Carribean of the East? Global Interconnections and the Southeast Asian Cruise Industry

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Introduction

In *Globalization and Culture*, John Tomlinson (1999) argues that the most fundamental characteristic of contemporary globalization is deterritorialization — the disembedding of social activity from immediate geographic location. Perhaps no industry constitutes a more extreme case of globalization in this sense than the cruise industry, due to its highly mobile nature and its unique liberation from traditional constraints of place.

The flip side of this disembedding of social relations is the forging of new types of global interconnections. Few ‘locations’ are as purely simulated as are cruise ships, with their postmodern style mixing of themes and motifs from around the world. Few worksites bring together workers from so many far-flung places, setting in motion new migratory patterns. Plus, the particularly footloose nature of capital in the industry has resulted in sudden shifts in ownership and control.

In this context, important new interconnections are being forged between Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. The two regions, of course, share many linkages that go back centuries. It was, after all, the spices from contemporary Indonesia — filtered by trade through India — that Columbus was looking for when he first set his eyes on islands that today are part of the Bahamas and the Caribbean. Subsequent colonial rule brought many Asian migrants, including a fair number from Southeast Asia, to the region. But never have the two regions been more closely linked than today.

Migrants from all over Southeast Asia now make up the largest single group of crew on most Caribbean cruise ships. Elements of Southeast Asian culture have become an integral part of the Caribbean cruise experience. With the takeover of the fourth largest Caribbean cruise operator by a Malaysian company in 2000, the Southeast Asian presence is now felt at the highest levels of the Caribbean cruise industry.

At the same time, the Caribbean has long provided a model of a successful cruise industry to tourism planners in Southeast Asia. Cruise tourism is generally regarded as the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry, increasing between eight and nine per cent annually over the past two
decades. While the Caribbean region accounts for about half of all cruises, market growth has been most spectacular in Southeast Asia. Both industry leaders and tourism officials have repeatedly expressed their goal of making the waters around Southeast Asia the ‘Caribbean of the East’. Thus, the Caribbean has come to be part of the conceptual horizon of Southeast Asian leaders, representing an experience to be emulated and, hopefully, someday surpassed.

I have suggested elsewhere (Wood, 2000) that cruise tourism represents a paradigmatic case of globalization at sea, both in the sense of a sea-based form of globalization, particularly unfettered by traditional constraints of space and time, and in the sense of a voyage of human societies into unchartered terrain, without a known destination. The cruise industry is uniquely deterritorialized in its freedom from place-bound political regulation in its ability to recruit a uniquely global labour force, and in its relative independence even from the usual constraints of touristic place. While these characteristics of the industry have facilitated its growth, they pose potential problems for regions, nations and peoples that the industry impacts.

There are three interrelated factors, in particular, that make this deterritorialization and relative independence from the traditional constraints of place possible: 1) the unique mobility of capital in the industry; 2) the flag of convenience system; and 3) the weakness of international regimes in regulating what goes on in both national and international waters. Let us examine each of these, briefly, in turn.

Cruise ships represent enormous capital investments. Cunard’s Queen Mary, which will be the largest cruise ship afloat (over three times the tonnage of the Titanic) when it debuts in 2003, is projected to cost $780 million. Unlike factories and most other industrial assets, however, these floating chunks of multinational capital can be repositioned to any part of the globe at any time, and are, by virtue of their mobility, outside any national jurisdiction most of the time. Constantly on the move, sometimes explicitly advertising their destination as ‘nowhere’, cruise ships symbolize global capital’s liberation from place-bound space and polities.

Quite apart from their physical mobility, the ‘fictional’ mobility made possible by international norms about incorporation and flags of convenience further disembled cruise ships from the normal rules and laws governing most industries. A number of the major cruise lines are incorporated in countries in which they hardly or never operate. Carnival is technically a Panamanian corporation while Royal Caribbean is a Liberian corporation. Star Cruises is incorporated in the Isle of Man, located in the Irish Sea, although it plans to relocate to Bermuda. Even more important is the flag of convenience system, under which 1) all ships must be registered with a nation state; and 2) the role of ensuring compliance with both national and international laws and regulations is primarily given to the flag of convenience state. Since providing flags of convenience to ships is