Ethics and Tourism: In dialogue with Dean MacCannell

Ética y turismo: un diálogo con Dean MacCannell

JOSÉ L. LÓPEZ-GONZÁLEZ[*]
UNIVERSITAT JAUME I

For several decades, tourism has mainly been identified as an activity that helps people escape their everyday routines, contributes to understanding between cultures, and promotes economic wellbeing. These assumptions have been questioned in both the public sphere and academic research, however. In this context, tourism research is increasingly drawing on ethical frameworks to support its criticism of tourism. Some of the most outstanding research on this issue is by Dean MacCannell, Emeritus Professor at the University of California at Davis and author of one of the seminal works of the social theory of tourism: *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976). In *The Tourist* and his other well-known book *Empty Meeting Grounds* (1992), MacCannell argues that in secular society tourism takes on some of the roles and functions that were the province of religion in traditional societies, pointing out that the instrumentalities of commercial tourism are not always satisfactory for tourists, and that tourism has ethical implications. MacCannell examines the moral and ethical aspects of tourism in all his writing, but they are the focal point of his book *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (2011), in which he identifies the tourists'

responsibility to mediate between their understanding of their own plea-
sure and the ethical repercussions of the late modern imperative, "Enjoy!".
During the Touriscape congress in Malaga, Spain, in February 2018, Mac-
Cannell talked about ethics and tourism with José Luis López, who prepa-
red this interview for Recerca.

José Luis López: Academics have usually explored tourism ethics through
pre-existing general frameworks such as marketing ethics, consumer
ethics, ecological ethics, business ethics, and so on, as they might apply
to tourism. The use of this disparate set of approaches sometimes seems
to ignore the epistemological entanglement deriving from the difficulty
of defining what tourism is. Against this background, you place the ethi-
cal focus of tourism on sightseeing because you believe it to be one of
the keys, or privileged activities, at the heart of the tourist experience.
This is how you move away from commercial ideas about tourism and
focus on one of its core foundations. Do you think that the role of ethics
in guiding sightseeing practice as you describe is more valid than the
earlier more general frameworks like consumer ethics as applied to
tourism?

Dean MacCannell: It is true that I have written and continue to believe
that in secular society, tourism takes over many of the functions for-
merly performed by organized religions. My main argument is that the
symbolic values clustered around each attraction in the global system
of attractions (large and small) are more universal than those enshrined
in any of the classic systems of religious beliefs. But what about morali-
ty and ethics? Organized religion has been the main source of these for
the vast majority of people. Can tourism with its wider non-tribal appeal
also be a source of ethical principles?
A fundamental ethical question that goes all the way back to Aristotle is:
Can humankind enjoy being good? It sounds simple but it is very pro-
found. It goes to the heart of who we are. Tourism is said to bring more
understanding, generosity, kindness, etc. into the world. If this is actually
true it would seem to provide a positive answer to Aristotle's question.
However, the travel industry has overplayed its enjoyment hand. Enjoy-
ment has shifted from simple human pleasure to an imperative "YOU MUST
ENJOY!". We can see this everywhere we turn, in travel industry hype, in
beer commercials, in popular entertainments. If you are not mindlessly
gyrating around with other beautiful young people, you are not a full-

fledged member of late modernity. The imperative "ENJOY!" has been pushed to the point of becoming sadistic. It is torture for us to keep trying to have as much fun as we are supposed to be having now. Yes, I argue that the late capitalist demand to enjoy, especially as expressed in its sub-sector of commercialized tourism, actually blocks tourist enjoyment and any good that might come from it.

If we can begin by setting aside all commercialization, tourism is not nearly so fragmented as it appears. Consider this. Tourism, considered globally, celebrates everyone's heritage. It does not elevate one people's heritage over the others. As such, it is in essence and in its totality, opposed to nationalisms, xenophobia, and racism. It is impossible to hold these views in the face of the global ensemble of attractions. Unless, of course, the tourist succumbs to the travel industry's seductive promise of isolation from all the world's cares in some all-inclusive cruise or resort where there are no demands on the guests beyond that they should relax and enjoy. Tourism in the thrall of late capitalism is pushing the tourist ever further away from any possible ethical concerns toward this sadistic demand, "ENJOY". Within my theoretical framework, the kind of tourism that involves lying on a beach doing nothing but getting drunk, dancing disco, and having sex is existentially, ethically, and in every other way, diametrically opposed to a trip to the Prado museum. I agree with your point that we must get closer to the essence of tourist desire, to "what tourism is exactly", to sort these matters out. That is what I have been trying to do in all my writing on the subject.

