

Anthropology, tourism

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Anthropology is the study of human commonality and diversity, past and present, anywhere in the world. Rooted in the era of European exploration and colonial expansion, it emerged as an academic discipline at the turn of the twentieth century. Like explorers who preceded and tourists who followed them, early anthropologists were concerned with the untouched and exotic. Any presence of tourism was ignored in their publications, reflecting ambivalence that stemmed from embarrassing similarities between anthropologists and tourists and from negative impacts of tourism on indigenous communities and material remains of past societies.

In the 1970s–1980s, anthropologists began to engage with political and social realities of the postcolonial world, including tourism, focusing on modernity, development, urbanization, and global south–north connections. An earlier focus on cultures as geographically bounded systems of shared ideas shifted to fluid understandings of culture as giving meaning and shape to human experience, process, and practice. Today tourism figures into anthropological research on myriad topics, including local and global politics, economic development, social inequality, gender, ethnicity, nationalism, the environment, construction and performance of identity, heritage, cross-cultural communication, discourse, representation, diaspora, mobility, and globalization.

Anthropological approaches

Anthropological analysis is fundamentally holistic, based on the premise that all domains of human life – such as politics, religion, economics, leisure, arts – influence and inform one another. To grasp interconnections across domains, anthropologists use ethnographic methodologies developed by

their predecessors over the past century and adopted more recently by other disciplines as “qualitative methods”. Chief among these is participant observation, an extended period (often years) of participating in daily life of the people studied while continuously recording observations. This experiential immersion provides the basis for holistic analysis and is generally considered the defining element of anthropological research.

For anthropologists tourism is not a single thing, but a complex realm of behavior, representation, and interaction. As a loosely integrated social field, it includes (a) multiple actors with differing degrees of power and autonomy (tourists, workers, residents, expatriates, foreign and local guides, and other intermediaries including researchers); (b) characteristic practices (traveling, sightseeing, photographing, shopping, relaxing; or, conversely, marketing, selling, serving, guiding, ignoring); and (c) constituent institutions (travel agencies, airports, hotels/hostels, museums, heritage sites, souvenir shops). A web of relationships and interconnections integrate this social field, running the gamut from emotional to material, imaginative to environmental, embodied to technological, and interpersonal to financial. In order to capture disparate aspects of tourism, anthropologists draw on interdisciplinary theoretical paradigms, such as political economy, cosmopolitanism, discourse analysis, semiotics, feminist and postcolonial theory, phenomenology, actor-network approaches, embodiment and non-representational theory, development studies, and applied/praxis approaches. The anthropology of tourism is consequently defined not by a unified theoretical approach, nor by particular topics, but by common interest in sociocultural phenomena that transpire in tourism-related settings.

Current themes

There is general agreement that a tourist can be defined as a person voluntarily using leisure time to travel away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change (Smith 1977). Ethnographic research counteracts the stereotype of the boorish tourist with nuanced, sympathetic portraits of motivation and experience that shed light on tourism as a reflexive and embodied practice (Harrison [2003](#)) in which differences of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and positionality matter. Anthropologists pay attention to the increasingly blurred frontiers of tourism, repositioning it within a broader field of contemporary practices and ideologies of mobility (including a range of discretionary educational, labor, and lifestyle mobilities) that can confound established distinctions between work, leisure, and travel. They also examine the gray area between tourism and pilgrimage, secular and sacred, revealing that the two blur together in practice. Studying the diversification of tourism and tourist identifications, anthropology highlights their relational, performed, multi-aspectual, and situated nature, foregrounding questions such as when and where is one a tourist, for whom, in which way, and to what effect.

An important contribution of anthropological work has been attention to the constructed markers of commonality and difference that tourists consume, as well as the role of touristic representation in constituting local populations and engaging them in self-commodification. Ethnic customs, heritage sites, “traditional” dance, music, dress, rituals, environmental adaptations, and unfamiliar social norms are attractions packaged to draw tourists to specific destinations. Recent research emphasizes the role of local (tourist) arts as a mediating factor in tourist-toured interactions and central player in local and global identity politics (Adams [2006](#)). Investigations of relationships between tourist anticipation and experience in specific destinations shed light on the power of representation and imagination in shaping the encounter. Studies of people working in the tourist trade, from sex

workers to hotel clerks to native guides, show for instance the manifold ways that their presentation of self and society is bound up in tourists' expectations and desires, as well as widely circulating imaginaries of paradise, authentic culture, adventure, discovery, and transgression (Salazar and Graburn [2014](#)).

The concept of the touristic border zone, developed by Bruner ([2005](#)), captures the interstitial and creative quality of the slice of community life in which performers and other tourism workers interact with tourists, and draws broader attention to tourism's role in the invention and enactment of culture. Bruner's work exemplifies how the ethnographic approach favored by anthropology facilitates experience-near, interpretive accounts of tourism. It continues to inform reflections on key themes and theories driving anthropological research on tourism, including recent re-conceptualizations of the notions of encounter, authenticity, narrative, embodiment, identity, and mobility (Leite et al. 2019). The study of the encounters and relations that tourism engenders has also helped anthropologists move beyond the portrayal of "tourists" and "host communities" as discrete and antagonistic social-cultural entities with unambiguous power differentials, shedding light on tourism's potential to profoundly alter people's lives, sense of belonging, and orientation to the world.

