

Self-Seekers and Sight-Savers

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There are not many things we leave at home when we undertake a foreign expedition. We take not only our traveler's checks (I saw one countercultural type in New Delhi present an order for four thousand dollars!), our penchant for acquisition and our instamatic insights, but also our convenience consumerism. This is the form of modern tourism—a containerized, SEA FREIGHT sort of business, in which prepackaged and unpleasant surprises, such as currency changes, are smeared over with cosmetic preparations like Tip-Packs—"Take along your own small change in ten currencies."

Tourism has become an entirely predictable extension of hectic, humdrum life, with predigested extravaganzas and expatriates to assure us of the integrity of the hedonistic life we are seeking. Although there are as many psychologies of tourism as there are tourists, I will attempt to embrace them all by considering three types of judgments which a tourist is (a) most likely, (b) less likely and (c) most unlikely to make concerning those among whom he has visited.

The most common judgment is that of the tourist who returns from the "less-developed country" convinced that the condition of the inhabitants is "regrettable." What this signifies for different tourists is, however, quite varied. This conventional view contrasts our modernity with the lack of it and finds India, for example, deprived. It is thought that such a condition is certainly distasteful and, perhaps in some connected manner, depraved. Such poverty—and the consequent psychological prison of the poor—offends our well-modulated sense of propriety and our sentimental view of life as a purposive, hence virtuous, exercise. It exceeds the bounds of our good

sense and taste, especially because of destitution endured without revolution and of life maintained by instinct. Denied its compensation of consequence, our goodwill is reduced to a sensuous or sterile curiosity, to be dissipated among the ruins of Delhi and the wild animals. Khajuraho displaces our empathy for the poor, so that the pity we feel for the latter comes to rest at no great remove from the smirking seriousness with which we view the former. Deprivation seems to us to imply depravation, and we arrive home to support by proxy the elimination of the one and the suppression of the other by pacts, progress, population control and proselytization.

Our second, more hip but less frequent, exercise in pathetic, touristic sympathy is to associate ourselves with a cause—for example, to vilify the cultural myopia that led the British to rule in India. The result of that myopia is that the problems of India are now "Western" in origin. V.S. Naipaul, a non-native Indian, writes after a visit to the homeland: "The Raj was an extension of the English involvement with themselves rather than with the country they ruled. . . . It points not to the good or evil of British rule in India, but to its failure."

As an historical caricature I think this is true, and in a careful and qualified sense. Some modern critics of India, however, will assert as objective fact that the British ruined Indian culture, that Indian culture is itself harmonious and desirable and had a unity now rent asunder by modernity. Gilbert Etienne, for example, writes of the "spiritual heritage of habits and customs which are without affectation and know nothing of the vulgarity that is the ever increasing taint of modern civilization."

For the frazzled, dharmadubious Westerners, the peasantry of which Etienne speaks does exhibit such dignity and self-possession. But it seems that the rehabilitation of the peasant as an eminently decent sort of guy (an opinion with antecedents in the colonial tradition, particularly among the noncon-

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forming District Officers) is on par, for completeness, with the previous diminution of the peasant as a hopelessly lazy and feudal vestige. And neither is vulgarity the patent of the West. Rather, this perverse process called modernity, especially in its high culture of film, advertisement and commerce in general, gives greater currency to particularly Indian forms of vulgarity. Nor are the peasants quite innocent of it, despite their rural simplicity and our own complicated search for calm. The vulgarity of the fishwives in Orissa, for instance, is real enough, if not in the derogatory sense that is usually intended.

The third kind of judgment involved in this tourism derives from a view that makes us the curiosity, the objects upon which other views are projected, persons to be scorned. It is distinctly embarrassing to think that, on this score, locals of all political stripes might be fundamentally in agreement (especially nationalist radicals and traditional conservatives). It is a mode based not so much on what we think about India but on what we *supposedly* think, what we *must* think to be doing in India what, in fact, we do.

It is at the points of discontinuity—when a tire flats and no one stops to help, or when our women are pelted with water-bombs on old Delhi streets (the point being that *they* are not so sacrosanct)—that we catch glimpses of our misconception. Tourism is not just getting away from it all; it is also “giving ourselves away” in both senses of that phrase. We have been had: bought and sold. Were it not for all the trimmings and our own thoughts of self-escape, we could see ourselves for what we appear to be. No longer ugly Americans but beautiful prostitutes: madams and Johns!

In obverse ways tourism is like pimping. At its

most obvious it packages exotic, virgin and forbidden merchandise for the pleasure of the client and offers it (to be handled with care) in alluring, addictive and seductive form. The agents of this trade profit from us, always encouraging, exploiting the causes and conditions of the attraction, providing a proper ambience. But it is only half the story to admit that, as if we were visitors to a world zoo, we had so reduced the “sights to be seen” to this voyeuristic status. Instead we must ruefully come to admit that it is we who are the sights. Thinking to discover a new world, we discover we have been lured merely to tout and prostitute our own.

The prostitution effect is very simple. The tourist is a purveyor, in poor countries, of illicit standards of status, privilege, wealth and freedom. To ply this trade the tourist is the self-advertisement of fulfilled desire, whose mysteriousness augments attraction in proportion to display. Seemingly inexhaustible wealth and insatiable satisfaction create an army of the disdainfully employed, such as clerks, waiters, peddlers, hangers-on and guides, and lead to a host of flaccid imitations.

