Geoforum 43 (2012) 1099–1107

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

The construction of Slovenia as a European tourism destination in guidebooks

Velvet Nelson

Department of Geography and Geology, Sam Houston State University, Box 2148, Huntsville, TX 77341-2148, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 October 2010
Received in revised form 9 July 2012
Available online 11 October 2012

Keywords:
Tourism
Tourism guidebooks
Discourse
Eastern Europe
Central Europe
Slovenia

ABSTRACT

Geographic research in tourism recognizes destinations to be socio-spatial constructions shaped by historic, cultural, and political discourses. These discourses are reflected in and reproduced by tourism literature such as guidebooks. Guidebooks are a key resource for potential tourists to learn about a destination. These texts produced by international publishing companies draw upon existing discourses for a place that will allow external audiences to make sense of the contextual information provided for the destination. At the same time, they reify these discourses by presenting them to readers as objective facts. This paper uses discourse analysis to examine tourism guidebooks for the European destination region, the Eastern and/or Central European sub-region, and Slovenia. In particular, it examines the competing and conflicting discourses of Eastern and Central Europe in these externally authored and oriented texts to understand the socio-spatial construction of Slovenia as a European tourism destination.

"Geographically, politically, and culturally, Slovenia lies in a fascinating corner of Europe." – Fodor's Eastern & Central Europe

1. Introduction

Geographic research in tourism recognizes destinations to be socio-spatial constructions. Discourses about regions and places influence this construction in terms of how destinations are seen and represented, particularly through textual sources such as tourism guidebooks. Guidebooks are a key resource for potential tourists to learn about a destination. Although the texts are produced by a diverse group of writers/contributors and international publishing companies, they are generally perceived to be more objective and accurate sources of information about a destination than promotional material produced by tourism stakeholders. Essentially, they are in the business of selling books, not places, and their ability to sell those books is based on their reputation for providing the 'best' information about places. These external authors draw upon existing discourses so that external audiences can make sense of the information provided about the destination; at the same time, they reproduce and reify these discourses by presenting them to readers as objective facts.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the competing and conflicting discourses of Eastern and Central Europe in externally authored and oriented tourism guidebook constructions of Slovenia as a European tourism destination. The external authors of regional and national guidebooks attempt to reflect the changing circumstances of Slovenia (specifically with regard to the reconstruction of Slovenia as a part of Central Europe in contrast to its former associations with Eastern Europe) in their representations of the destination to external audiences. However, the rhetorical devices used in guidebooks to assert the expert authority and reputation of the international publisher ultimately results in the fixation and reproduction of discourses about Eastern Europe.

The first section provides a brief overview of the construction of Europe as a region and the meanings historically attributed to the two primary sub-regions discussed in this paper: Eastern and Central Europe. The next section discusses the socio-spatial construction of tourism destinations through textual representations, specifically tourism guidebooks. The following section outlines content analysis as the methodology that contributed to the selection of guidebook sources, discourse analysis as the methodology for the in-depth examination of the selected sources, and a detailed discussion of these sources. This is followed by a description and discussion of the discourses used to construct Slovenia as a European destination.

2. Contextual background: Eastern Europe, Central Europe and Slovenia

Like destinations, regions are acknowledged to be socio-spatial constructions based on historically contingent processes. Yet, they are also constantly changing as their meanings and identities are reproduced and contested (Agnew, 1999; Allen et al., 1998; Claval, 2007; Deas and Lord, 2006; Gilbert, 1988; MacLeod, 2001; Murphy, 1991; Neumann, 2010; Paasi, 2001, 2003). The social construction of Europe as a region – from its extent to its identity – has long been debated (Agnew, 2001; Paasi, 2001). Nonetheless, the concept

E-mail address: vnelson@shsu.edu

0016-7185/$ - see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.07.004

maintains a powerful symbolic importance (Light, 2001). Often broken down into Western, Central and/or Eastern sub-regions, the degree to which these are meaningful categories has also become the subject of debate (Agnew, 1999; Hall, 2004). However, the historic import of such distinctions cannot be easily undone.

The conceptual divisions of Europe have been many and varied (Paasi, 2001). Wolff (1994) argues that the "invention" of a Western and an Eastern Europe dates back to the Enlightenment era of the 18th century. With the onset of the Cold War, nearly two centuries later, the demarcation of West from East by the imagery of the Iron Curtain corresponded with this pre-existing idea. At this time, Europe became synonymous with Western Europe (Ash, 1989; Kusý, 1989; Schöpflin and Wood, 1989; Paasi, 2001), while Eastern Europe was associated with the Soviet Union and, by default, the areas dominated by the Soviets (Ash, 1989; Neuman, 1999). Because these areas were not as economically developed as the western part of the region, Eastern Europe came to be identified as backward and, by extension, superstitious, unstable, violent and 'bad' (Okey, 1992; Simonsen, 2004; Todorova, 2009). Accordingly, in his essay on the Central European identity, Kusý (1989, p. 93) writes, "Are there really any of us who have a sense of 'East Europeanness'? I don't know of anyone. On the contrary, the idea of an East European identity is something we all shun as a calamity that could one day befall us".

