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Beyond temporal reflections in thanatourism research

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Thanatourism, or dark tourism sites as they are also known, including sites of war, genocide and murder that become tourism attractions, are commonly criticised for commodifying the past for financial gain (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sarmiento, 2011). Yet, these monuments to tragedy can also fulfil socialising functions (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) as memorials (Schofield, 2003) and cautionary markers (Levi, 1986). Many site proprietors argue that sites raise awareness of past atrocities amongst present and future generations, helping to ensure past atrocities are not repeated (Schofield, 2003). Recent decades have seen increasing focus placed on the educative role of thanatourism. For example, in 2014, the UK government funded a multi-million pound initiative to enable two students and one teacher from every state-school in England to visit the Western Front battlefields as part of the WWI Centenary commemorations (Lee-Potter, 2014). Yet despite the burgeoning attention that academics from various disciplines give thanatourism, a knowledge-gap exists concerning how and to what extent this activity contributes to a moral mission. This research note therefore seeks to encourage greater critical reflection on this ethical dimension of thanatourism. It does so by challenging the notion that casting sites in aspic, as often occurs when death sites become material monuments to tragedy, helps to create more peaceful societies (Smith, 1998; Uzzell, 1989). It then proposes that these spaces could encourage greater reflection on current global unrest by focusing upon transitions from their most tragic historical moments to the present day.

As Massey (2005) argues is common of contemporary travelling imaginaries, thanatourism experiences may appeal to individuals because they promise the chance to 'travel back in time' (Tarlow, 2005) to historically significant death sites that are cemented at the impasse of their most dramatic historical moment. Tourists may thus visit the war graves of their forefathers, take part in city murder tours or travel to distant genocide sites not to find 'contemporary stories, but the past' (Massey 2005: p. 123). Massey (2005: p. 122) argues that such contemporary travel experiences allow us to freeze places in time 'for our own purposes, while we do the moving'. Yet this freezing of places in time can be problematic, firstly, because it often ensures the portrayal of singular histories. To this end, Poria and Ashworth (2009: p. 523) have questioned the ability of heritage sites to function as change agents. In particular, they discuss issues arising from processes of heritagisation that are designed to use heritage 'as a resource to achieve certain goals'. The debate concerning the public value of thanatourism sites as memorial monuments becomes ever more relevant as tragic events become increasingly temporally distant. Memorials evolve into, primarily, tourist attractions and site providers objectives mutate from memorialisation to providing memorable tourist experiences. Tragic events may thus be trivialised (Dann & Potter, 2001) or glamorised (Strange & Kempa, 2003) as death is presented as entertainment (Uzzell, 1989). Experiences may be enhanced by the simulation and replication of the past in seeking to provide 'authentic experiences' (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Temporally distant death thus becomes unreal or hyper-real for tourists, who may not connect to the sites gravitas (Baudrillard, 1994). The visitor can return home content that they have experienced a piece of history. However, the horror of the tragedy may elude them (Tarlow, 2005).

Secondly, thanatourism sites have been criticised for prohibiting host communities to move beyond dark pasts. For example, Taubman and Carnegie (2003) discuss jurisdictional barriers

forbidding alternative developments on or around European Holocaust sites. Site interpretation can also inspire parochialism, stifling societal progress (Tarlow, 2005) by presenting one-dimensional histories rather than holistic interpretations of the roles of differing parties at different historical moments (Beech, 2000). At many thanatourism sites, opportunities for tourists to reflect on how historical trajectories connect to the present day are rare. Further seldom does interpretation address how history repeats itself in other times and spaces (Beck, Johnson, Schofield, and Schofield, 2003). The experience may thus inspire little reflection for the casual tourist who returns to a sequestered space and time of their present (Dann & Theobald, 1995), while the constant reminder of the dark past, for those living closer to its memory, may encourage resentment between previously opposed groups (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

Massey (2005: p. 123) argues that freezing historical moments is driven by a 'political cosmology which enables us in our mind's eye to rob others of their histories'. It is proposed here that it might be possible to avoid the detrimental effects of treating the past as a foreign country (Lowenthal, 1985) by throwing ourselves 'into the spatial' (Massey, 2005: p. 194). Massey (2005: p. 192) calls us to adopt a 'politics of outward lookingness, from place beyond place'. When we adopt such a perspective we appreciate space as never complete or closed but 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far' (Massey 2005: p. 24). By this interpretation, thanatourism sites are constantly evolving and extend into the everyday lives and relations of those who visit.

Were thanatourism spaces to be contested, in the same sense as Massey (2005) argues the concept of space more generally should be, it is possible that the thanatourism industry could help to shape society in a meaningful way. If there is to be a genuine social benefit from thanatourism then it is to be found in the dynamic contemporaneity of these spaces. In how people pass through them, and are influenced to instigate change because of them, in their present day. Adopting such a perspective would call for thanatourism providers to deliver tellings of history, together with an appreciation of the multiple trajectories of space and time. From a tourist's perspective, it would involve consideration of dark events as part of a global, interlinked world. It would involve harnessing both the relational thinking and the outward lookingness that Massey (2005) describes. Still, whether thanatourism site proprietors and thanatourists are ready and indeed willing to adopt a spatial approach is yet to be determined. What is proposed here is a reframing of research questions within the scholarly field to include a greater focus on the implications of interpreting the remnants of dark histories within contemporary society.

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