

Tourism as a Neo-colonial Phenomenon: Examining the Works of Pattullo & Mullings

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The Caribbean is a region deeply rooted in mass exploitation; it is commonly associated with single-crop agricultural production for North American and European markets (sugar, bananas, nutmeg etc). Despite its geographic and demographic diversity, Polly Pattullo suggests that its historical background (moulded by slavery, colonialism and the plantation) is reflected in its people: the indigenous (and now almost extinct) Amerindian, European colonizer, settler and adventurer, African slave, indentured East Indian, labouring Chinese and Portuguese, as well as the small-town merchant Arab and Jew (Pattullo, 5). In the mid-to-late 20th century, as territories particularly in the English speaking Caribbean became politically independent, there arose new industries and service sectors, one of the most important being tourism. While it may have then seemed a solution to the economic woes of many states, this essay will argue that this sector, in its very nature, has perpetuated the legacy of colonialism, so much so that it may be conceptualized as a ‘neo-colonial phenomenon.’

According to Gmelch, neo-colonialism takes power from the local and regional levels and concentrates it in the hands of foreign-owned companies. This relates to the topic under study in that the ‘economic freedom’ which was expected to have taken shape after independence did not in fact materialize. In other words, economic power did not simply fall into the hands of the majority of Caribbean people. Instead, what many scholars call “a new form of colonialism” took shape; this is regionally exemplified in industries such as tourism. Small scale tourism existed in the region up until the 1960s, though it was particularly geared towards “famous and rich Americans and Europeans” (Mullings, 99). Bryden states that “it was in the 1900s that a steady stream of travel journals, tourist guides and handbooks for the Caribbean began to emerge.” This is referred to in Aspinall’s Pocket Guide, published in 1907, from which he quotes:

Every year our beautiful and historic possession in the West Indies attracts an interesting number of visitors from England, who find in them a refuge from the rigour and fogs of winter. To our American cousins, these colonies have long been profitable hunting grounds for health and enjoyment. (Bryden, 99)

While the notion that tourism in the Caribbean emerged recently is false, Bryden claims that “it is certainly in the postwar period that it reached any significant size as an industry in most of the Commonwealth Caribbean” (Bryden, 99). The mid-twentieth century however saw the rise of modern, conventional tourism. This form of tourism can, to a large extent, be characterized by undifferentiated products, origin-packed holidays, spatially-concentrated planning of facilities, resorts and activities and the reliance upon developed markets such as the United States, Canada and Britain. (Duval, 10)

During the 1950s and 1960s, many transformations facilitated the development of mass tourism in the Caribbean. One was the introduction of the jet aircraft which made travel from wealthy markets such as North America and Europe much easier. It was also during this period that many British colonies began to move towards political independence, encouraging the need to take control of economic development (Duval, 10). A focus on tourism meant that some islands could break away from existing colonial dependency arrangements through other sectors; tourism during this period then was a means of diversifying and modernizing the economies of the Caribbean. The 1960s were described as ‘the booming years’ for tourism in the region. In fact, islands such as St. Vincent, Grenada, St. Lucia, Monsterrat, Antigua, the Bahamas as well as the Turks and Caicos, Cayman Islands and Virgin Islands had growth rates ranging from 10 to 24%. While tourism flourished in these islands, the management of the industry was largely in the hands of expatriates, especially large hotel proprietors. While small scale, locally owned businesses existed since the industry’s very inception, they were outnumbered by foreign owned businesses. Overall, the success of tourism could be seen in the stronger and larger economies of Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago (Duval, 11).

In the 1970s, tourism began to direct ‘a measure of respectability’ and Caribbean government involvement began to grow. Holder states that “in terms of the overall economic

contribution that tourism activities made in the Caribbean, approximately US\$1.7 billion was generated from foreign exchange as early as 1978” (Duval, 12). Tourism would continue to become a mainstay in most Caribbean islands over the next twenty years. In 2000, “despite the recognition of the volatility of tourism, especially in fragile Third World economies and cultures, the region had become even more dependent on tourism” (Pattullo, 8). Pattullo explains that “by the turn of the 21st century, all Caribbean territories were in the tourism business, (and) politicians had proclaimed it ‘the engine of growth’”. It became associated with power and prosperity and was referred to as “the tool which would carry Caribbean peoples into ‘development’ and ‘modernism’ and out of the periphery of the world“(Pattullo, 6).

Though the tourism industry has had positive effects on the Caribbean, the region has retained patterns reminiscent of its colonial past. This is demonstrated in the way in which (like other regions of the third world) a dependency on foreign investment, foreign aid and the export of raw agricultural products maintained the shape and character of these societies. Bell, who Duval quotes in an effort to analyze this pattern, states that “the political structure of the region and the introduction of ‘sensitive political psyches’...often conjured up suspicions of neo-colonialism as some economic ties to former colonial nations were not ‘cut off’ completely.” This he said was “especially felt through tourism, the hedonistic face of neo-colonialism” since most tourists were from affluent Western countries (Duval, 11). In other words, many Caribbean states, while no longer legally bound to mother countries, were unable to develop independently due to persisting economic disparities and linkages, even in sectors such as tourism.

