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Sociological and Anthropological Concepts in Tourism

At the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Understand tourism as a quest for contrived reality
- Evaluate how tourism is a quest for authenticity
- Define the environmental bubble and critique how it forms the basis of commercial tourism
- Evaluate Cohen's five roles of tourists
- Analyse Cohen's quest for the other
- Assess and be able to critique the concept of liminality
- Identify aspects of risk and how they affect travel behaviour

Introduction

Tourism is both a business and a social phenomenon. To understand how tourism works, then, one must understand both the business side of tourism as well as the human side. Ever since large scale tourism began, people have been examining it and trying to place it in a sociological perspective. These efforts have involved an examination of why people travel, the social reasons for travel and the type of tourist experience they are either getting or seeking. This chapter examines how the founding sociologists and anthropologists in the field looked at tourism and how they still shape our thinking.

Social perspectives on tourism

Three dominant themes in the sociology of tourism have emerged over the last 60 years. They are:

- Boorstin's essentially negative 1960s view that tourism represents contrived reality;
- MacCannell's 1970s more positive view that tourism represents a quest for authenticity; and
- Cohen's more neutral views that tourism represents a quest for one's centre.

In reviewing these themes, it is important to understand a few points. One is that most take a very American-centric view to the world. The second is to remember that these were written over a nearly 30-year period and that they are heavily influenced by the dominant social paradigm at the time of their writing.

■ Boorstin's contrived reality

In the early 1960s, sociologists were becoming increasingly concerned about the contrived and illusory nature of the human experience in American society. They were concerned that people were no longer experiencing reality in their lives; instead they were being presented a series of pseudo-events. As Boorstin (1964) described them, they were immersed in a thicket of unreality.

Tourism, especially large scale, mass tourism, was seen as being just another example of how American life had become overpowered by pseudo-events and contrived experiences. Boorstin felt that (in 1964, remember) the modern tourist was simply a passive onlooker who was isolated from the host environment and the local residents. As a result, tourists chose to disregard the real world around them, instead choosing the isolation of tourist ghettos. Both the tourist experience and the type of tourism development had to become more contrived, in which the tourist moved in a closed self-perpetuating environment that was isolated from the rest of the world. This was both caused by and reflective of the nature of modern (1964) American society, of which tourism was only a part.

There is much to what Boorstin discusses that is still relevant today. Mass tourists can only withstand a certain amount of strangeness. They like to witness strangeness of the host environment from the security of their own surroundings. Too much strangeness becomes threatening. In addition, he introduced the idea of the 'tourist ghetto' that is isolated from the real world. Destination areas like the Gold Coast, Disneyworld, Waikiki and many more are prime examples of tourist ghettos. On a smaller scale, many destination resorts are physically removed from the outside world. They have been constructed as discrete areas that, by design,

inhibit any contact with the real world. The only types of contact that tourists are likely to have with locals are either in a servant-master relationship, in a commercial relationship, or through the window of a self-enclosed, air conditioned bus. No one would describe these places as being real except possibly as real tourist destinations.

But, as Cohen (1972) argues, Boorstin's concept has a number of fundamental weaknesses. To begin, he labels all tourists as being the same. He fails to recognize that there are a large number of tourists that do not fit the mass tourist model, and even among mass tourists significant differences exist. Moreover, his work is editorial and observational in nature, rather than scientifically rigorous.



Boorstin felt the modern tourist was simply a passive onlooker who was confined largely to tourist ghettos or enclaves and did not want to experience the destination in any meaningful way, nor was he or she able to do so. He felt places like Waikiki in Hawai'i placed the tourist in an enclave divorced from the real world. Some of his arguments are valid, but his core thesis fails to appreciate that this is exactly the type of experience many tourists seek, if you abide by Dann's ideas of anomie, Crompton's concept of relaxation and the core elements of Pearce's travel career pattern.

■ MacCannell (1973) – quest for authenticity

Some ten years later, Dean MacCannell (1973) came up with a revised view of tourism and tourist motivations. Indeed, he is rather dismissive of Boorstin's ideas. He argued that the modern tourist is not a victim of a contrived and illusory culture, but instead is on a quest for authenticity that involves paying homage to the symbols of modernity, in this case tourist attractions. He suggested that the