Thus, the renewed debate about a 'Central Europe' became an 'Eastern European' project (Todorova, 2009). Such a concept was viewed as a means of putting forth an alternative to the associations of Eastern Europe and the Soviet system (Neuman, 1999; Okey, 1992; Patterson, 2003). Ash (1989) cites Central Europe's usefulness to be in reminding western audiences that such a region was, in fact, not synonymous with the Soviet Union. Further weight was added to this distinction as these states became candidates for integration into European projects, such as the European Union (Agnew, 2001; Hall, 2004; Neuman, 1999; Paasi, 2001). As such, discourses on the Central European identity emphasized an idea of 'returning' to Europe (Batt, 2002; Light, 2001; Young and Light, 2001) and highlighted a certain European character that would establish such places as part of 'Europe' (Hall, 2004, 2008; Light, 2001). Therefore, Neumann (1999, p. 153) notes, "Where the 'Central European nations are concerned ... they are bona fide Europeans".

Despite representations of Central Europe as "a readily observable reality" (Neumann, 1999, p. 144), it is still a contested idea as yet undefined by boundaries (Ash, 1989; Miłosz, 1989). This (re)construction of the region served to negatively reinforce the perceptions of the Eastern European identity (Neuman, 1999) such that the boundary of Central Europe was continually pushed eastward (Schöpflin, 1989). The resulting scenario presents Europe as having a west and a center with no east (Okey, 1992; Todorova, 2009). While Todorova (2009) argues that the eastern category may soon disappear, the discourse of an Eastern European region persists.

Gilmore (2002) argues that recently independent nations have a unique opportunity to create a new identity without preconceived associations. Indeed, the former Yugoslav states have actively engaged in the construction of new national identities (Hall, 2002; Light, 2001), not only for the purpose of working towards greater internal unification but also for promoting this identity to the international community. The production and reproduction of identity is an ongoing process of negotiation among not only internal agents but external ones as well. As such, these nations are not entirely free of preconceived associations; they continue to be subject to the externally-based ideas and attitudes that come from these persistent regional discourses.

In particular, Slovenia has, at times, been included and excluded from both Eastern and Central Europe. The country's connection to Eastern Europe is primarily attributed to its association with Communist Yugoslavia, although Patterson (2003, p. 117) argues that this "unnaturally bound Slovenia to the Balkans", which has often been considered synonymous with Eastern Europe (Todorova, 2009). Despite arguments to the contrary, though, Slovenia continues to be characterized as Eastern European.

Since independence 20 years ago, a distinct component of Slovenian nation-building has been a rejection of the east (Hall, 2004; Patterson, 2003) and an (re)orientation to the west based on its former position in the Hapsburg Empire. The emphasis has been on a European character in terms of historical associations, culture, economic development, and democracy (Gow and Carmichael, 2000; Hall, 2002, 2004; Patterson, 2003). In the introduction to the edited volume *In Search of Central Europe*, Schöpflin and Wood (1989) argue that, "Croatia and Slovenia ... see themselves as rightly Central European." However, Patterson (2003) finds that Slovenia is generally still not included in discussions of the concept of Central Europe, as is the case in Batt (2002).

3. The socio-spatial construction of destinations in tourism guidebooks

Discourses construct meanings and ways of seeing the world (Laderman, 2002; Pritchard and Morgan, 2001; Saarinen, 2004). Although discourses are historically produced, they are not fixed; they are constantly changing with new ideas and in response to various challenges (Pritchard and Morgan, 2001; Saarinen, 2004). Discourses about places do not evolve naturally but reflect a process of construction, negotiation, and contestation by a wide range of producers and stakeholders (Hughes, 1998). As such, there may be concurrent and/or competing discourses (Saarinen, 2004), although powerful discourses can become dominant and overcome alternative ways of seeing the world (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998). However incomplete, ambiguous or contradictory they may be, though, discourses are still incredibly powerful in shaping understandings of the world (Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

Despite the academic tendency to dismiss tourism as insignificant (Hall, 2005), the discourses that are produced, reproduced, and circulated through tourism are by no means inconsequential (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Norton, 1996). Tourism is one of the most significant ways in which people know places that are not their own (Clancy, 2009; Kusý, 1989; Norton, 1996; Rivera, 2008). This at least partially occurs through tourism representations of places. It is argued that cultural texts "are viewed not as neutral vehicles for communication ... instead they are sites in which social meanings are created and reproduced and social identities are formed" (Pritchard and Morgan, 2001, p. 172). While it may be easy to view texts as static markers of cultural traits, they should be considered dynamic agents that have the power to shape, alter, and reify meanings associated with places and ways of seeing those places (McGregor, 2000).

Travel literature is recognized to be one of the most significant ways tourists learn about and evaluate potential destinations (Zillinger, 2006). Specifically, tourism guidebooks are defined as a type of text available for purchase that provide information about a place for prospective visitors (i.e. non-residents) to that place (Nishimura et al., 2007; Therkelsen and Sørensen, 2005). This includes contextual information about a place, logistical information, and advice (Bhattacharyya, 1997). While these texts were once dismissed as superficial representations of places (Gilbert and Henderson, 2002), they are increasingly recognized for the tremendous power they have in the social construction of tourism destinations (McGregor, 2000).

Today, guidebooks have become a mass cultural phenomenon. Millions of tourists use guidebooks every year, and for many of