Melanie K. Smith in her book *Issues in Cultural Tourism* attempts to wrestle with the question of whether or not tourism is a new form of imperialism. She argues that tourism is “dominated by Western developed nations, rendering host nations dependent and subservient to its needs” (Smith, 62). Therefore, tourism reinforces an unequal balance of power between the West and host nations, so that many locals, especially in poorer areas will never have the opportunity to leave their homelands and instead, are often condemned to lives of servitude in the tourism sector (Smith 62). It was recognized during the booming years of tourism that Caribbean governments could not afford to fund the sector, thus, “helping to make it all happen were the ‘men in suits’ – ranks of consultants,

diplomats, international tourist industry officials, lending agencies and development banks” (Pattullo, 6). The governments relied heavily on international bodies such as the World Bank which financed the building of large hotels in the 1970s. The United Nations also supported the emerging sector, and an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publication reported in 1967 that tourism was a ‘promising new resource for economic development.’ Following this, between 1986 and 1990 the third Lomé Convention, which Pattullo argues “enshrined Europe’s ‘special’ relationship with states in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific”, also recognized the ‘real importance of the tourism industry’ and gave a broad range of financial backing (Pattullo, 6). This ‘special relationship’ itself proved another way in which the region’s ties to former colonial rulers still continued economically and were not completely severed as Duval suggests.

The idea that tourism “made economic sense for both tiny under-productive islands as well as for larger, more diversified debt-laden economies such as Jamaica or the Dominican Republic” was supported by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These institutions supported Caribbean tourism: the IMF through its structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and the World Bank through financing studies and providing loans for environmental and technical assistance projects (Pattullo, 6). The reliance of Caribbean governments on trust agencies incurred a substantial debt, putting the region at the mercy of lenders. Thus many islands were forced to make great changes in their social and economic structures to suit their first world counterparts. Mullings in her article *Caribbean tourism: trouble in paradise?* suggests that since “the islands could not finance tourism projects without diverting resources away from the other sectors that were also being developed,” Caribbean governments would have to depend on foreign investment to build hotels and infrastructure. It was also established that in creating a tourist market, certain provisions would have to be put in place, such as linkages with foreign airlines and tour operators (Mullings, 100). During the 1960s and 1970s, many islands, in an effort to appeal to foreign investors, offered hotel incentives that reduced import duties as well as income taxes. Incentives like these often included provisions for the duty free importation of equipment and raw materials, income tax relief as well as hotel profits and dividends. While islands were successful in this regard, tourism nevertheless seemed to be a more profitable

prospect for foreign investors rather than for the islands which subsidized their ventures (Mullings, 100).

Mullings makes reference to the fact that foreign ownership levels were lower on larger islands, yet higher on smaller ones. By mid-1980s, the industry was largely dominated by multi-national corporations such as The Sheraton, The Hilton, and other large hotel companies. By the 1970s it became clear that only a small number of these hotel chains would create the kind of linkages which would generate local development. While these hotels contributed somewhat to the provision of local employment, much of it was in “labour intensive, relatively low paid jobs such as housekeeping and food preparation.” The earnings host governments received from these forms of employment was miniscule when compared to potential earnings lost with the repatriation of the wages by expatriate managerial staffs and high import bills acquired by hotels under ‘centralized purchasing systems.’ (Mullings, 100)

In his book *Ecotourism*, David A. Fennell (73) quotes a passage by Hills and Lundren which serves as a stark example of metropolitan dominance over developing countries in the Caribbean:

On arrival in a Caribbean island between plane and hotel, the tourists could well have passed through a terminal building presented by the people of Canada and have been driven along a road either built or improved “thanks” to Canadian aid, on behalf of the Canadian tourists of course. At the hotel you will likely be greeted with rum punches, the first of the few local products to be encompassed by the package. At your first meal, a menu perhaps designed in Toronto, Chicago or Miami will provide you with a selection of food imported for the greater part from North America-good familiar, homogenized, taste-free food, dressed up with a touch of local colour.

This quote, in its somewhat sarcastic tone, speaks to the idea of the Caribbean as grounds for a warmer, perhaps ‘not so North-American, North American vacation.’ In other words, elements of local culture are lost as a result of heavy foreign influences in the tourism sector, so much so, that tourist vacations become nothing but a little, more ‘colourful’, version of home. The all-inclusive hotel, described as the solution to tourists’ fears of crime and harassment, also seems to stifle local development. Mullings in her article suggests that “Because all expenses are pre-

paid, few tourists in these packed holidays ever venture outside of the hotel complexes to directly purchase goods and services from locals in the surrounding communities.” In fact, tourists are reminded that tips are unnecessary “therefore closing-off even this opportunity for money to leak into the local community” (108). This ‘cash free vacation’ then has resulted in a growing concentration of foreign earnings in the hands of a few (usually foreign) hoteliers as well as the decline in opportunities for local service providers (indirectly involved in tourism) to export their services. This has, in essence, disadvantaged local taxi drivers, craftsmen, vendors and even farmers for whom tourism was once a means of securing their livelihood (Mullings, 108). Now, the hotel provides many of these goods and services as a part of a pre-packaged deal.

