

TOURISM AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE CZECH VILLAGES OF THE ROMANIAN BANAT

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Abstract

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In the 1820s, several thousand Czechs moved to the Carpathian Mountains region near the Danube river. They founded six villages. Strict ethnic endogamy helped preserve their cultural distinction. Nowadays these villages are visited by tourists from the Czech Republic. Visits are motivated by the search for both "traditional" rural landscape and lifestyle. The paper analyses the ways of how tourists perceive the rural landscape and lifestyle, how their perceptions vary and how they influence their behaviour. It is assumed that there is a sentiment for traditional, pre-modern world. This sentiment is used for tourism promotion there. Therefore the "harmonic cultural landscape" does not only have ecological and cultural value, but its image becomes a commodity in the tourism industry.

Key words

tourism, authenticity, Banat, myth, landscape character

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1. Introduction

In the course of the 1820s, several hundred Czechs moved to the mountains of the Banat Carpathians as part of the colonization of the sparsely settled borderlands of the Habsburg Monarchy. More than one thousand Czech compatriots still live in six secluded Czech villages in the territory of today's Romania – Svatá Helena, Gernik, Rovensko, Bígr, Šumice and Eibentál. Strict ethnic endogamy (intermarriage of members of one ethnicity) went hand in hand with the preservation of cultural differences. To date, the Czech minority here has preserved its cultural uniqueness – language, religion, traditions and farming methods, which are reflected in the striking appearance of the surrounding landscape (Klvač 2003).

With the relaxation of the political system after 1989, the Czech villages in Romania became a favorite destination for trip-makers from the Czech Republic. Full travel agency buses, small groups and independent tourists have become part of daily life here over the past 20 years. It is no wonder; “*a true journey back in time*” to “*Czech history*” is a tempting morsel.

2. Methodology

Our research is based on participant observation during study stays at the six Czech villages in Romania (Svatá Helena, Gernik, Rovensko, Bígr, Šumice and Eibentál), interviews with visitors and local residents, and the analysis of documents related to tourism there. Our theoretical base was the *concept of authenticity*, as it has been developed by contemporary social science. The research is focused on the question in what way the visitors from Czechia perceive the local landscape, the village and the residents, and what they actually value about their visit.

3. Tourism and Authenticity

Several sociological and anthropological theories of tourism state that one of the most important reasons for travelling is the fact that exotic and traditional culture may represent an image of our past for us (Valentová 2003, 57). This past is often perceived to be *authentic*, unspoiled by the modern era; in short, a *golden age* (Budil 1995, 28-30), from which our civilization is growing further and further apart. The view of people from traditional cultures as *noble savages*, who live close to nature and the roots of our civilization, from whom we have greatly grown apart, has been around since Rousseau's time. Romanticism as well as anthropology helped strengthen this view (Valentová 2003, 56).

In the social sciences (sociology and anthropology), the concept of authenticity was at first considered to be the basic essence of traditional cultures (Valentová 2001, 107), e.g. something rather static and invariable that is either still present in the studied culture, or no longer exists. If traditional culture meets tourism, then its authenticity is threatened according to this view. It is gradually transformed into a saleable commodity and in the end it is completely anaesthetized – Greenwood's negativist theory. Or, in a better case, this meeting can lead to strengthening of the feeling of belonging to the group and to understanding the significance of maintaining authenticity – McKean's balance theory (see Valentová, 2001, 106).

Contemporary social sciences work with authenticity as a variable category, determined by the interaction between tourists and locals (Valentová 2001, 108).

The domestic culture takes on influences from tourists and their surroundings, and thus its identity is constantly changing. However, it is impossible to decide which stage of society is the original/ideal, the one to which we should relate, and therefore it is impossible to say which society still has that *essence of authenticity*, and which does not. Determining authenticity through interaction therefore arises as tourists choose what they want to see and the locals choose what they want to present from their culture.

Kevin Meethan, a critic of the rigid view of authenticity, refers to Erik Cohen's tourist typology (Meethan 2001, 93). Cohen divides tourists into several groups that differ on the level institutionalism, i.e. on the degree to which they let travel agencies or other third parties organize their vacation. The less institutionalized tourists are, the more they are interested in authenticity and the closer they want to get to the everyday lives of the local inhabitants (Burns 1999, 43).

This brings up the question in what sense can tourists find the "*authentic*" and "*traditional*". Before we attempt to answer this we must explain the notion of *authenticity* in terms of social sciences. In everyday life this term evokes an image of something traditional and original - for example a preserved rural farmstead, a traditional agricultural landscape or a way of farming passed down through generations. As opposed to landscape ecologists and historic preservationists, the social sciences work with the concept of authenticity in a different way. There is no interest in to what extent the given artifact or phenomenon is of historic origin, nor is there interest in its "*originality*". Instead, interest is put on what they represent for specific social actors, whether they are representatives of traditional culture or tourists, who either search for or create this specific quality (whether intentionally or unintentionally).

