



## College Quarterly

Spring 2005 - Volume 8 Number 2

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### Out with the Old and In with the New: The Problem of Ethical Travel

by *Marianne Vardalos*

#### Abstract

Featuring the tourist as a subject position powerful enough to activate new market mechanisms by way of choosing to travel in more ethical ways, theorists argue that new tourism activities present an alternative to the modern conception of mass tourism and the devastation it has come to represent. Tourists, once portrayed by leisure theorists as mindless consumers conforming to the script of corporately produced adventure, are now theorized as the very embodiment of democratic choice and social agency, capable of overturning the social, ecological and economic travesties of mass tourism. It is argued that new tourism presents no substantial alternative to mass tourism and no substantial challenge to the liberal doctrine that lay at the root of a global power imbalance. Control of tourism, including the construction of the tourist's desires, remains firmly in the First World. Though the case of India is presented, the presentation is concerned more theoretically with the problematic trend in social theory towards the increasing liberalization of thought as it is represented in theorizations of new tourism. It is argued that the dominance of a liberal paradigm represents a diminished capacity to critically understand and challenge the social structures that perpetuate domination, hence allowing for the proposition that tourism, steeped and rooted in hierarchized social relations, could be ever ethical.

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The central problem of this article is the proposition that new tourism as an industry offers an ethical way to travel. New tourism is a concept recently adopted in debates to indicate a variety of tourisms that have emerged that in some respects seek to distinguish themselves from what is referred to as mainstream or conventional mass tourism. New tourism activities, marketed as designed for and capable of countering the differentials inherent in conventional forms of mass travel, are said to humanize tourism in what is deemed the Third World.<sup>1</sup> They are seen as protecting the fragile ecosystem, benefiting locals as much as visitors, democratizing travel among classes, and acting as tools for cross-cultural understanding (McLaren, 1998). This is primarily a discussion of how the Third World is constructed through new tourism - socially, geographically, and ideologically. A secondary purpose of this paper is to examine how these constructions reveal the manner in which control of tourism development resides firmly in the First World. Theories of travel focused on local government decisions tend to minimize if not wholly

ignore the inherently political nature of tourism, embodied in the pressures of First World governments, international lending bodies, supranational policies and the desires of First World tourists.

In an effort to differentiate new tourism from old, the industry capitalizes on a false distinction tourists have commonly employed to separate themselves from what is seen as common and vulgar - the exploitation associated with mass tourism. There is a profit of distinction in creating a gap between the ideal practices of touring versus travelling, where the latter is ethical, or the right thing to do, and the former is not. In the popular imaginary, the term **mass tourism** conjures up images of swarms of people, pollution, invasion of villages, and rape of landscape. In contrast, **new tourism** is presented as being about discovery, exploration, cross-cultural contact, and mutual benefit. Standardized and predictable destinations such as Hawaii and Las Vegas are associated with mass tourism, whereas new tourism destinations like Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Novopolitsk are presented as chaotic, untamed, untouched, or even dangerous. The motivations of the tourist are commonly assumed to be self-gratification, hedonism, and escape while the motivations of the traveller are presented as spiritual rejuvenation, education, and concern about the world and its inhabitants. The tourist's character is viewed as cautious, oblivious to inauthenticity, and unmindful of others, but the traveller's character is presented as adventurous, intelligent, independent, and conscientious. Mass tourism is associated with the rationality of the fast-paced urban world, while new tourism is the antithesis of civilization, ruled only by the laws of nature and the rhythms of the circadian clock. In the popular imaginary, the tourist is parasitic and exploitative of the natural world, but the traveller is a global citizen, a survivor in the natural world.