Moreover, Pattullo states that the primary institutions of the tourism industry such as airlines, tour operators, travel agents and hoteliers are largely owned, controlled and managed outside of the region: “Sometimes, through vertical integration, they are corporately linked, controlling every ounce of the tourist’s holiday.” (21) This very arrangement relates directly to the economic past of the Caribbean, in which western ‘parent’ countries externally controlled their affairs. In his book *Behind the smile: The working lives of Caribbean tourism*, George Gmelch suggests that tourism “reawakens memories of the colonial past and so perpetuates resentments and antagonisms.” In the 1970s, many intellectuals criticized foreign influence in the Caribbean as “demeaning and a re-colonization by other means” (35). Authors such as Polly Pattullo believe that from its very beginnings, there were echoes of the system of slavery in the dynamics of the tourist industry which was met by the “the languid behaviour of black hotel employees [evoking] the passive resistance practiced in slavery.” (64)

Pattullo proposes that many of the tourism industry’s issues are rooted in slavery and colonialism through “this folk memory lingering in the shadow of every encounter: that black people have served white people for hundreds of years and that before they did it for wages, they did it under servitude.” An example she gives speaks directly to the case of Jamaica where the best jobs in Jamaican hotels had been reserved for white Americans, leaving blacks with only menial jobs. She states unabashedly: “The predominantly white American tourists brought their own racist attitudes and behaviour on holiday with them, and Jamaicans often found themselves unwelcome on the beach or in hotels, treated as dehumanized

curiosities and exotic objects in the tourist literature.” In other words, tourism began to marginalize Caribbean peoples in their own homelands. (Pattullo, 64)

In countries such as Barbados where a majority of the locals are black and most tourists are white, Gmelch identifies that dynamics of race influence many interactions between them, in that, “racism or expectations of it based on the country’s colonial history sometimes complicates interactions.” A case he uses as an example refers to black workers in managerial positions in the industry. He describes a scenario in which:

an unhappy guest went to the front desk to lodge a complaint. The hotel manager, a black man, just happened to be at the desk when the visitor approached, loudly demanding to see the manager. The manager said “Yes, that’s me.” The visitor refused to believe that a black man could be the manager of a luxury hotel and when he repeated that he was the manager, the visitor left in a huff. (Gmelch, 27)

He also refers to a case where an American tourist walked directly up to two hotel barmen and asked “How do you guys feel about waiting on white people? Does it bother you? (Ibid.) An Antiguan staff member at a restaurant, in a letter to a local newspaper, wrote about poor working conditions, asking “How are we to work right through the day from 7am until 3:30pm with only one meal on an empty stomach; ARE WE SLAVES?” (Pattullo, 64)

It must be noted that connections with slavery, similar to the above notions, are still made in the workplace today, particularly as it relates to matters of servitude. In the 1990s, Professor of History at the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill, Hilary Beckles, analyzed the relationship between the white business elite, the state, and the citizenry at large. He claimed that tourism was the “new plantocracy”, and added, “The new financial tourism base means that the state has become the overseer”. He goes on to say that “[t]he feeling is that black people are more marginalized now, that there is a return to colonialism. Because whites own all the land, commerce, and all have major duty free outlets and now the sea ports - the same group is in control. In tourism, blacks have no status in decision making”. (Patullo, 65)

Prominent Jamaican writer, Olive Senior, draws a close comparison between colonialism and tourism in her poem, "Meditation on Yellow." In doing this, Senior divides the poem into two parts; the first addressing colonialism in relation to the groups of peoples brought to the region for plantation work and in the second, conveying the perpetual exploitation of locals in the face of neo-colonial tourism. The very rhythm of the poem captures the labour intensive nature of local work while maintaining the repetition of servitude to a 'new group of people' in a very familiar way:

At some hotel
overlooking the sea
you can take tea
at three in the afternoon
served by me
skin burnt black as toast
(for which management apologizes)
but I've been travelling long
cross the sea in the sun-hot
I've been slaving in the cane rows
for your sugar
I've been ripening coffee beans
for your morning break
I've been dallying on the docks
loading your bananas
I've been toiling in orange groves
for your marmalade
I've been peeling ginger
for your relish
I've been chopping cocoa pods
for your chocolate bars
I've been mining aluminum
for your foil. (14)

With the use of the pronoun 'I', Senior speaks *collectively* of the freedom that was expected with the Caribbean's independence from formal colonialism. Instead of its realization however, there has been a replacement of a new form of colonization, in part through the tourist industry. She continues:

And just when I thought
I could rest
pour my own
– something soothing
like fever-grass and lemon –
cut my ten
in the kitchen
take five
a new set of people
arrive
to lie bare-assed in the sun
wanting gold on their bodies
cane-rows in their hair
with beads – even bells (14-15).

While tourism has become one of the most significant contributors to the Gross Domestic Product of most Caribbean countries, it must be deduced that this industry has retained its roots in the colonial past. This is directly attributable to the nature of the region's relationship with metropolitan states, which remains glaringly unequal.

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