4. "Let's go" to the Banat

When advertising tourism in the Czech villages of the Romanian Banat, references to the "*authenticity*" of life there and the state of the landscape are apparent and often explicit. Potential visitors are enticed to take a "*journey to the time of our forefathers*". Advertising material is inflected with terms such as "*authenticity*", "*romance*", "*tradition*" and "*nature*" (see the website www.banat.cz) for example:

- "A romantic vacation – Do you like the smell of hay, the chirp of crickets and the Balkan sun? Then head off on a vacation to the Czech villages of the Romanian Banat. An authentic rural environment with home-cooked meals and striped sheets awaits you."
- "Tradition – our fellow countrymen have preserved the customs and traditions they brought with them from their home. Therefore in these villages you can speak Czech, housewives will offer you Czech pastries and schnitzels and in the evening you can relax with a quilt just like at grandmothers. During your stay you can help the farmer rake hay, cut and thresh grain, bake bread or use a stone gristmill."
- "Nature – Gentle, traditional agriculture has preserved the undisturbed landscape abundant with animals and rare plants, and with sights that are reminiscent of Josef Lada's paintings. An abundance of caves, karst streams and rock formations together with the well preserved folk architecture of the sheepfolds and villages create an unique environment for relaxation, recreational sports or family

recreation".

The visual part of the advertisement uses photography of the stylized rural idyll. There are pictures of aged country women wearing head scarves and carrying baskets, girls in traditional folk costumes, domestic animals (cows, horses, geese), farming equipment, painted mugs, hay stacks, flowering meadows, small religious buildings in the landscape, etc. All these attributes of traditional farming reflect and reproduce the generally shared stereotype of the "*tranquil harmonious countryside*", for which the modern urban mentality hungers (Brooks 2001). It is thus understandable that, for example, cars and satellite dishes, otherwise ordinary parts of everyday life for the local residents, do not have a place in these pictures.

The *genus loci* here ordinarily makes a strong impression on visitors from the Czech Republic, where respect for and admiration of *the cult of the countryside* has a firm place (compare Blažek 1998; Librová, 1987). Visitors staying with a compatriot's family can thus see, as well as take part in, ordinary, everyday tasks such as mucking out, using a horse-drawn plow, milking cows, grinding grain in old-fashioned mills, baking bread, or drying hay. This experience is evaluated as strong and emotionally positive by the visitors. At evening meetings in the local tavern (Magazin mixt), tourists staying with different families talk excitedly about their personal experience with farm work during the day and praise various types of the local "*home-cooked food*" consisting of "*local specialties*". Everything is considered as being "*similar to back home in the olden days*", or being like "*in my childhood*", or "*at granny's*". Visitors' attempts to find remnants of how people lived "*at home one hundred years ago*" are almost omnipresent. Smith (2003, 117-120) labels this type of travelling, where tourists get to know as intimately as possible the life of local inhabitants, "*indigenous cultural tourism*". Although he emphasizes that it is mostly an affair of exotic Asian and African destinations, it is clear that we can speak about the same in the Banat. Visitors, escaping from the routine of their lives at home, "find" and value "*comfort*", "*tranquillity*", "*true interpersonal relationships*", and the "*happy*" and "*unhurried*" life there, which is in contrast with their normal life style that has "*long ago lost*" these values and characteristics.

The evaluation of the landscape there is similar. Visitors as a rule judge it to be "*beautiful*", "*traditional*", "*original*", "*virginal*", "*untouched*", "*preserved*", "*harmonious*", etc. Attributes of the landscape here include small fields worked by peasants, unpaved carriage roads, meadows, balks, and other landscape elements which, in general, the landscape in the Czech Republic greatly lost as a result of collectivization.

Travel agencies and other subjects that promote tourism in the Banat are well aware of the attractiveness of the local landscape for modern people, and thus commoditize and sell the landscape there: they offer the landscape experience as part of the tour ("*visit*"), just like the "*striped sheets*", "*milking the cows*", "*moon-shine*" and "*rosehip jam*". This is a symbolic encapsulation of a complex of attributes that are attributed to the Czech villages in the Banat: authenticity, reality, and untaintedness. Tourists should "*experience*" these attributes, for example, through landscape perception. The images of landscapes with narrow swathes of fields, ploughed by a team of horses or grazed by a herd of goats, which draw tourists to the Banat, are still sought out when they are actually there. "Impressions are made from looks, sounds and smells – memorable experiences that are necessary to fix by a camera, experiences that are worth talking about at home, because they are so

different from experiences at home" (Bauman 1995, 51).

