
In this examination of international tourism to four “post-conflict” regions of Latin America—Chiapas (Mexico), Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru—Florence Babb elicits the notion of encounter in order to describe the interaction of different cultures and societies in the experience of tourism, without the assumption of any predetermined outcome. Thus, rather than use the travel industry’s hegemonic malignancy as a starting point, Babb’s idea of encounter functions much as Mary Louise Pratt’s ubiquitous “contact zone” does with respect to imperialism (Pratt 1992). In this case, it is intended to divest tourism of its long-standing verticality and to take account of the historically (and often economically) disadvantaged—those who are toured—in the process. This is where the “fashioning” of Babb’s title comes in. The sites under consideration have all undergone political transitions of varying degrees of violence, which in part explains their attraction to tourists either for forms of “political tourism” (Moynagh 2008) or “extreme pursuits” (Huggan 2009). In such destinations, which have yet to be spoiled by over-development, tourism has not only supplanted revolution but has also become a mechanism for the furthering of social transformation. One salient example concerns indigenous women in Mexico and the Andes, where—whether it be through the marketing of Zapatista dolls, the sale of chola Barbies, or their albeit still limited participation in home-stay visits—“we may find that what has been a social liability, being female and indigenous, has become in some cases a new form of cultural capital” (p. 153). While mindful of tourism’s well-documented ability to solidify relations of economic inequality in a global capitalist world, Babb points to the ways in which tourism can be used as a development strategy in postrevolutionary societies, where it can replace armed struggle to advance transformative agendas. As such, this study is congruent with other work emerging on tourism in Latin America, especially on Mexico (e.g. Berger & Grant Wood 2010), which illustrates how the industry can be more than a means of capitalist incorporation—one that is also capable of cultural affirmation (Saragoza 1998), or of constituting informal forms of political diplomacy (Berger 2006).
One of the strengths of *The Tourism Encounter* is undoubtedly its multisited approach, which allows both for a wide angle of vision on this complex topic and a number of illuminating comparisons of the four destinations. Babb records the apparent contradictions between Cuba’s longstanding revolutionary politics and culture and its offerings of luxury hotels and resorts to the moneyed international tourist, outlining the way tour operators play down the Cuban Revolution in their itineraries in favor of the island’s colonial heritage, beaches, and Hemingway haunts, perhaps because of competition with other Caribbean nations where tourism is associated with more mainstream leisure pursuits. Visitors to Nicaragua, meanwhile, often prove to be ignorant of its recent history of political revolution, which, despite the romantic images of Sandinista fighters emblazoned on tourist objects available there, also tends to be suppressed in “official” discourses, such as those of INTUR, for fear that it will act as an obstacle to developing tourism. On the other hand, Babb notes that well-circulated images of Che Guevara in Nicaragua “represent a safer, more remote…radicalism, and in other instances a deep longing at a time when Sandinista party politics are viewed as either ‘watered down’ or contaminated by a ‘pact’ between Sandinista and Liberal parties” (p. 62).

Such insights tend to be undermined, however, for this reader (whose home discipline is not anthropology), by the indeterminacy arising from Babb’s avowedly “eclectic” (p. 14) methods. Admitting readily to a “scant” use of quantitative data, she expresses a preference for qualitative findings, featuring narratives from her research, in an exercise in which ethnography is declared to be “at the heart of [the] work” (p. 14). The prevalence of her research narratives means that many parts of the book read like travel writing, for *The Tourism Encounter*, despite the putative objectivity of its title, is in large part Babb’s account of her own journey too. On one level, this is unsurprising, as the study is based on numerous visits she made to those countries (pp. 2-3), and travellers and anthropologists do indeed have much in common, not least their position as strangers translating (in) an exotic place to an audience back home. On another level, however, Babb appears to rely excessively on what seems like impressionistic evidence (for example, of a particular visit or tour experience) for her conclusions. This is a charge she anticipates in the book (p. 126) but does not altogether quell. Some passages have a decidedly unscientific or unrigorous air: the equivocalness of her Havana tour guide about the merits of tourism...
becomes redolent of a “deeper [governmental] ambivalence”; even in the book’s more assured third section, Babb’s analysis of the experience of two *jineteras* depends on frustratingly limited observation (“although I never observed [Ana] go off with anyone, if only because I did not stay out as late as she did. . . . Claudia was quite certain she was a *jinetera*” [p. 138], or again, “I left before I could learn more about where this was heading” [p. 139]). If one of the key differences between travel writing and ethnography is that the latter emphasizes the scientific over the anecdotal, this study does not always make a successful distinction, which is unfortunate in what is otherwise a timely volume.

Claire Lindsay
Department of Spanish and Latin American Studies, University College London
London WC1E6BT, U.K.
claire.lindsay@ucl.ac.uk

References