



‘From the Flames to the Light’: 100 years of the commodification of the dark tourist site around the Verdun battlefield

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Dark tourism
Supply
Commodification
Verdun
Stakeholders

ABSTRACT

In order to contribute to research on dark tourism, this article details the process of commodification of a dark site by adopting a supply approach. We empirically apply the dark tourism spectrum (Stone, 2006) to the battlefield of Verdun in France from 1916 to 2016. In doing so, we shed light on the relationship between the temporal distance from the tragic event and potential economic exploitation. Our findings reveal that commodification is possible from the very creation of the site and becomes more complex as temporal distance increases, notably due to the multiplicity of stakeholders and their incompatible interests. Our results contribute to the improvement of the dark spectrum; we add the stakeholders' structure as a new and dynamic attribute.

Introduction

New York's Ground Zero, the prison on South Africa's Robben Island, and even the concentration camp at Auschwitz: all these sites share the common trait of being linked to death and suffering whilst also being tourist destinations. Partly due to widespread media coverage (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Sharpley & Stone, 2009), the number of tourists visiting these sites is constantly increasing (Minic, 2012). For many years, this type of tourist destination has been overlooked in the academic literature, which considers it an 'embarrassing niche of the traditional tourism market' (Tarlow, 2005). However, in the mid-1990s, a research stream known as dark tourism studies emerged (Kang, Scott, Lee, & Ballantyne, 2012). 'Dark tourism' is defined as 'the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre' (Stone, 2006, p. 146); these sites are considered dark because death, disaster, or human suffering are their main attribute.

The field of dark tourism studies has developed interesting new approaches to the examination of the commodification process of these sites (Hartmann, 2014; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Miles, 2012; Stone, 2013), i.e. the transformation of these sites into commodities. Indeed, dark sites can be compared to consumable products, constituting attractive tourist destinations with economic potential (Stone, 2006; Stone, 2010). Recent research into this commodification process has focused mainly on the demand approach, whereby researchers consider the reasons why tourists visit this type of place (e.g. Kidron, 2013), or the integrated approach, when they examine the experience the tourists have (e.g. Kang et al., 2012). Despite these works, the study of the commodification process remains incomplete. To gain a more complete understanding, we adopt the supply approach (Farmaki, 2013; Hertzog, 2012; Stone, 2006; Stone, 2010). Following Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011), a supply approach is a descriptive one, emphasizing the individual's presence at sites associated with death. This presence is explained by the attractiveness of the site's attributes, which are managed by

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2017.11.005>

Received 5 July 2016; Received in revised form 27 October 2017; Accepted 16 November 2017

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the suppliers rather than the tourists' expectations.

More precisely, we seek to study the entire commodification process of a dark site, from its creation to the present day, to understand how supply evolves and impacts the process. To this end, we use a theoretical tool developed by Stone (2006), Stone (2010), namely the dark tourism spectrum, which draws up a list of supply attributes by which to categorize dark sites. Based on this spectrum, we aim to explore the process of commodification by probing the link between increasing temporal distance from the creation and the potential economic exploitation of a site, adopting a supply approach.

We take the battlefield of Verdun, in France, from 1916 to 2016—precisely a century—as our case in point, and this is for two main reasons. First, this type of dark site, a battlefield, represents a significant and popular tourist market niche (Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2011; Smith, 1998). Second, Verdun is of particular interest because it is considered an archetypal site of death (Stone, 2006) and a legendary First World War site for researchers of tourism (Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Hertzog, 2012; MacCannell, 1999; Tarlow, 2005) and of history (e.g. Prost & Krumeich, 2015). Hence, to conduct this management study, we adopt a multidisciplinary approach since we feel that this is the best way to improve our knowledge of dark tourism (Hartmann, 2014).

The rest of this article is structured as follows: first, we present a literature review on the supply approach to the commodification process and the dark tourism spectrum developed by Stone (2006), Stone (2010); then, we justify our case study and the methodology used; finally, we detail the commodification process of Verdun and discuss our findings.

Literature review

Dark tourism: A supply approach

The field of dark tourism studies is currently at a crossroads (Hartmann, 2014; Stone, 2013). It is structured around three approaches: the supply approach (Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), the demand approach (Seaton, 1996; Tarlow, 2005), and a combination of these two, called the integrated approach (Biran et al., 2011; Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006; Sharpley, 2005; Sharpley, 2009a). The second and third approaches have attracted increasing scholarly interest (Hartmann, 2014), and research into visitors' motivations and experiences at dark sites is often seen as a particularly useful method of studying the phenomenon and managing dark sites' attractiveness (Kang et al., 2012; Farmaki 2013) whilst also reflecting on the associated ethical concerns (Austin, 2002).

Although there is great interest in these demand-focused approaches, concentrating on supply offers the advantage of looking at dark sites' attributes. This provides a process perspective on those attributes, such as that which Seaton (1999)—relying on MacCannell's work (1976)—uses to study the sacredness of the site at Waterloo. It is also used to examine the construction of the social memory of the First World War (Winter, 2009).

In Stone's view (2006, p. 146), supply is a complex matter, but a more considered analysis of it 'will lay a theoretical underpinning in order to better explore consumer demand.' Similarly, as a number of authors recount (Apostolakis, 2003; Biran et al., 2011; Farmaki, 2013), a site's attributes function as 'pull factors' which help construct the image of the site in question and ultimately affect the visiting tourist's perception and experience (Smith & Croy, 2005). Furthermore, the sensitive nature of dark sites is such that the tourist supply at a given site is rarely shaped by visitors' expectations, unlike with traditional tourist destinations (Austin, 2002; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). This is even more true when the victims or concerned parties are still alive (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005).

These are the main reasons for examining how supply is structured and the ways in which these sites are commodified (Timothy & Boyd, 2006) to increase their economic potential (Hertzog, 2012). Only the supply approach allows researchers to understand how such sites are converted into tourist destinations (MacCannell, 1999; Seaton, 1999; Miles, 2014) despite the tensions surrounding their management (Hartmann, 2014; Irimias, 2014). Amongst the research on the supply approach, we draw specifically on that of Stone.

The dark tourism spectrum

Stone (2006), Stone (2010) has developed a dark tourism spectrum for categorizing dark sites. Based on the works of Miles (2002), Strange and Kempa (2003), and Sharpley (2005), this spectrum has been the focus of recent works (e.g., Heuermann & Chhabra, 2014; Miles, 2014; Raine, 2013; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). This spectrum categorizes dark tourist sites according to their degree of 'lightness' or 'darkness', depending on their various attributes (Fig. 1). Those attributes encompass various binary oppositions such as education vs. entertainment orientation that reflect long-standing debates in dark tourism (Light, 2017).

As with every typology, the spectrum is subject to numerous critiques, due to its subjectivity (Dale & Robinson, 2011), its process of construction or its descriptive classification that ignores experiences and motivations (Biran et al., 2011). Other critics focus on attributes presented above. Instead of having clear boundaries, they often overlap, as for instance the educational message coupled with higher tourism infrastructures (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Ashworth and Isaac (2015) also argue that darkness is socially constructed rather than based on a range of intrinsic attributes. Despite these shortcomings, we choose this spectrum for three main reasons. First, we use it as a guide for analytical purpose, rather than to categorize new sites in a static manner that leads to reduce its limits. Second, it is considered the most influential typology and third, is particularly suitable for studying the supply side in Western context (Light, 2017).

Amongst the different attributes, geographical and temporal proximity to the tragic event are the most decisive, as they impact the others to varying degrees. Geographical proximity concerns the place where the tragic event actually took place (apart from sites

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