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Beginner Research on Tourism and the Tourist : Beware of Words and Caricatures !

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Description :

Mots clefs : Caricature, Touriste, Tourisme, Hypothèses de recherche, entretien avec un expert.

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Basée sur un entretien avec un anthropologue français spécialiste du tourisme, cet article propose un panorama du phénomène « tourisme » à destination du chercheur débutant un travail. La recherche se concentre surtout sur les dangers de caricature et de développement d'une vision simpliste du sujet et propose un portrait bien plus stimulant pour la recherche du touriste.

ABSTRACT.

Based on an interview with a French anthropologist particularly well versed in tourism, this article offers a useful overview of the phenomenon of tourism to the beginner researcher. The research focuses essentially on the dangers of caricatures and simplistic views, and offers a more stimulating portrait of the tourist as a research field.

Key words : Caricature ; Tourist ; Tourism ; Research postulates ; Interview with an expert.

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Introduction.

In the Anglo-Saxon countries, tourism is the subject of a great deal of attention and of numerous academic researches. France, while being the number one destination worldwide for tourists, is underrepresented by researchers in management at international meetings on tourism. As far as research is concerned, French work on tourism is more often the work of geographers rather than managers, and the implementation of tourism is largely the resultant of decisions strongly impregnated by political dimensions, indeed petty ones.

In this context, the researchers in management who are interested in tourism are often the exception to the rule. Nevertheless, tourism is a field of research where real problems of management can be broached. The analysis of the market through the understanding of the individual touristic actor, the tourist, remains a domain still largely unexplored (see the Appendix).

This article does not aim to contemplate the possible reasons for this disinterest by the academic community, but to observe the fundamental problem of the definition of tourism which is obscure, falling between the nebulous generic where each trip is considered to be tourism, and the specific, caricatured to the pastiche that is so ridiculous that no one dares to use the term tourism.

Nevertheless, if this observation can partly explain the scientist's contempt for the discipline of tourism, our intention does not stop here. Our objective, on the contrary, is to be a preamble for the choice of tourism as a field of research. In the process of formulating a research problem, the researcher often relies on information gathering carried out in discussions and meetings with experts or key informants (D'Astous, 2005 ; Evrard et al., 1977). Hence, the researcher must be familiar with the discipline being studied to rely on the expertise of those individuals whose functions and specialties are directly linked to the theme under study.

In this context, this article offers the neophyte a basic introduction to the tourist phenomenon, bypassing the need to consult experts and key informants. By relying on an interview carried out with a researcher in anthropology with a specialty in tourism, the dangers of an overly simplistic vision of the tourist phenomenon are highlighted.

The method of information gathering : an interview with an expert researcher.

This project took root in 2003 during an interview to compile information for a handbook on tourist marketing with Jean-Didier Urbain, a teacher and a researcher in anthropology who has worked for more than thirty years on tourism (see Annex A1 for a brief biography and a list of his main works). In light of the wealth of information obtained during this interview, the full potential of an in-depth analysis became apparent : the content of the interview suited the exploratory needs in the early stages of interest in the field of tourist research. As a result, we have undertaken a thematic analysis of the corpus of this interview.

Our decision to give more weight to this isolated interview rather than the traditional accumulation of several interviews with experts was based on three key criteria. Firstly, the expertise of Jean-Didier Urbain, whose work demonstrates a scientific activity of large scope, is based on research and reflection, and his analysis goes beyond a simplistic understanding of a sector of activity by one of the actors of this sector. His view on the phenomenon is a critical and thought out vision of tourism as practiced by the individuals in a society and as understood by the members of that society.

Secondly, by not sharing the outlook of geographers, the usual authors of French work on tourism who concentrate more on the environment, the expert privileges an analysis centered on the individual. This outlook has more in common with the one adopted by marketing, hence increasing the interest of his analysis for researchers in this field

And finally, as a French scientist, his view focuses more particularly on the understanding of French society. His conclusions take into account the particularities of the French consumer, subtleties for which the numerous North American works have little application.

The interview with Jean-Didier Urbain was divided into two phases. The first was a phase of unstructured interview and the unique instruction given was to share his expertise of the tourist phenomenon by addressing future readers interested in tourist marketing and management. Six probing questions were raised during this first phase. The second phase, to which we only make punctual reference in this article, was more concerned with the format of the semi-structured interview. As a whole, the questions corresponded to requests for precision and opinions on certain points that were broached, and dealt with the notion of the rational, Internet and the seller of tourism, of the social obligation of "going away for the vacation ». Four requests for precision were presented in the form of probing questions. The precise topics of choosing a destination and the notion of constrained choice were the object of two probing questions, subjects concerning determinism of the activity were dealt with without probing questions, and a request for precision on the expert's point of view on sociological determinism in the sense used by Bourdieu occasioned one probing question. In all, the interview represented more than 49 000 signs and 8444 words to be analyzed.