The irony of this profession is that there is no remuneration, only expense. The pleasure the tourist conveys he himself elicits in the pursuit of his own. His pleasure is in dreams—feeding others dreams by which he feeds his own. Both visitor and visited then grow to dislike substantial reality as the tourist counts the numbers of castles conquered in his postcards and the customs devastated by irony. Our package-dealers nourish our dependence and tawdry hopes by feeding us illusions. As with the most pathetic prostitutes, we tourists put our lifelong imaginations and desires and dreams up for bid to the most congenial romancer. In concentrating on the aspects of pleasure to be fulfilled, we enter into a compact of innocence, like the prostitute who convinces herself that she not only does the world a service but is not a prostitute at all.

Consider then, even at the most superficial level, the impressions we create, how we act, having gotten dressed up as tourists, in search for this glitter of escape. It is we who are stared at in our deshabbillé, who take certain liberties and advertise presumption, who advertise the charms of a “carefree, indulgent” life and entice others to join in the fun, uncaring of the cost to them. Who else so persistently believes in, and lives for, the next connection, for better terms, for an even better time, and who enlists all the past and all the carefree future in a seemingly natural law of pleasure and profligate expense? And then it is the tourist who parades this pleasure as virtue as if it had in some way been more hard-earned and encourages others to envy by example and by exhortation.

The tourist: Eating and sleeping, the agent has care of him. Lured by the exotic and visions of Eden,

he gets-away-from-it-all only to trade his virtue, even that of a defeated, tired, inauspicious or inexperienced American, for a gaudy promise—the nightclub glitter, the four o'clock setup, the razzmatazz; or, conversely, the guru's guile, the vegetarian high, the Himalayan cool. He has got away from it all only to have brought it all with him. If he emerges during the heat of day, he is armored with the insignia of the trade to protect and prevent the local population from realizing his shattered banality. The agent is dedicated to gauge how close he can parade his "clients" by the natives, to excite the latter to self-conscious admiration and gratify the former at having been seen, to be able to see and to touch but not be touched. Exuding a strange perfume of power and prosperity, and conscious of the curiosity, the tourist attends the local proceedings long enough to retire satiated for a time and not overexposed.

Insofar as the connection has been established, for the locals to measure their own needs (their wish to have, to make an offer), the tourist feels comfortable in the prerogative of this splendid processional. The tourist has been able to take, see and feel what most intimately concerns the local in a way that most easily renders back profit and satisfaction, and he is then able to credit what he has felt to his own ingenuity, to deposit it in the same account with which he started out. The tourist has gained so much and has lost nothing. . . .

But perhaps this tourism masks in fact a truly regal interest? an imperial posture? Is there really no benignity or philanthropy in this curiosity? The answer is that, compared to this tourism, no imperial presence, whether on postage stamps or on horseback in the square, was so crass a one-night stand. Sympathy for welfare, even with immunity provided by noblesse oblige, is not the pretense of those whose first loyalty is to professional self-gratification. It is the latter which leads to this imposture of concern, an imposture which lasts only until midday. Then benignity melts away in the midday sun, while the iron man on horseback basks, bareheaded, in the sun (until he is pulled down).

One might think, still, that such an analogy goes too far. After all, if the tourist is naive, isn't he merely conned by the poster-pimp? Such tourists will not be very useful tricksters. This, however, ignores the main point: The relations of the local society, in its perceptions of tourists, quite clearly reveal local opinion of what, in fact, they are. The advantage-taking, the convenient civility, the casual familiarity, the crass commercial quality of favor: these well-known themes exhibit more than the shady artistry of the con man. Rather they show

forth the dependent and fundamentally disreputable aspect of tourism in many societies.

The dependence is obvious. The disrepute, I believe, is a result of tourism's intrinsic nature, as not only voyeuristic and self-preoccupied but usually derogatory and patronizing—comparisons are always invidious—disruptive of the local values, alluring in its display, conspicuous in its consumption of leisure and, most particularly, stimulating social morale and increasing useful productivity, yet without fundamental results in maintaining them. The West is paid for the prostitution of its manner and form in the currency of imitated behaviors and vulgarisms. And all of this is nourishment to the prostitute.

This pleasure in illusion is hardly illegal: It is officially sanctioned and promoted by the World Bank and other such institutions of progress in the interest of cold cash and other trade-offs. In a basic sense, however, it is illicit, because of the violation of the social fabric, formed or still forming, which it so caustically alters, materially and mentally. At the very least it creates a reserve army of dilettantes, and it initiates uninhibited assaults on decent behavior in strange places. I fear the corruption of the economics of scale in tourism.

Yet in the interests of social morality many societies abroad, socialist like Tanzania as well as capitalist like Kenya, are now constructing larger or smaller zones of safeguard against tourism, isolating and ghettoizing its pernicious and even promiscuous effects. A sort of red-lighting. A kind of sanitizing. Like prostitution, tourism is going to be, is being, licensed to protect the public interest in certain respects. This is as it should be. It is not our illusions that render the tourism of modernity without redeeming social value. If in fact our dreams of peace and leisure, given life in tourism, could be more properly expressed in other ways, they would indeed be redeeming. What is destructive is that we convey and model behaviors in our tourism, by the very fact of it, that we could not countenance even in ourselves were we to enact them without self-illusion and escape.

Shall we therefore license tourists and give them periodic checkups? And shall we build more and more Hiltons of ill-repute by which to regulate the commerce of our patrons in foreign lands? It is ironic, but true, that the tourists are the last to know what their desire and their agents have made of them. And I think it is time we tourists stopped "trapping" ourselves in such unwonted array as these agents have in fact provided. They only exist because we desire to be marketed in such ways they render profitable to us. It is up to us tourists to halt the traffic in ourselves.