

Ivan Chorvát: Travelling and Tourism in the Mirror of Time

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Any new book by a Slovak sociologist is a big event. Finally! Once again, sighting a new book cover, we breathe a sigh of relief and console each other that Slovak sociology is still alive. However, Slovak sociological production is well characterised by Allen's aphorism about "fifteen minutes of fame". The initial euphoria swiftly shifts into another unfulfilled hope which is soon after replaced by a fall into eternal oblivion. Extraction from the realm of general oblivion happens only when we need to extend the reference list in our own paper. I worry that the book by Ivan Chorvát *Travelling and tourism in the mirror of time* can suffer a similar fate. In part, my concern may be justified; in part, not so. Let's begin with the bright side. Above all, the book is a final outcome of the VEGA project. Such a practice ought to be taken for granted. However, it is rather an exception in Slovak sociology. At the same time, I. Chorvát goes against the current trend characterised by a focus on applied research, which, we sociologists should recall, is more or less influenced by the client's demands. In contrast, Chorvát centred his writing on sociological theory, for which we are certainly grateful.

Chorvát has been writing on tourism for a long time and has published several articles related to this topic. In contrast to his previous articles, this book deals with the meaning of tourism not within the current society but from a historical perspective. He reviews the "starting points and development of organised tourism." (p. 8) In the introduction, the author reminds us of the fact that the sociology of tourism has not attracted much attention in Slovakia so far and rightly elevates the value of his monograph. In the next five chapters, he provides an overview of the historical development and meaning of tourism from ancient history to the communist era in the second half of the 20th century. He directs his description mainly towards the beginnings of modern tourism in Great Britain (19th century) and in Slovakia (the beginning of the 20th century). Chorvát analyses modern tourism's philosophical foundations (the influence of romanticism on the perception of nature) and social causes (the growth of spa treatment and the emergence of organised tourism, as well as the institutionalisation of free-time activities and of paid vacation). The fourth chapter, depicting the genesis of modern tourism and tourist traffic in Slovakia, will certainly be of the greatest interest for a Slovak reader. The commencement of modern tourism in Slovakia is linked to the construction of tourist resorts in the High Tatras. The author furnishes the chapter with many interesting comments and detailed historical data on, for instance, the development of mountain climbing in the Tatras, the offers of the Čedok travel agency, or the controversy surrounding new constructions in tourist resorts. This kind of historical data, especially about the controversial new constructions, can be very relevant even for interpreting today's debates about the further expansion of tourist traffic in the High Tatras.

On the other hand, there are many reasons, after the first skim though, for filing this book away again. In my opinion, the book's main shortcoming is a lack of coherence, which stems from an attempt to cram as many issues as possible on as little space as possible. The author could not do otherwise than briefly and superficially touch on the issues discussed there. The book is the most plausible where it provides the most details (as in the part on the evolution of tourism in Slovakia). In contrast, some other chapters give the impression that the author only reproduces the main arguments of other scholars without explaining or interpreting them. At the same time, he too often uses typical sociological clichés, such as "to embed the issue in a wider historical and cultural framework" which enhances the impression of schematic writing which is not built on sound arguments. Moreover, there are also some inaccuracies in his study. I will point out two of them. Already in the introduction, the remark on the insignificance of sociology of tourism in world's sociology is rather questionable. And even more disputable is the way the author intermingles scholars who deal with the phenomenon of tourism itself with scholars who work with the sociological concepts of stranger and nomad in present society, namely Bauman and Maffesoli. Bauman's and Maffesoli's theories and the sociology of tourism, which Chorvát draws from and works with, analyse quite distinct phenomena. If the author thinks otherwise, he should have supported his position with persuasive arguments. The other inaccuracy is related to the translation of the English word "sightseeing". "Sight" in this compound noun does not refer to a kind of "gaze" but to a kind of historic building or site that is worth seeing. For the modern traveller, not only is the present important, i.e. "observation of the surrounding through her/his own sight" (p. 50) but also the past, i.e. remembering memorable events and artefacts gathered from her/his travels. After all, it is the author himself who states that travels multiply the collection of "what one has already seen" and that the desire to collect aesthetic and emotional experiences through sightseeing has become the prime reason for travelling (p. 51). According to Chorvát, the emphasis on the visual aspect of travelling is related to the shift in the perception of nature, influenced by romanticism of the 19th century. However, romanticism is hardly associated with the development of the modern tourism itself. Just the opposite. The emergence of organized tourism and the growing affordability of travelling for the new upper middle class (bourgeoisie) has meant to the old aristocracy (for whom travelling represented one of the means to demonstrate their social status) the loss of authenticity and the "romantic" character, formerly associated with travelling. Hence the often used traveller vs. tourist dichotomy, emphasizing the distinction between the "authentic cultural travelling", connected with discoveries and getting to know places, and

commercial tourism, based on the “mere” consumption of the free time through organized package tours. However, Chorvát does not discuss the impact of the democratization of travelling and he concludes the subchapter about the traveller / tourist dichotomy by a generalized recap: “The emergence of large-scale vacations at coastal England’s resorts can be interpreted as a consequence of the industrial revolution and its main processes, industrialization and urbanization. Since the beginning of the 19th century, tourism has become a regular, formalised and institutionalised way of escaping the tension, troubles and stress of the modern industrial society.” (p. 73) This quote aptly illustrates how the author tries to hide behind classic hackneyed sociological phrases that obscure more than they clarify. One might ask, for instance, which social group the author is talking about. It cannot be the proletariat as the institute of a paid vacation for employees has been introduced only in the 1920s (p. 75). On the other hand, that the bourgeoisie perceived tourism as a way to flee from the stress of the modern industrial society seems an unlikely claim.

Chorvát’s book leaves more questions than answers. Those questions, however, are not prompted by the author’s attempt to make a reader think but are the result of an insufficient argumentation and laconic phrases. The genre of the book is somewhere at the borderline between a historical and sociological paper but, in fact, is neither one of them. In order to become a historical study it would have to encompass much more historical data. To become a truly sociological study, it would have to provide a deeper analysis of the social phenomena related to the evolution of modern tourism. This weakness is also connected with how the author works with the literature he uses. The author does not discuss and interpret the claims of other scholars, he merely reproduces them. However, this problem relates to Slovak sociology in general. It begins with sociological education at the university. If the students are not lead towards a polemic and argumentative style of writing and if the teachers do not give up their alleged impartial stance which hinders them from openly advocating a sociological paradigm, then Slovak sociological papers will remain at the level of “parroting” of other scholars’ thoughts. In this current situation, however, we can jeopardise sociology’s mission, which is to question well-established beliefs and stereotypes, and turn it into a rigid, conformist science.

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