The problem of ethical travel is that, far from heralding the end of dominance and control, new tourism represents a more nuanced way in which relations of power are transmitted and circulated. A comprehensive critique must challenge the very ethic which informs new tourism practices.<sup>2</sup> Rationally organized social arrangements that produce new practices in travel should not be assumed, as they are by some postmodern theorists, to be a means of increased freedom for the individual or for society (Giddens, 1990; Lash & Urry, 1987). All new tourist genres are the same, regardless of their specific claims, because of the existing unified ideology that encompasses all the practices, and acts not as a means for travellers to exercise freedom of choice, but as a means of further tyranny and manipulation of these travellers, their destinations, and the people inhabiting those destinations. The criticisms associated with mass tourism (and modernity) - classism, racism, and environmental destruction - have been co-opted by new tourism and reformulated into a new vocabulary of survival integral to the new businesses' promotion and growth. This new vocabulary renders true criticism benign, by transforming dissent into marketable characteristics - individualized, experiential, ethical, eco-friendly - that differentiate alternatives from

mass tourism and conceal their similitude.

### Creating Desire

Amidst obvious acknowledgments that mass tourism is an environmentally, economically, and culturally problematic activity, many theorists have come to accept uncritically that the shift in values represented in new practices is fundamental. For example, McLaren (1998) writes:

Since the 1970s, however, local people have joined with ecumenical groups, Indigenous Peoples, women's groups, grassroots groups, environmentalists, and even tourists to challenge and denounce the negative impacts of global (mass) tourism and seek alternatives in an international "responsible movement." Growing numbers of organizations outside of but reliant upon the travel industry are also rethinking their roles in tourism and creating strategies for change. (p. 21)

It is assumed by these same theorists that the result of these efforts is the advent of the new tourism industry. Theorized as fundamentally different from mass travel, and therefore potentially ethical, new tourism is described in the trade magazine, **Survival International** (1995), in this way:

In response to the more obvious negative effects of tourism, many tour operators have now proclaimed themselves to be "green"... . Ecotourism hopes to change the unequal relationships of conventional tourism. Thus it encourages the use of indigenous guides and local products. Ethical tours claim to combine environmental education with minimal travel comfort, help protect flora and fauna, and provide local people with economic incentives to safeguard their environment. For example, ethical tourists can now join a rainforest research project, visit African mountain gorillas or take a water diving tour to Sahel. (p. 34)

Our problematization of ethical travel begins with the understanding that tourism is an arena of competing narratives and mediated social relations, where discursive and hegemonic languages are produced in the act of promotion, travellers' tales, and local resistances. In their life-imitating-art-imitating-life thesis, Thurot and Thurot (1983) note that tourism promotion seeks to appropriate and embellish upon the typical recitals of touristic activity to the extent that the next generation of visitors makes its experiences conform to the discourse of the advertising.

The advertising world knows how to use the feedback generated by the reactions of the various social groups in search of a cultural and ideological model. This

newly created kind of story has in turn become a model for advertising texts and it is then used, among other things, as a further model for the stories that tourists will make up about their own experiences... . Because of this, advertisements and eventually the stories told by the tourists seem like what ought to have been reality. (p. 180)

What both theorists are demonstrating is central to this critique of new or ethical tourism, namely, the primacy of experiential language, which permits the circular and secondary process of tourism publicity to operate as it does in effectively creating desire, which again feeds into the tourist experience, promoting further desire. Both theorists recognize the requirements of refocusing tourism investigation on the realm of constructed desire and how this affects the production of certain new tourists, practices, and destinations.

### **Case in Point: GAP Adventures**

In Toronto, the agency most associated with new tourism is GAP Adventures, with its headquarters located on Dupont Street and its promotional literature available in most travel agencies. The acronym stands for Great Adventure People. The agency acts as an umbrella booking agent for different new tourism operators in 20 countries specializing in one continent or another and "committed to bringing travellers to the most adventurous and exciting destinations." The agency is nine years old, a veteran in terms of the new industry, and the team in Canada consists of 30 staff members responsible for sales, marketing, promotions, and flight reservations. GAP's 2002 brochure claims that "through a love of travel and exploration a great company was born". The text states:

At GAP Adventures, we pride ourselves on showing you the world face to face. We want to introduce you to the people along the roads less travelled. We offer adventures of a lifetime that are sure to charm even the most jaded traveller.(GAP Adventures, 2002)

GAP operates their tours through a number of partners they call "specialists and leaders in adventure." As our problematization of new tourism is developed and illustrated with the particular case study of India, we focus on the tour operator typical of new tourism in the region, namely Integrity Groups, a small specialist company claiming expertise in South Asia. Integrity, a name precisely indicating the industry's effort to establish probity and to demonstrate that they recognize the same moral rectitude in the consumer, packages its ethic by encouraging the brochure reader to ask him or herself, "Am I an Integrity traveller?" The text continues:

If you **are** an Integrity traveller, you will be a person who is interested in local cultures and environments wanting to find out more about the hows and whys of the

countries you are visiting. It is important to you to get out amongst the local people, to get involved in really "experiencing" a place. You will need a good sense of humour and a flexible and relaxed attitude to travel, knowing that it will be very different to home. You accept occasional discomfort and delays, and the fact that all the conveniences and sophistication of the western world are not available. Remember you will often have to carry your own luggage. If this sounds like you, welcome to Integrity's India. (GAP Adventures, 2000)<sup>3</sup>

This passage, though ordinary in its representation of new tourism literature, is extraordinary in its embodiment, in one short paragraph, of the need to consider both the realms of production and consumption in a comprehensive theory of new tourism.

The problem of **production** is illustrated in the fact that Integrity's India can be "affordable" to "tourists on a budget" from western, industrialized, technocratic countries, while the industrialized world remains prohibitively expensive and politically inaccessible to the majority of India's inhabitants. The problem of **consumption** is demonstrated in the way India is constructed as "different to home" and devoid of "the convenience and sophistication of the western world," and that this is a selling feature. The problem of orthotourist **subjectivity** is evidenced in the fact that a consumer would be willing to pay a premium price in exchange for occasional discomfort, delays, and unavailability of conveniences.

Integrity, like most new tourism operators, claims to offer not a mythical, fantastical India, resulting from the colonial imaginary, but India as it really is. The "real" India that Integrity claims to know, however, is simply another style of representation serving another tourist perspective. Tour operators, to give an aura of authenticity from the vantage point of the tourists, discursively construct destinations. These constructions are organized around what the tourist already knows, recognizes and anticipates. The claims of authenticity offered by operators play on the new tourist's conviction that he or she knows India differently than a mass tourist might. The new tourist assumes the mass tourist's impressions of India to be the result of conventional tour guides, coffee table books, or Hollywood movies, while his or her own ideas of India are informed by a **personal**, and **legitimate** interest in global affairs, independent films, educational documentaries, or art exhibits.

The distinction between old and new representations of India is worth developing further here. While a mass tourist is likely to accept, uncritically, the idea of India as an entity, the new tourist is apt to recognize the concept of a unified country with a homogenous culture as a residual trace of European domination. Nevertheless, new tourism representations of India as a place and Indians as a people are infused with the language of colonialism, and brochures do little to change the contributions to the myth of India of colonial writers like

Mark Twain. Though Integrity claims to differ from conventional tourism, which it deems to be premised on colonial understandings of India, the company's brochure still echoes Twain's mythological discourse, even becoming nostalgic at times:

This fascinating journey leads us into the heart of India's heritage and allows us to experience the timeless spirit of ancient India with its religious mystique and exotic enchantment... . In some places we've chosen hotels with character so you can spend the night in a 16th century palace, a restored hunting lodge or a colonial style hotel full of memories of the Empire... Little has changed since the days when camel caravans passed laden with treasures... . Chinese, Portuguese and British influences turn tropical India into a kaleidoscope of unforgettable images. (GAP Adventures, 2000)

Despite the flattering tones of colonial descriptions, the underlying Hegelian imperative is that "it is the necessary fate of Asiatic empires to be subjected to Europeans" (Hegel, *The philosophy of History*, p. 143).

