical capitalism; later, ecotourism and various other alternative forms of tourism reflected a critical turn in capitalism, often called the ‘sympathetic capitalism’. These were incremental alternations, however. Thana-tourism is a qualitatively discontinuous form of tourism and its surge should thus correspond with a similarly discontinuous, radical, shift in capitalism. The authors present scholarly perspectives to bring home the view that thana-tourism might indeed be symptomatic of the end of capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, there is a growing tide to visit or organize tours on cemeteries where tourists learn further about the history of individual tragedies, or the life of celebrities who had died under strange circumstances. The same has been observed in England and US where hundreds of tourists visit haunted houses and castles. To

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the fear factor these types of new emergent segments evinced, there is a morbid element which suggests that the conceptualization of tourism is changing. Here, some key questions arise: are capitalism and tourism entwined? Specifically, to what extent does the rise of dark tourism assume more fundamental changes in the societal scaffolding? Our position is that, if modern tourism is a reflection of the capitalistic forces, fundamental changes in the nature of tourism phenomenon that we notice more recently should be reflective of changes in capitalism itself. In this paper, we discuss this and a range of associated topics.

The classic Marxists emphasized on the advance of capitalism as an exploitative force that commoditizes relations, culture, customs and everything in their wake. Leisure and tourism, in this context, plays an alienatory role by mystifying the exploitative conditions where citizens are involved. As Dean McCannell (1976; 1992; 2001) observed, tourism and the productive system function in parallel preventing social fragmentation. Not only tourists emulate the cultural values of their respective societies, which are confronted in meeting others, but also tourism acts as a mediator between citizens and their institutions. In short, tourism revitalizes those frustrations experienced in day-to-day life in a way that lay-citizens foster their loyalties to the nation-state. The commoditization of culture, inevitably, not only molds the experiences of sightseers but also imposes a self-identity, which painstakingly interpolates locals. Paradoxically, while tourism produces further cultural commodities, less genuine the host-guest encounters turn. Recently, some specialists called the attention on the rise of a new form of tourism, more macabre, namely morbid emerged in zones of disasters, death or complete obliterations where the primary attraction is death and mourning; Dark Tourism. Though under different names, the onset of Thana or Dark Tourism interrogated social scientists on the possibilities the sense of beauty as it was aesthetically established were in jeopardy.

As the previous argument given, the present chapter centers on the ethical dilemma of dark tourism, which starts with a radical transformation in the means of production across capitalist nations. Our thesis here is that Thana tourism reflects the arrival of a new stage of production where the risk society sets the pace to a new capitalism, Thana Capitalism. One of the aspects that defines Thana Capitalism alludes to the consumption of other’s death as the main commodity to be exchanged.

In the first section of the chapter we discuss critically the intersection of capitalism with culture; though it remains as a well-discussed theme, not surprisingly, further interrogations are necessary. In so doing, we use the term Dark or Thana tourism indistinctively. Based on the advances and limitations of first Marxist studies, which oscillates from Marx to Bauman, we provide with an all-encompassing model to understand dark tourism as a unit of production, which is interconnected to a much
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