JL: *Let's go into detail on this issue of the relationship between tourist and attraction. In* The Ethics of Sightseeing *(2011) you outline the foundations on which a tourist ethics might be built based on your critique of another of the great theories of tourism, that of John Urry. You suggest that while Urry claims the gaze frees the tourist from determinism, it actually encloses the tourist in an even greater determinism. You argue that the desire of the tourist is founded on the matrix of attractions and this configures their visits and their experience without attending to any ethical consequences. To get away from that determinism you propose a second type of tourist gaze –Lacanian– in which tourists feel incapable of fully satisfying their desire for pleasure by simply leaving behind their everyday life, and that interpolates a certain responsibility. In this way, starting from a psychoanalytic standpoint, you open the door to a tourism ethics.*

Does your tourist deal with any justice issues from this ethics that has its origins in the problem of pleasure?

DM: Both Urry and Foucault before him foreclose an ethics of sightseeing by placing their exclusive emphasis on the *power* of the gaze. According to Foucault the invisible can never be anything but the future visible. Urry adapted this theory to tourism. According to Urry, tourists go out to see something beyond the orbits of their day-to-day existence –their "future visible"–. When they hear about something that tourists don't usually get to see, they go out of their way just to see it. Urry glosses his tourist compact as what they see is what they get; that is, the gaze is free, all powerful, and determinative.

Such tourists –and I believe there are such "powerful" tourists– may be completely self-satisfied, undivided by ethical doubt. These are the tourists favored by the tourism and travel industries. Their –literal– point of view is a unidirectional gaze along the lines of the "panoptic gaze" that Foucault developed in *Discipline and Punish*. Obviously a theoretical version of the gaze with this pedigree has side-stepped any concern for justice. It simply reinforces status hierarchies. When justice depends on nothing more than the benevolence and goodwill of the powerful it ceases to exist. Justice is replaced by flows of power.

I want to rescue the tourist from this determinism even, or especially, if he or she happens to be on the powerful end of a hierarchical relationship. But first I had to go through the thought of Foucault where he argues that somehow, within the fixed structural arrangements of society, the human subject remains free. In *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (2011) I question Foucault's assertion that the human subject can never be trapped in cause/effect relations because there are always alternative articulations between different discourses. Even if the number of discourses is high, and the number of alternative articulations is even higher, the universe of choice is determined. The Foucauldian subject may believe him- or herself to be free but he or she is not. Justice is absorbed into the application of power –discipline and punish. And ethics does not apply.

I took my concept of "the second gaze" from Jacques Lacan who did not posit a free and all powerful objectifying gaze. He argued, to the contrary, that it is the gazing subject who is caught, manipulated and captive in the field of vision. Following Lacan's logic, the tourist is called

upon to question his or her own desire. Suddenly, the tourist attraction is gazing back at you, the tourist. This is literally true when it is the colorful customs of exotic indigenous peoples who are the subject of the tourist gaze. They are watching the tourists as closely as the tourists are watching them. But it is equally true when the attraction is an inanimate object. The Statue of Liberty is looking down on the tourist and saying, in effect, "What exactly have you done lately to advance the cause of Liberty?" Or, possibly, "Who exactly do you think you are in the grand scheme of things? Or even in the brief history of democracy?" It is the attractions looking back at the tourists that I have called "the second gaze". Each and every response to the second gaze may be subject to the full range of ethical tests.

JL: *This seems to me to be the great contribution of your argument. You put tourists in a position from which they must respond ethically. However, tourists do not always rise to the ethical challenge that their position demands, and this may impact on human relationships in tourism. You point out that part of the deep appeal of tourism is the prospect of "crossing a line" into a different social and cultural order where the moral constraints imposed on tourists by their own society seem to lift off and they can experience some kind of primitive enjoyment and pleasure.*

