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Assessment 1:

The impact of tourism on local societies and their cultural heritage:

A critical review of the article from Lo, May-Chiun: The Impact of Natural Resources,
Cultural Heritage, and Special Events on Tourism Destination Competitiveness

Pia Unda-Koutnik (1809167)

For my assessment I chose an article out of the International Journal of Business and Society, as it is impossible to talk about tourism without having a look on the economic side(-effects), also as social anthropologist. What arouse my interest on this article was the idea of getting only the tourist point of view on the impact of natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events on tourism destination competitiveness, is it not the local community, which rises and falls with former mentioned impacts.

We are living in a fast world, where global movements and social and cultural exchanges are a daily routine, around the globe. Tourism as anthropological topic arouse in the 1970's and is since then a constant discourse in our discipline (even though the phenomenon 'tourism' existed already before the 1970's). It is explicit or implicit perceived as an incident, happening at a certain time and certain place, and therefor socially constructed (Gren, 2012:157). Important for the definition of the tourist, as individual, is the taken trip/tour, after which the tourist returns to his/her home or place of origin (Cohen, 1974:529). While on this trip, the person finds him-/herself as a social subject, living in his/her own social world (Gren, 2012:157), delimited in time and place, individually embedded in a certain context. In her work, Lo declares, that there are three elements, which are the most attractive for tourists: nature, culture and ethnics (Lo, 2017: 763). This is, of course a very rash, indiscriminate presumption, even for an economically oriented article. Talking about tourism, is talking about a change of a daily – routine, experiencing something new, unknown, etc., but that doesn't mean, that the tourist is automatically attracted to just three given notions. In the past, the most common reasons for travelling have been health, education and culture. Nowadays tourists can be categorised in numerous different types, always seeking pleasure, such as 'thermalists' (health), 'students'(education), 'pilgrims' (today more of an interaction from religious tourism and pleasure-tourism), 'old country visitors' (migrants or posterity of such), also 'conventioneers'

(aim is to be part of the tourist-program), ‘business-travellers’ (instrumental intentions), or ‘tourist-employees’ (work and travel) are sorts of tourists (Cohen 1974:541-543), each one of them with particular claims on their travel or vacation. Even if ‘nature’, ‘culture’, and ‘ethnics’ affect each trip, the question, in what way they are glossed over in travel brochures or other kinds of publicity material to make it especially attractive for guests of each category, while ‘real’ cultural-, natural-, or ethnical values of local societies are marginalised and forced out of the way, because they are unprofitable, still remain. It is an economical orientated attempt of a categorisation of tourists and their desire, but poorly reflected and should therefor not be accepted as professional conclusion in any kind of work – anthropological or not.

The tourism industry is one of the fastest growing movements of our time, due to industrialisation, new technologies and the organised classification of leisure time, and work time, especially in Western, industrial societies (e.g. Europe and the USA). Lo writes about the growing competition among rural tourism industries (in her example, at Sarawak River/City of Kuching), the decline of tourists to some destinations due to “[...] dissatisfaction toward the quality of services and products provided” (Lo, 2017:764), which leads to a growing destination competitiveness.

The tourist, visiting a foreign country to learn about their history, their culture and their heritage, to experience the local life. Conzález Tirados talks about the formation of a ‘*tourist hypermarket*’ i.e. through globalisation, where the whole point of traveling and visiting another country is to feel the ‘authenticity’ of it, next to gigantic constructions of luxury hotels, or theme parks:

“In short, what is local and familiar is either trying to survive or reinvent itself and blend into the global scene.” (Conzález Tirados, 2011:1592)

The claim for ‘authenticity’, when it comes to cultural heritage is well-known in our discipline. They usually go hand in hand in their characteristics, share the same dichotomy – dilemma, as on the one hand inherent in an (heritage-) object and therefore measurable, or subjective and culturally constructed. The idea of the measurable ‘authenticity’ of an object (UNESCO, Nara Document, etc.) is regarded as the product of particular regimes of validation and universality through authority and power of institutions (Jones, 2009:4). On the other hand, we have ‘authenticity’ as linked to social and physical dislocation (Jones, 2009:5) (i.e. industrialisation and urbanisation and the wish of affiliation, but also individual originality through

‘authenticity’), which leads to the point, that nowadays ‘authenticity’ often refers to originality or uniqueness *‘being authentic as individual or object’* through affection/emotion and association with place and history. This desire for emotional participation in other countries, then the homeland of the tourist, through ‘authentic heritage’ leads not only to mass-tourism movements, but also to commercialisation of the same ‘authentic heritage’ for profit.

Her study showed, that, in order to counteract those claims, it is advisable to conserve natural resources/natural heritage, to maintain the quality of the rural – tourism – products. She interprets the phenomena right in her work: “[...] people travel around the globe, just to see different types of heritage” (Lo, 2017:765). But shows a *westernised* point of view, of a tourist, coming from industrial countries to see a show of locals with their cultural, and natural heritage sites to pleasure the upper class, which is, as mentioned before, not the only tourist-case anymore. Furthermore, she refers to Özdemir (2011) and Lee, Lee, and Wick (2004), that organised events, special events, or holidays (also cultural heritage) are glad opportunities for tourists to experience ‘local cultures’, which, in my point of view, is once again a poorly chosen argumentation and no evidence at all, to truly find out about the tourist-local relation, or the role of any local community support. Clearly the working class in the tourist sector has great influence on organised events of the holiday celebrations, but usually there are two realities in that case: one artificially constructed (and probably exaggerated) holiday celebration for tourists, and one traditional celebration of the locals. Which one is more ‘authentic’ is questionable, but what I want to criticise about her statements of holiday celebrations – as experiencing the uniqueness of the local culture - is, that first, when it comes to tourism and holidays, all special, cultural events are only demonstrated as valid, if they bring profit, and second, that tourism is illustrated not only as (still) a privilege of industrial countries, but also thinking of rituals, cultural festivities and customs of a society, only as chance for profit and commercialising, not as spiritual, traditional performing of locals in honour of their heritage and believes.

Lo mentions, that the local communities are the sole and the most convenience human capital resource for rural tourism development (Lo, 2017:765), where in my opinion, the locals are getting transformed into objects and ‘means for the purpose’ in the machinery of industrial (mass-)tourism, disguised as eco- or nature-tourism.

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