CHAPTER 7

Mass Tourism, or the Mob-in-the-Streets
Travels Abroad

Mrs Rittenhouse: ‘And now, my friends, before we start the musical programme, Captain Spaulding has kindly consented to tell us about his trip to Africa...’

Captain Spaulding: ‘My friends, I am going to tell you of that great, mysterious, wonderful continent known as Africa. Africa is God’s country and he can have it.’

An exchange between Margaret Dumont and Groucho Marx in the film Animal Crackers (1930), directed by Victor Heerman

This journey has only served to confirm this belief, that the division of America into unstable and illusory nations is a complete fiction. We are one single mestizo race with remarkable ethnographic similarities, from Mexico down to the Magellan Straits.

Ernesto Che Guevara (2004) after having travelled round Latin America on a motorcycle during the early 1950s

Introduction

The political and ideological themes emerging from the Grand Tour over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also inform travel writing produced during the first half of the twentieth, the era preceding mass tourism. During this period, therefore, upper class travellers find reassurance in far-away places where the kind of socio-economic hierarchy they favour – monarch, nobility, dependent followers of one sort or another – is still intact.1 When they praise the existence in these contexts of what they refer to as ‘natural’ man

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1 Writing at the start of the nineteenth century, William Stewart Rose was initially taken aback at the extent to which the ‘system [of inter-class] sociability is almost universal in Italy’. About this he observed (Rose, 1819: 41): ‘I recollect passing two days in the family of a gentleman who occupied the principal house in a small town in Tuscany, where, to my great astonishment, I perceived, on returning from an evening walk, the ominous preparations of lights and card-tables. Having asked the meaning of this, I was told that it was my host’s turn
(generally rural inhabitants who exhibit the appropriate level of deference), it is their own kind of social system that is being endorsed. The inference is that such hierarchy, itself ‘natural’, should not be tampered with by ‘alien’ developments linked to modernity.

This is particularly true of contributions to the literature about travel during the first half of the twentieth century, by – among others – Robert Byron, Evelyn Waugh, Wilfred Thesiger, Georgina Grahame, and E. Lucas Bridges. Their accounts – respectively of journeys undertaken in the Mediterranean area, in Africa and the Middle East, in Italy, and of residence in Tierra del Fuego – epitomize the golden age of foreign travel, and all are structured by the discourse advocating in the main the pastoral variant of the agrarian myth. On the one hand, therefore, they disapprove of modernity, urbanization, industrialization, and socialism. On the other, they approve of the ‘otherness’ of traditional indigenous identity based on enduring rural culture/customs/crafts, and more generally of small-scale peasant society engaged in subsistence-oriented economic activity.

Received wisdom is that there is a gulf between the way travel was written about in the first half of the twentieth century, before the onset of mass tourism, and travel writing in the second half, when mass tourism had become established.2 The end of colonialism, the global extension of industrial society and modernity, and the spread of economic development generated huge changes in both the subject and object of travel. Not only in the places and people visited, therefore, but also in the social composition of those who travelled, and in the amount, the way, the frequency and the duration of travel itself.

A result was that foreign travel became less exclusive, a transformation reflected in the discourse structuring this act. Travel ceased to be a process of discovering the cultural ‘otherness’ of rural inhabitants in a foreign context, and writing about this ceased to be a description and record of such

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1 to hold an assembly, solemnized in rotation at the houses of all the notables of the place. At this all were present, from the feudatario to the apothecary. In some instances, indeed, even common shopkeepers are admitted (and were so formerly) to these county conversazioni. Yet, on returning to the city, all have the good sense to fall back into their proper ranks. Shocked at the seeming dissolution of the ‘natural’ hierarchy, the writer is relieved to find that subsequently those concerned resume their usual place in the social order (‘have the good sense to fall back into their proper ranks’). Normality, as he perceives it, is once again in evidence.

2 This distinction is embodied in the lament (Amis, 1990: 325, 327) about a change in the ‘social conditions governing travel writing’ from the 1960s onwards, which in his opinion led to the ‘demise of the travel-book or the get-there-and-stay-there-book’.