Also contributing to the contemporary colonial mindset is the idea that India does not exist until it is discovered and mediated by Euro-Americans. Eurocentrism, or the perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning and the privileged point of knowing the rest of the world (Shohat & Stam, 1994), first emerged as a justification for colonialism. It is still a way of thinking that permeates and structures contemporary practices of representation ranging from art forms to everyday speech. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write:

Eurocentrism minimizes the West's oppressive practices by regarding them as contingent, accidental, exceptional. Colonialism, slave-trading, and imperialism are not seen as fundamental catalysts of the West's disproportionate power, Eurocentrism appropriates the cultural and material production of non-Europeans while denying both their achievements and its own appropriation, thus consolidating its sense of self and glorifying its own cultural anthropophagy. (p. 3)

Integrity "gives you the freedom to become totally involved in your holiday adventure," to "make your own opportunity of personal discoveries," and to "explore independently." This enduring love/hate relationship with the homeland is revealed in the brochure's phrase "travel independently in the Third World while we take care of those hassles that consume precious holiday time." India's perceived lack of order is both attraction and detraction to the European rationality. This construction of India is integral to the dialectic of difference that permits tourism a niche as something unlike or opposite to everyday life. For this very reason, it is not uncommon for new tourism destinations to be constructed as something to be feared. As the

brochure states:

It is important to remember that India is a very different part of the world. Still emerging from the Third World is can sometimes be unconventional, confusing, even overwhelming. Travelling with a small group has the advantage of providing safety and security while still allowing us to be flexible and spontaneous. It also means we can access places and events not possible for larger groups. (GAP Adventures, 2002)

### **First World/Third/World**

As used in new tourism literature, the term **Third World** is very much the product of interventionist discourse, manifested in the colonial imperative to advance the primitive, or the modern imperative to develop the underdeveloped. The suggestion that India is still emerging from the Third World exemplifies this assumption of time as progress and the increased liberalization of economies as advancement towards survival. The term Third World is worth defining clearly in the context of tourism, as its ideological construction matters as much as its political reality, represented in the discrepancy in power at inter/intra-regional and inter/intra-national levels, is a central concern. Even though the term is steeped in historically uneven power relations, critical postcolonial theorists continue to use it as a "symbol of planetary intellectual responsibility ... and as a text for survival" (Nandy, 1989, p. 275).

Since the Third World consists mostly of tourist-receiving and not tourist-sending countries, the glaring inequalities are apparent in the reality that only those who have the resources - time and money - can make the journey. (A growing middle class in India and within other poorer nations (often called the First World, in the Third) is now able to participate in tourism, as the middle and higher classes of wealthier nations always have. In India, domestic tourism constitutes the third highest number of travellers after those from the United Kingdom and Germany, albeit in different forms and utilizing different infrastructures.)

Although the First to Third World spectrum was first established for the purpose of describing the various alignments of nations with opposing political forces, it has now come to embody the uneven development among and within nations, geographically, politically, and ideologically. Geographically, the Third World is not a tidy, definable portion of the globe coinciding with nation-states, since national borders are increasingly diffuse, with transnational trade blocs, transcultural identities, and global entities continuing to shift and emerge. For purposes of this study, however, the First World refers to those nations which were and continue to be implicated in the colonial and mercantile modes of production since the invasions of the Spanish Conquistadors. They continue to systematically exploit the Third World. These countries are the United States, Canada,

Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and the growing Dragons in South Asia and the Pacific Rim.

Conversely, the Third World refers to those nations whose resources continue to be drained through these uneven power relations - most parts of Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. Politically, the First World refers to those nations whose institutions are able to exercise control over other nation-states by means of unfair trade practices, international policing mechanisms, and military intervention. In the present era of advanced capitalism, the central players are those nations with capitalist economies whose continued existence heavily relies on the increasing liberalization of economies deemed Third World, whose political position is neither sovereign nor autonomous, and whose access to global governing institutions is limited or peripheral. The G8 and permanent Security Council members constitute the political First World.