Everything that is reminiscent of home (i.e. the modern era) must thus be removed. In this sense, the attitudes towards the advances civilization is gradually making in these Czech villages are illustrative. In the spring 2008, these were above all the asphalt road to Svatá Helena and developers' intentions to build wind turbines above this village. Both construction projects were largely rejected by the visitors. From their point of view, the "*original harmonious landscape*" that they can admire there would suffer, referring to its authenticity and traditionalism. They assess the landscape as a part of the entire life style, which they consider to be worthy of admiration – it is harmonious and idyll, however (forever) lost to modern people. Wind turbines and asphalt roads (even though they can improve the material quality of life of the local residents) would thus destroy these images and stereotypes.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to present the uncertainty of terms such as "*authenticity*", "*originality*", and "*tradition*", which make up a large part of the image of the Czech villages in the Romanian Banat. The life of the local residents and the surrounding landscape are perceived in these terms by tourists/visitors and are reproduced by specific practices during their actual stay. Tourists, with ideas and stereotypes rooted in these cultural constructions, search out the life and landscape here as a symbol of the pre-modern sentiment that is rooted in the modern mentality. The *myth* (Barthes 2004) of the "*Czech Banat*" is thus created and reproduced through the selective perception of tourists, and the way they speak about their visit, which tells more about the culture the tourists in the Czech villages of Romania come from than that of the place itself.

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Summary

In the course of the 1820s several hundred Czechs moved to the mountains of the Banat Carpathians, Romania, as a part of the colonization of the sparsely settled borderlands of the Habsburg Monarchy. More than one thousand Czech compatriots still live in six secluded Czech villages there. Strict ethnic endogamy went hand in hand with the preservation of cultural differences. To date the Czech minority here has preserved its cultural uniqueness. After 1989 the Czech villages became a favorite destination for trip-makers from the Czech Republic. Full travel agency buses, small groups and independent tourists have become a part of daily life here over the past 20 years. Research was based on participant observation during study stays, interviews with visitors and local residents, and the analysis of documents related to tourism here. The theoretical base for us was the *concept of authenticity*, as it has been developed by contemporary social science. The research is focused on the way in which visitors from Czechia perceive the local landscape, the village and residents, and what they actually value about their visit.

Several sociological and anthropological theories of tourism state that one of the most important reasons for travelling is the fact that exotic and traditional cultural may represent an image of our past for us. This past is often perceived to be *authentic*, unspoiled by the modern era; in short it is a *golden age*, which our civilization is growing farther apart from. The concept of authenticity in the social sciences at first considered authenticity to be the basic essence of traditional cultures. If traditional culture meets tourism then according to this view its authenticity is threatened. It is gradually transformed into a saleable commodity and in the end is completely anaesthetized. Or if the case is better, this meeting can lead to a strengthening of the feeling of belonging to the group and to understanding the significance of maintaining authenticity. Contemporary social sciences work with authenticity as a variable category, determined by the interaction between tourists and locals. The domestic cultural takes on influences from tourists and from their surroundings, and thus its identity is constantly changing. This brings up the question in what sense can tourists find the "*authentic*" and "*traditional*". Before we attempt to answer this we must first explain what social science means by *authenticity*. In everyday life this term evokes an image of something traditional and original. As opposed to landscape ecologists and historical preservationists, the social sciences work with the concept of authenticity in a different way. There is no interest in to what extent the given artifact or phenomenon is of historic origin, nor is their interest in its "*originality*"; instead, there is interest in what it represents for specific social actors, whether they are representatives of a traditional culture or tourists, who either search out or create this specific quality (whether intentionally or inadvertently).

When advertising tourism in the Czech villages of the Romanian Banat references to the "*authenticity*" of life here and the state of the landscape are apparent and often explicit. The visual part of the advertisement then uses photography of the stylized rural idyll. The *genus loci* here ordinarily makes a strong impression on visitors from the Czech Republic, where respect for and admiration of *the cult of the countryside* has a firm place. Visitors staying right with a family of their compatriots can thus see ordinary, everyday tasks such as mucking out, using a horse-drawn plow, milking cows, grinding grain in old-fashioned mills, baking bread, or drying hay.

This experience is evaluated strongly, and emotionally positive by visitors. The evaluation of the landscape here is similar. Travel agencies and other subjects that promote tourism in the Banat are well aware of the attractiveness of the local landscape for modern people, and thus commoditize and sell the landscape here. Everything that is reminiscent of home (i.e. the modern era) must thus be removed. Wind turbines and asphalt roads (even though they can improve the material quality of life of the local residents) would thus destroy images and stereotypes. Tourists, with ideas and stereotypes rooted in cultural constructions, search out the life and landscape here as a symbol of the pre-modern sentiment that is rooted in the modern mentality. The *myth* of the "Czech Banat" is thus created and reproduced through the selective perception of tourists, and the way they speak about their visit, which tells more about the culture the tourists in the Czech villages of Romania come from than that of the place itself.