The results of the thematic analysis.

Three principal themes emerged from the interview. The first theme concerns the tendency to excessively simplify

the tourist phenomenon. This propensity towards caricature is due as much to the nonexistence of operational terminology as to an overly mechanical vision of the phenomenon. The second theme deals with the ambivalent links between the tourist practices of a society and the society itself. The third theme focuses on tourism as a form of individual consumption and considers tourism, or rather travel, as a project which is carried out in a coherent manner and, hence, the idea of travel as a means of self fulfillment.

1) The tourist caricature

The term tourist caricatures the individual

Tourism does not follow mechanical laws

2) The ambivalent links between tourism and society

Changes in the functions of conformity and the social distinction of travel

Tourism as a withdrawal from the rhythms and the order of society

3) For an understanding of the consumer tourist project

Travel is much more than a product, it is a project

The future tourist is a rational individual.

Conclusion.

Through the variety of ideas and points of view presented, this article summarizes the complexity of the tourist phenomenon. If the caricature of the "bad traveler" is quasi systematic in daily language, thus reflecting an anti-tourist mentality, or at least an asserted anti-tourist scorn (Urbain, 1991), the researcher must not fall into this trap. The first step is to be conscious of undermining the actor and, perhaps, the researchers who study, or are simply interested in, the phenomenon. This reality established, one must then keep in mind that the phenomenon is not reducible to several rough outlines, to simplistic mathematical formulas or hyper determinist correlations.

In reality, tourism is an extremely complex research subject, as is proven elsewhere by the ambivalent links that are maintained with the society which produces travel. Nevertheless, according to the expert, the functions of conformity and the social distinction associated with travel would be, while not losing ground, at least in mutation, in our extremely mobile society whereas the purpose of travel and trips would still retain the same role of withdrawal from social life.

Tourist practice must also be considered on an individual level, as a complex phenomenon since the consumer commits himself, through his vacations, to the realization of a personal project. Through the choice and consumption of products and services that are involved in planning a trip, the consumer attempts to carry out a project, a dream perhaps, representations of what his trip should be in order to fulfill a mission of construction or confirmation of his self-identity. Regarding this subject, Freud was the first to establish a parallel between psychoanalysis and travel

because "exteriorized trips, vacations are also interiorized trips" (Touriscopie, 2004). Consequently, if tourist practice can lead to diverse disorders and neurosis, one of the factors (among others) may be the confrontation between the imaginary of the vacation project and the reality and the pragmatism of the choices made.

Finally, the preponderant role of the imaginary favored the idea that, through travel, the tourist buys a dream. But the buyer of a dream does not wish to be considered a naïve dreamer. As we have already seen, the tourist of the future is a rational consumer in the sense that he knows how to look intelligently for the place in the world which suits him, while taking into account personal restraints and pressure.

Although the propositions presented here result from one interview, thereby limiting their validity, one must keep in mind the qualifications of the expert when evaluating the quality of these propositions. His profound analytical perspective offers new horizons to researcher in marketing.

In conclusion, in emphasizing the complexity of the tourist phenomenon, our desire was not only to warn the neophyte against falling into the trap of oversimplifying tourism and the tourist, but also to create a more stimulating portrait of the subject and the phenomenon in such a way as to initiate interest to do research (even vocations) on tourism. We still have a great deal to learn about this actor who we do not understand completely (Urbain, 1991). As a scientist, the French researcher in marketing and in consumer behavior must be capable of overcoming the shame which is attached to studying the tourist, in order to plunge into a sector of research valued on the other side of the Atlantic for quite sometime (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

Appendix : Biography of the Expert.

Jean-Didier Urbain, born in 1951

Abridged Biography

- Docteur d'état in Social and Cultural Anthropology (1987)
- Currently Professor of the Sciences of Applied Languages in Social Sciences, Université de Versailles/St-Quentin-en-Yvelines (since 1996)
- Formerly Professor of Sociology of Culture, Paris 5 (1989-1996) and Assistant Professor in Linguistics, Université de Tours (1980-1989)
- Director of a forecast group "Temps libres et dynamiques spatiales" at the Datar (1999-2002) presided by Professor Jean Viard
- Expert on the scientific committee of the Office National du Tourisme
- Author of numerous articles and scientific works
- Main Works Published on the Theme of Tourism :

Urbain, J.-D. (2002). Paradis verts, désirs de campagne et passions résidentielles. Paris : Payot, 392 pages.

Urbain, J.-D. (2002). Les vacances. Le Cavalier Bleu, Collection : idées reçues, 118 pages.

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