The Sociological Consequences of Tourism

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Tourism has become a significant economic force. So significant that stimulation of tourist industry is frequently seen as a solution to the economic problems of a country or region within a country. Despite its economic importance tourism has been neglected as an area of investigation by social scientists and has remained a matter for practical manipulation by Tourist bureaux, government departments, and airline advertising.

To practitioners the creation, or stimulation, of tourist industry is an “event”, something which is done and having been done remains as created, or “develops” or “progresses”, while retaining its original character. By distinguishing between “event” and “process” I wish to suggest that there are many actions which appear to the public as discrete entities. To the social scientist the same act appears as part of a sequence, or process. The significance of the distinction lies in the prediction of subsequent actions. A common instance in the U.S. is a minority group family moving into a neighborhood; this is seen by those involved as an “event” with certain immediate consequences. To the more sophisticated observer it is seen as part of a sequence of events with quite different consequences. In this paper it is suggested that the establishment of a tourist industry is only one event in a sequence. As the sequence develops the character of the industry changes, and in fact there are certain consequences in the development which override cultural differences and/or the intentions of those who put the series of events in motion.

The following discussion is restricted to the Pacific Islands and to the effects of tourism on the communities in which it becomes a viable industry.

The sources of my information include newspaper reports and government publications in Hawaii and New Zealand, together with personal observation

1 New Zealand is a good current example of a country attempting to bolster its economic position in this way. During the recent election, November 1963, the amount of money to be made from tourists was mentioned quite often in political addresses. Other Pacific areas, Samoa and Fiji for example, are beginning to think of such a possibility but have not yet begun to exploit it to the full.

2 My interest in the problem was originally stimulated by a period of field work in Hawaii in an isolated community where a tourist resort was established and its effects became
and interviews in both places. I have also had the opportunity to discuss the question with persons familiar with Tahiti, Fiji, and Samoa, particularly New Zealand government officials concerned with Island Territories. The following observations are therefore most pertinent to island economies without a long period of modern economic development and which are non-industrial. Each of the areas from which I have drawn information has been a single, or dual, crop economy producing for an overseas market. While the general significance of my comments is limited by my sources there is a class of literature ranging from Mark Twain to Agatha Christie, and from Ian Fleming to Time Magazine which seems to indicate that some of my observations have a more universal character than I have suggested.

In this paper I have been general and descriptive in hope of arousing interest in a surprisingly neglected topic.1 This approach leaves the question of theory in abeyance. In the remarks which follow it is evident that there are many problems which can be approached from a variety of theoretical positions, and I have preferred not to impose one orientation on such a general overview as this.

The position from which I begin, and which is implicit and not explicit in the paper, is that the tourist areas of the Pacific are essentially “underdeveloped”. In classing together as “underdeveloped” the countries I have named I run the risk of being both inaccurate and offensive. But as I indicate below I have in mind economies which are not and cannot be in the foreseeable future self-sustaining. In this context tourism is a new economic factor which creates a type of “cumulative causation” and ultimately a new economic base.2 These economic changes produce their own consequences in what might be called the “social” sphere. The distinction between “economic” and “social” factors is conventional rather than precise though it does suggest a useful differentiation. Hopefully it will be clear that there is no inevitability in the process: it can stop, change direction, or move on to an unanticipated outcome. This can occur through political decision, external influences or accident. Nor is the “economic change” the first cause; numerous factors lie behind this; matters of climate, geography, values, and even perhaps an element of luck.

I

Economies may be classified in a variety of ways. Among them by the types of activities which operate within them; at present we refer to these activities as apparent very quickly. (Forster, International Journal of Comparative Sociology Vol. III No. 2, Dec. 1962, p. 200: see also Forster, Journal of the Polynesian Society, Vol. 69, No. 2, p. 92, (June 1960)).

1 It is interesting that of the major publications on leisure not more than a brief note is given to tourists and tourism, e.g. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyerson, Mass Leisure, Free Press 1958; and Max Kaplan, Leisure in America, John Wiley & Sons, 1960. To my knowledge there has not been a study of a community influenced by this rather dramatic change.

2 For the elaboration of this view see Gunar Myrdal, Rich Lands and Poor, Harper & Bros, N.Y. 1957.