Worldwide, tourism continues to be promoted as a job-creating, income-generating industry for development. Anthropologists critically examine the circulation of such discourses, their moral underpinnings, the forms of transnational collaboration they entail, and the outcomes of implementation. In some cases, tourism development displaces resident populations; in others it creates new channels of labor migration, or opportunities to recreate tradition in the face of modernity. Host populations perform their identities simultaneously for tourist consumption and political recognition, documented by anthropologists attending to the legitimization of cultural forms and ideas in a world shaped by global interconnection, factious identity politics, and waves of collective sentiment. The analysis of the manifold ways tourism is promoted as a tool for development, exemplified for instance in the growth of volunteering abroad programs (i.e., voluntourism), also enables anthropologists to shed new light on broader issues of power and inequality in south-north relations, global governance, and political economy.

Tourism studies

There has been a sharp bifurcation between anthropologists whose work primarily addresses tourism scholars in other disciplines and those whose writings engage solely with anthropologists in other subfields. However, since the turn of the twenty-first century tourism-related institutions and behaviors are increasingly common subjects of anthropological research, leading to debate over whether "anthropology of tourism" should be considered a coherent subdiscipline or whether it remains simply anthropology, in that the majority of studies address theoretical and ethnographic concerns common to the discipline as a whole (Leite and Graburn [2009](#)).

In recent years several international anthropological organizations have established tourism subgroups, including the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the American Anthropological Association, and the Society for Applied Anthropology. Anthropologists also join networks organized by sociological and geographical societies (such as International Sociological Association RC50), as well as interdisciplinary organizations like the International Academy for the Study of Tourism, China's International Tourism Studies Association, and the

Critical Tourism Studies network, which began in Europe and now includes North America and Asia Pacific chapters. They publish in an array of topical interdisciplinary journals, including the longstanding *Annals of Tourism Research*, founded by anthropologist Jafar Jafari. Others publish in discipline-specific journals, addressing audiences more interested in theoretical insights than tourism per se. Anthropologists are increasingly vocal in calls to diversify the epistemological foundations of the study of tourism by further decentering and pluralizing knowledge (beyond longstanding Euro-American hegemony) and unpacking the geographical and cultural biases that permeate this field of research.

Interdisciplinary tourism studies draw extensively on anthropology's qualitative methods, ethnographic case studies, and theories, with substantial overlap in topical interests (Roberts and Andrews [2013](#)). Tourist motivation, intercultural communication, social hierarchies, cultural change, heritage discourses, identities, the politics of representation, and constructions of place and people are some research arenas shaped by anthropological insights; and the discipline's theories of transnationalism, diaspora, global interconnection, exchange, value, and commodification also appear throughout tourism studies.

Toward the future

Once considered a detriment in ethnographic fieldwork, the ubiquity of tourism activity worldwide now shapes anthropological theory about globalization, in terms of cultural flows of information, people, and imagination, as well as power relations grounded in discourse about global citizenship, cultural diversity, and world heritage. At a moment when anthropologists are broadly concerned with cultural representation, cosmopolitanism, and border-spanning assemblages of practices, objects, technologies, actors, and discourses, tourism has emerged as a particularly fruitful and influential research focus. Embodying both localizing and globalizing tendencies, tourism generates a unique "brand" – local tradition, landscapes, and heritage – framed in terms of generic, widespread imaginaries of tropical paradise, lost homeland, or exotic Other. It also brings diverse populations together in unprecedented numbers, generating ever-thickening networks of imagery, cross-cultural contact, and exchange.

Anthropologists show that tourism has become an increasingly diffuse and distributed economic, social and cultural process, with increasingly blurred frontiers and entanglements with other forms of mobility. Its study requires bridging diverse areas of life and multiple scales of analysis, but also taking seriously how actors and institutions delineate, identify and act upon something called "tourism" – designing and implementing policies, measuring and evaluating, transacting and relating, but also criticizing and resisting tourism by condemning for instance its excesses and consequences on local life (including prices and property), heritage, or the environment. As tourism continues to expand, so do the themes addressed by anthropologists, calling for imaginative conceptual and theoretical resources.

While tourism settings provide a microcosm of many issues of anthropological interest, anthropologists undertaking holistic fieldwork face methodological and epistemological challenges. International tourism constitutes a reticulated field of infrastructural and interpersonal nodes, images, and acting subjects. Tourists are by definition mobile, making long-term, single-site participant observation difficult, and they often view anthropologists as local fixtures to be toured or as authenticators of cultural performance. Tourism workers, though often stationary, may mistake

anthropologists for tourists and interact with them accordingly. Anthropologists of tourism have consequently been pioneers in multi-sited ethnography and reflexive analysis of positionality.

As “natives” in international travel and cross-cultural interaction, anthropologists are enmeshed in a web of diverse stakeholders and power dynamics that influence the production of anthropological knowledge (Swain 2004). The ethical, methodological, and epistemological stance of the anthropologist as professional stranger can no longer be taken for granted. Like all inhabitants of this unprecedentedly interconnected world, anthropologists are influenced by and implicated in imaginaries of global commonality and difference, social roles and responsibilities, and emergent forms of cultural representation (Simoni 2018). With their close attention to complexities of global–local relations, method, and positionality, tourism researchers are increasingly charting provocative paths for anthropology as a whole.

See also

[Critical studies](#), [cross-cultural study](#), [culture broker](#), [ethnography](#), [host and guest](#).

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