

Dark tourism from the viewpoint of cultural geography – Jozef Lopuch

As you can see from the name of the topic, I find it needful to explain more terms “dark tourism” and “cultural geography” and also why I chose them. Dark tourism, according to mostly used definition, means act of travel to places that are associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre (Sharpley, Stone, 2009). By other words, it is travelling to places, where some tragedy happened or the place is somehow associated with that tragedy. It is still relatively new form of tourism, despite the term being used for the first time by Lennon and Foley in 1996. Its popularity is still rising, what can be interpreted in two ways. First is that more people are visiting dark tourism places or sites, what can be seen worldwide (e. g. Ground Zero, Auschwitz, Chernobyl) or in the Czech Republic (e. g. Terezín, Kutná Hora ossuary). The second one is medial popularity, what means growing number of articles – scientific and also popular and also blogs or websites that are related to this topic. But beside growing popularity, there are still many unexplored or just slightly explored places on the field of dark tourism. That was the main reason why I chose dark tourism for my dissertation thesis. Another reason is that my previous thesis – bachelor and master – were focused also on dark tourism.

On this place I would like to explain why I chose cultural geography. According to Cosgrove (1994), human geography focuses “upon the patterns and interactions of human culture, both material and non-material, in relation to the natural environment and the human organization of space”. Additionally cultural geography focuses from the 80s more on non-material culture, e. g. media or construction of identity. Also nowadays, non-representational cultural geography focus on practices and experiences of people. To explain more, I would use what I read in Understanding cultural geography by Jon Anderson (2010). This author shows how there is not just material landscape, but there are layers or traces in space that are constructed by the peoples activity (in other words culture) that creates and (re)interprets different meanings or symbolism. As an example Trafalgar square was used. There is statue of Nelson which can be seen as a symbol of British Empire, but others can see the same square with same look as symbol of protest, as there were lot of demonstrations and protests happening in last 25 years. So there are those layers or traces constructed by material look of place but also by human activity. And I can see same in dark tourism. There are sites and places where is the layer or traces of dark past, that forms how the place or site is perceived.

It is hard to explain what is known and what we need to know because there are many definitions in dark tourism. Sometimes are even used other terms than dark tourism, e.g. thanatourism. Another problem is that there are multiple viewpoints on this topic, but usually they are more economic – they are focused on supply and demand. Some authors also gave us a look on typologies of these sites or they have worked on concept of dark tourism spectrum. But there is still place to look at the topic from different angle. As I am thinking about it, there are not so many geographers focused on this topic. Also the articles about dark tourism are in many cases focused on some small part of it without broader context, e. g. motivation of tourists. That is understandable, but I think dark tourism should be explained more as a process. I mean it that tragic event gives some “meaning” to some place, which makes it a dark tourism site. This meaning can change or it can also disappear.

And therefore I am proceeding to aim of my thesis. I want to take a look on dark tourism as a process, how tourism site is “constructed” and how these places affect people. If we say that dark tourism is when some tragedy happens and people start to visit the place, in my opinion that is oversimplified. Firstly, it is not after every tragic event. There can be seen big role of media, which tells the “story” of place. According to that story people looks on the place. Secondly, as I mentioned, that story or meaning of place can change or maybe it can disappear. And there are more things to

explain or to study. There are moral questions that are attached to dark tourism places – how people can/should behave at these places – e. g. is it ok to take a selfie there? Maybe even if it is good to let people visit these places. So there are lot of question, so I have still just aim of dissertation thesis, not some concrete research questions. In the end I want to add, that I want to use more qualitative analysis in my research and to use mainly semi structured interviews.

So that is how I see my dissertation thesis now. I want to proceed to formulating research questions, but now I am more focused on some articles connected to the topic. And on reading more and more about dark tourism, because I have discovered some new sources, e.g. ATLAS dark tourism research interest group, who organized conference about dark tourism last year. So that, I think, could really help me to understand more what is going on in dark tourism research nowadays.

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