DM: Yes, I certainly agree. The kind of touristic attitude presupposed by the Urry/Foucault theory of the gaze, and promoted by the industry, may be the historically dominant one. This is especially problematic when a tourist who is relieved from their everyday normative constraints –getting up and going to work on time, maintaining personal hygiene, etc.– comes to believe they are relieved from *all* normative constraint. Tourists have been known flagrantly to violate local norms regarding public nudity, to get high and out-of-control, have sex on the beach, become abusive and even violent with hospitality workers, urinate in the streets, etc. When tourists declare, in effect, that the norms of their society are the *only* ones that apply to them, and once they take leave of their society they are no longer beholden to *any* constraint, they disable themselves from entering into any new "normal" relationship. So, yes, there are certain aspects of the tourist-local interaction that can work against the formation of human relationships. And commercialized tourist support systems emphasize freedom from normative cons-

traints because they are not in the business of fostering human rela-
tions. They are in the business of maximizing profits. The two are in
conflict. When a bartender becomes close to a patron, he pours free
drinks.
But I will continue to hold out the prospect that no matter whether the
tourist responds to it or not, the ethical demand is still there, inherent
in the act. And every tourist is aware of this even if it only makes itself
felt as a small pang of guilt. "Is my presence here beneficial to this place,
to these people? Is the money I am spending sufficient to make up for
ways I am disrupting their lives?".

JL: *The guides for "good" tourist behavior seek to impact on intersubjec-*
tive relations between hosts and guests. What do you think about it?

DM: If by "intersubjectivity" you mean complete openness and transparen-
cy between two or more subjects, I don't think that is possible under
any normative or psychoanalytic regime. As human beings all we can do
is try to get closer to one another –or not– through our normatively
structured interactions. No one is completely privy even to their own
subjectivity, far less to another's. Every social norm simultaneously
blocks and facilitates human interaction that can lead us both toward
and away from intersubjective understanding. The norm that says we
should not share intimacies with strangers is exactly what allows our
interactions with strangers to progress to the point that intimacies may
be shared. It is the general impoverishment of norms governing the
host-guest or tourist-local interaction that makes close relationship for-
mation difficult. It is not the norms themselves.

If ethical tourism grows there will be a corresponding growth of social
norms that define the tourist-local situation. We are already witnessing
the deployment of more detailed consideration of rights and obligations
in tourist-local interactions. Local service providers are cautioned not to
cheat the tourists, and the tourists are cautioned not to objectify the
local people and treat them as mere instruments of tourist enjoyment,
there to be photographed and to serve. When and if these normative
imperatives begin to take hold there will be more opportunities for
closer tourist-local relationship formation.

JL: *Are the problematics of tourist and local interactions reflected in the distinction between tourist and traveler? It is been said that the traveler sometimes seeks out primitive cultures in order to experience acute differences. The tourist goes to more familiar settings to reduce cultural differences and increase the possibility of more meaningful interactions. The tourist is attracted to the other but only on the condition that the other is not profoundly different.*

DM: I think it is dangerous to try to second guess tourist motivation at a psychological level. It is true that differences in physical strength and wealth preclude access to some destinations for some people. But I don't think that strength or wealth determine whether a tourist experience is either meaningful or acutely different from the perspective of the tourist. And I know these differences do not determine tourist desire. The poor, old and infirm dream as much about adventuresome travel as the young and wealthy. An elderly tourist from Ghana visiting a plantation slave owner's home in the American South might find it more strange and deeply moving, more "different" than an upper class British mountaineer dining with Sherpas at a base camp on Everest. Who are we to say?

Destination achievement, checking off items on a bucket list claiming to be a traveler and not a tourist, are all attempts to establish hierarchies and status distinctions among tourists. So far I haven't found any analytical value in such distinctions. A much better question would be: Do the tourists put the differences they discover to any creative use? And, what is the good of a creative innovation that originated in an act of sightseeing?

JL: *Can we continue to discuss the relevance of human relationships to your work beyond sightseeing and the connection of tourists and attractions? You have written on urban changes, especially about processes of gentrification that have shifted local people out of their neighborhoods to prepare these areas for re-occupation by the new urban elites and make them more presentable to tourists. You claim that a society that wants to be called "human" cannot allow this process if it produces widespread homelessness, people who are not merely ejected from their homes but, for all practical purposes, from society itself. Now, 25 years later, it seems these processes are accelerating thanks to new economic models like home sharing. Do you*

think the post-political agenda of tourism studies has made it easy, difficult, or even impossible, for tourism to find a solution to these problems that it has a large part in creating?

DM: You point out interesting connections between late 20th-century homelessness and early 21st century Airbnb and other forms of home sharing. In *Empty Meeting Grounds* (1992) I wrote there is no way to find a single measure for "being out of place" that might be used to find common ground between the *tourist* and the *homeless*. Tourists are always eventually on their way home. A few don't make it but they always move on the assumption that they will. The homeless, by contrast, suffer from a double expulsion, first from their homes and second from theory. As such, I suggested that the homeless are the lost souls of late modernity.