Ideologically, the First/Third World binarism is evident in the power of some nations to represent other nations, through geographical, temporal, and hierarchical ideas. Ideological references with an imagined geography are those which envision the world on a mythical cartography where the West has the privileged central vantage point. From this perspective, the East is divided into Near, Middle, and Far in terms of its proximity to Europe, just as Asia is divided into South and Central. Hence the term East India is still used to describe the subcontinent, and East Indians, its inhabitants. National borders themselves are often residual effects of colonial occupations during which imperial powers carved up territories into nation-states, and placed borders in the midst of culturally homogenous groups. An obvious example of this process is the establishment of India-Pakistan partition and the later establishment of Bengal.

Temporally ideological references are those which place England as the regulating centre of time measurement through the establishment of Greenwich Mean Time or timetables in Third World countries which offer the New York time as reference for comparison. These temporal implications become all the more evident when broadcasters like CNN air professedly global events, such as the Olympic games, in time slots which coincide with an American viewer's schedule, compelling Third World inhabitants to watch football in the middle of the night.

Ideological references are also those which hierarchize through language and send the implicit message that Euro-America leads the way in a linear trajectory of civilization. Shohat and Stam write (1994) about the ideological thinking that organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe: "**our** nations, and **their** tribes, **our** religions and **their** superstitions, **our** culture, **their** folklore, **our** art and **their** artifacts, **our** demonstrations, **their** riots, **our** defense and **their** terrorism" (p. 2). Ideological binaries, like political, geographical, and political ones, are the result of influence



and control. Power is wielded in constructing and maintaining the First World/Third World distinctions via new tourism because it is power which ultimately determines who controls the planning and directs the growth of tourism, what international investments will be made and where loans will be channelled.

The absence of power, however, is a central feature of Third World nations in the twenty-first century, which brings this discussion to the problem of ethical travel in the realm of production. The power gap between First and Third World nations continues to grow, compelling Oswaldo de Rivero (2001) to term India and several other Third World nations the "powerless powers." According to de Rivero, the present world order means that in more than 130 poor quasi-nation-states, governments have only marginal control in creating and implementing domestic policies:

They do not control large segments of their economic activities, because these are mainly informal, and what remains in the formal sector is controlled by the IMF and The World bank. In the international field, the quasi-nation-states have no negotiating power and do not exercise a positive influence on any major event. (p. 24)

De Rivero argues that the vast majority of the world's population lives in countries that he terms **non-viable national economies** (NNEs), those which became "independent" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as India did, but whose genesis had no national viability because their creation was imposed and not organic or spontaneous. Rivero reasons that whereas the majority of industrialized states shared a national identity or relatively common culture, either through a national market or a middle class before a state authority crystallized, the nation-states of Latin America, Asia, and Africa experienced the opposite sequence. De Rivero's observations, coupled with the imbalance of power permeating the industry, and contextualized within the historical post-colonial order that allows some cultures the power to construct others, the quest for an ethical version of tourism is dubious if not senseless from the outset.

### Endnotes

1. The terms Third World, less developed countries (LDCs), and developing world are used interchangeably. Despite the fact that these labels are seen as "toxic words in the 'development' discourse" by Ivan Illich, Wolfgang Sachs, Ashis Nandy, and Arturo Escobar, among others, we will use them with the understanding that they are, and remain, problematic.
2. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1999) call the linguistic depoliticization of social problems (as in the case of the term ethical) commonplaces in the Aristotelian sense of "notions or theses with which one argues but about which one does not argue, or put another

way, these presuppositions of discussion which remain undiscussed" (p. 41).

3. All quotes in this section are from Integrity's brochure titled "India Small Group Adventures 2000" (published by GAP Adventures).

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