

# Driving Culture Underground: Tourism and the Market Economy

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## Abstract:

*This article attempts to explain why the complexities of culture are lacking in the tourism literature. It suggests that the nature of the market economy has placed a greater emphasis on economics, and that because they are perceived as lacking in importance and difficult to measure, issues of culture are being omitted or pushed to the side in our published work.*

When addressing the topic of culture and its relationship to tourism, it became apparent that something was missing in the multitude of case studies, development models, and discussions available. It eventually became evident that the something omitted was, in fact, cultural depth and complexity. In this paper it is suggested that while tourism typically acts as an agent for a market economy, it is the market economy that has encouraged us to put to one side the importance culture has in the tourism literature.

When considering tourism there has been discussion of how tourism can create cultural understanding (MacCannell 1976) and revitalize local traditions (Dogan 1989), which are important topics, but when tourism development is discussed it is nearly always explicitly presented as a bottom-line phenomena. Virtually all tourism development has as its stated goal the making of money, and in today's world capital is raised by successfully participating in the market economy.

Few would argue that the introduction of a market economy into a different economic system has no impact upon culture. But it is apparent from the literature that tourism researchers too often forget that there is almost always some degree of resistance to the market economy, even in those areas where such an economy is dominant, and that this resistance has a cultural basis. It is clear that not every group who participates in the world market economy is trying to get the biggest bang for their buck, and for many people there are more important things than maximizing income. As an example, Mervyn Alleyne (1984) states that Black West Indian males are some of the most innovative entrepreneurs in the world, however, at the same time they can make some of the worst capitalists. This can be explained

largely through cultural norms. Black West Indian males are expected to make time for their friends and social network, and if socializing gets in the way of business, then the business may get put on hold.

Nevertheless, people around the world are being drawn into the web of the world market, some willingly, others grudgingly (Burger 1987). Regardless of what people think about the market economy, where tourism arises, the literature suggests that a market economy, if not already in place, quickly becomes the dominant economic system. Outside forces are quick to move in and dominate a successful market. So one might ask, if the economies of the world's tourist destinations are all becoming market based, what difference can culture make?

The debate about how culture affects economy is not a new one. Those familiar with economic anthropology will be well aware of the substantivist/formalist debate (see Polanyi 1968; Cook 1966). Making the assumption that it is inevitable that every group faced with tourism development will eventually willingly and completely accept a market economy, is the worst kind of paternalism. Today anthropologists and most economists at least pay lip-service to the notion that culture plays some kind of role in any society's economy. The question at hand is how big a role has culture played in tourism development, and how has that role been viewed and portrayed in the literature?

Since tourism typically demands a market economy and is about economics, it has become easy for social science researchers to fall into the trap of limiting ourselves to a formalist perspective, even when we say we do not. For tourism researchers, "socio-economic factors" are buzzwords. But are we

really looking at both social and economic factors, or are we simply assessing economic elements and adding social factors as window dressing? From the literature it is apparent that the most common approach is, in fact, to attribute so-called social factors to larger economic issues. In other words, the underlying approach is one of bottom-line economics, and while we consider the social implications of tourism, those that we do consider, at least in our published work, are in fact economically related. This is not to say that social and economic factors are not intertwined, for indeed they are, and this is the kernel of this discussion. The real or potential social and economic effects tourism researchers typically look at are a part of a group's culture, but they are only a part, and we must look to the larger picture if we are to play our role as researcher or advisor effectively. Yet, if we are indeed looking to the larger picture we are doing ourselves harm by not presenting the importance of culture in the literature.

To offer up an explanation as to why tourism researchers have been negligent in adequately considering culture, the answer may be embedded in the formalist/substantivist debate. Because tourism development is about economics, we have tried to make things scientific in our efforts to make ourselves heard by others, and in doing so cast aside culture because it is difficult to measure and therefore not present. Also, tourism researchers have been too quick to think that just because a market economy is put into place, the culture will follow – that cultural institutions that are disagreeable to a market-based system will somehow be selected out and replaced with ones that are more fitting to a market system. Here it is suggested that this is not an inevitable truth, and that many people in the world are walking to the beat of a different drummer. But the dilemma that faces those walking to the beat of a different drummer as related to tourism development is that if a market mentality is not adopted, there is the risk of outside forces moving in and dominating the tourism market before local people can choose to react. This is not to say that groups around the world are unable or completely unwilling to take part in the world market system, but that tourism of any scale inherently requires, creates, and furthers a market-based economy. Moreover, the rate that the market economy can develop is largely based upon the cultural systems in place. In other words, the rate at which groups can adjust to an ever-expanding market economy is determined at least in part by how well-suited their existing institutions are to a market economy and how flexible their cultural system is.

Residents of most of the world's tourist destinations have been unable to pick their pace of development, and this may be a partial explanation as to why so few local groups have been successful at maximizing the economic benefits of the industry.

To conclude, as applied anthropologists we know that to make a reasonable assessment or garner understanding of a particular tourism phenomena it is necessary for cultural elements including economic systems, internal and external politics, and the history of the people in question to be taken into account, and that a discussion of socio-economic factors, while important, is insufficient. What is not being proposed here is that anthropologists engaged in tourism research are ignoring cultural intricacies in their work. What is being suggested is that they are failing to incorporate the importance of culture into their published material, and by doing so, eroding away the moral and practical high ground on which we stand.

#### Notes

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