Today, 25 years later, as your question implies, the rest of us, even those who have homes, are being pushed in the direction of the homeless. The invention of new ways of meeting tourist demands, Airbnb, etc., entice some who have homes to transform them into way-stations for cheap tourists. If I fell for such a scheme I would have to remove from my home everything of high personal value, all evidence that I undertake often messy research and writing in several rooms of my house, my wife's books and jewelry, and my single malt scotch, everything that makes it distinctively *my* home. Anyone who goes through this exercise of transforming their home into a generic space for transients is now in a state of exile, or limbo, somewhere between the tourist and the homeless.

I cannot accept the idea of the "post-political" in tourism research or elsewhere because it logically leads to the end of democracy. And nothing could be more political than that. Rather than being in a "post-political" phase we are witnessing the politicization of everything that is almost as deleterious. The current political focus on "identity politics" "and culture wars" conveniently shifts attention away from responsible administration of public affairs that is the hard work of democratic governance.

JL: *Let me ask you a last question. Tourism produces unwanted negative impacts and new forms of sustainable tourism seem not to be always a solution for it. You have pointed out the paradox underlying the growth of the "new moral tourism" that is driven by anxiety about the*

growth of tourism. Taking into account the forecasts of continuous future growth for tourism, some researchers and activists are looking for ways to slow it down or even stop it. In your opinion, does the tourist catharsis demanded by societies under the regime of late capitalism render the de-growth of tourism a chimera?

DM: Perhaps. If we go to a frontier of global tourism, we find eco tourists who want to experience pristine nature without disturbing pristine nature. They continue to come in increasing numbers supported by an infrastructure of suspended walkways and viewing platforms made of "natural" materials that they hope only disturbs pristine nature a "little bit". But as their numbers increase, satisfied that they are minimizing their presence and their impact, every little bit adds up. Eventually all of pristine nature may become a stage show, an entertaining variety review for tourists. The promoters of this kind of tourism try to convince the tourists they are doing nothing wrong, and maybe they are even doing something right: We use the proceeds to expand the protected area for future viewing. So long as the tourists believe they are being guided by positive moral principles, the underlying contradiction and its dialectic movement is unstoppable.

When examining the impact of tourism on a destination community or region it is not a simple matter of growth, no growth, or reverse growth. The people in every locality should make their own decisions about how much and *what kind* of tourism is appropriate for them. They should understand that local tourist economies take different forms with different trade-offs in terms of local life changes. When we place sightseeing, not commercial exchange, at the center of the question, tourism connects with basic human nature to want to share with respectful strangers the interesting aspects of one's current situation, cultural heritage, natural beauty of the region, sources of enjoyment, other –non-touristic– ways of making a living, etc. It is also basic human nature *not* to want to deal with hordes of drunken merry-makers complaining about the prices of everything, insulting local decorum, demeaning service workers, and strewing trash everywhere. So yes, the interjection of ethical considerations into the analysis of the problem is essential.

Unfortunately the business model of large segments of the heavily capitalized tourism and travel industry depends on profits from the latter beach revelry type of tourism –sun, sand and sex. These tourists can be packed by the thousands into cheap flights, warehoused in two-star

high-rise hotels, and fed at fast-food chains. Under ideal business conditions, the airline, hotels, and restaurants would be divisions of the same global corporation. For their part, the local people flip burgers, make beds, do the laundry, and clean up the mess.

This is economically and ethically a completely different kind of tourism from visitors who come on their own, with their friends and family, and in small group tours. These other kind of tourists stay in locally owned boutique hotels and eat in the same restaurants as the local residents. They may spend time at the beach but are mainly interested in museums, architecture, scenery, and the general local ambiance. Studies show that this type of tourist spends much more *per capita* per day than the sun, sand, and sex type so fewer of them are needed to make the same contribution to the local economy. And all the money they spend stays in town for a while, instead of being immediately siphoned off by a remote hedge fund.

The "tourist catharsis" that society needs may be ethically aligned with local community pride and integrated into local cultures and economies. But only if there is effective local resistance to corporate capture and exploitation of natural and cultural resources and heritage.

REFERENCES

MacCannell, Dean (1976). *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class.* New York: Schocken Books.
MacCannell, Dean (1992). *Empty meeting grounds.* London: Routledge.
MacCannell, Dean (2011). *The Ethics of Sightseeing.* Berkeley: University of California Press.