TRANSATLANTIC TOURISM: AMERICAN VISITORS TO EUROPE IN THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

Workshop at the GHI Washington, October 28-29, 2011. Convener: Frank Schipper (GHI). Participants: Adri Albert de la Bruhèze (University of Twente), Chandra Bhimull (Colby College), Christopher Endy (California State University, Los Angeles), Eda Kranakis (University of Ottawa), Vincent Lagendijk (Leiden University), Delphine Lauwers (European University Institute), Ruth Oldenziel (Eindhoven University of Technology).

In the twentieth century, tourism has become a major economic sector worldwide. The workshop “Transatlantic Tourism” brought together historians of tourism, technology, and mobility to better understand the first significant cross-continental flows of tourists from the United States to Europe, which grew to mass proportions, particularly in the last third of the nineteenth century. Christopher Endy opened the workshop with the lecture “The Accidental Nationbuilder: Tourism and the Myth of the Weak State.” Endy addressed three issues: First, he asked how tourism can help us understand the relationship between globalization and the fate of nation-states, while acknowledging that states still matter and have always played a large role in tourism through subsidies, creating tourist spaces, and border management. Second, he argued that the impact of globalization was stronger in the economic realm than in its cultural counterpart, where nation-states and territoriality retained more leverage. Third, Endy discussed how these two elements changed depending on time and place. He made a general call for scholars to engage in creative comparisons, for example, between dictatorships selling themselves as attractive travel destinations to boost their international standing, say in Franco’s Spain (1960s), Tunisia (1980s), and Cuba (early twenty-first century).

The first panel of the workshop discussed civil aviation. Chandra Bhimull kicked it off with the paper “Shaping the Colonial Encounter: Verticality, Dimensionality, and Airline Travel,” focusing on the first generation of long-distance airplane travelers from Britain. Her paper revolved around their itineraries in relation to imperial contexts at a time when airplane travel was, above all, an experience, not merely a means of getting from point a to point b. By combining anthropological and historical approaches, Bhimull tracked three airline passengers up close on their way to India, Iraq, and South
Africa, respectively. By studying their travel accounts in the *Imperial Airways Gazette*, the monthly magazine of British Airways’ predecessor, she found that their first-hand experience of moving through the air shaped their understanding of both themselves and others. The panoramic overview they acquired from the air occasioned a feeling of superiority in them — in a literal as well as a figurative sense. Whereas aviation reduced distance in the sense of shrinking the travel time necessary to reach the colonies, it also enlarged the distance between colonial subjects on the ground and the passengers in the sky.

Eda Kranakis’s paper “‘Come Fly with Me’: Transatlantic Flying from Social Club Glamour to Cattle Car Blues” provocatively sketched the shrill contrast between the golden age of air travel in the 1950s and 1960s, and today’s “cattle car flying bus.” In the golden age, prices were regulated, and airlines competed to provide the best service and comfort. Air travel was an upper-middle-class phenomenon; flight attendants, all university educated, had relatively few customers to take care of. As a result, the transatlantic passage was a first-class experience, unlike the present-day bifurcated system of expensive private aviation for the happy few who retain the previous comforts, on the one hand, and “efficient” commercial aviation stripped of most pleasantries, on the other. The private system can only exist thanks to large subsidies from general tax revenues and taxes collected from passengers in the commercial system. The contrast is further reinforced by the securitization of commercial aviation versus the relaxed security infrastructure in private aviation. The paper concluded by noting that this change was not unintentional but the outcome of a deliberate choice in the aviation industry to deprioritize passengers’ travel comfort over efficiency and price.

Ruth Oldenziel started the second day of the workshop with the paper “Europe from the Bicycle Saddle and the Grand Tour, 1881-1939,” co-authored by Martin Emanuel (Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm). The paper zoomed in on a neglected mode of mobility that its users often associate with individual freedom, a trait that most people connect with the automobile. American tourists cycling through Europe depended on auxiliary technologies like trains and ships to gain access to rural destinations close to nature and authentic everyday life that they imagined had remained unspoiled. Special cameras enabled cyclists to sharpen their observation skills en route. In order to facilitate the mobility of their members, bicycle clubs collaborated across national borders in improving roads, building...
tourist infrastructures including appropriate accommodation and safety measures for first aid and bike repair, and agreeing internationally on measures that eased border formalities for cyclists, such as custom regulations. Both American and Swedish cyclists, in their travelogues, depicted “Europe” as a tourist destination that acquired specific content in their itineraries.

The theme of “Europe” as a tourist product given meaning by American travelers resonated in the paper “Transatlantic Tourism” by Frank Schipper. It discussed three themes relating to Americans visiting Europe in the interwar years. The first explored whether the ocean passage by steamer was represented as an inherently European part of the trip, and additionally touched on the transport of uncrated automobiles aboard the ship for travelers to use in touring around Europe. The second snapshot portrayed the American Institute of Educational Travel, an elusive part of the British travel giant Thomas Cook. Collaborating with academic institutions, the Institute offered two- to three-month trips designed to edify American students. The final snapshot sketched the four conventions Rotary International organized in Europe between 1921 and 1937. Aside from providing a forum for discussing the general business of the organization, these events formed an outstanding opportunity for Rotarians to make post-convention tours. Selected steam liner companies and travel agents coordinated with the organization’s headquarters in Chicago to ensure that the tours would not simply consist of pleasurable sight-seeing, but would also serve Rotary’s expansion in Europe and fortify the friendly bonds among Rotarians, for example, by incorporating visits to local Rotary clubs.

Delphine Lauwers’s paper “Battlefields as Tourist Attractions: Britons Traveling to the Ypres Salient since 1919” introduced cross-Channel British travel to the battlefields in Ypres as a case comparable to transatlantic tourism. British travel to Ypres started as soon as the war had ended. With not a single building left standing, locals turned to tourism in the aftermath of the war just to survive. Lauwers identified the time periods 1919-1922, 1928-1932 (the tenth anniversary and thereafter), and the late 1930s as booms in the cycle of British travel to Ypres. The heyday of this type of tourism, however, is today. Starting in the 1960s with the fiftieth anniversary of the battles, the site has become a near obligatory passage point for all Britons. Lauwers highlighted two main changes over time: The initial military focus of battlefield tourism gave way to more attention to civilian interests,
and the bottom-up private initiative that was important in kick-starting this type of tourism was replaced by the growing involvement of (local) authorities in what has quite simply become big business.

Adri Albert de la Bruhèze closed the workshop with “The Politics of Translation: The Dutch Appropriation of Modern American Tourist Accommodation, 1945–1955.” His paper tracked the appropriation of the US fordist tourism regime with regard to the design and construction of new hotel facilities during the Marshall Plan years. American car-based mobility patterns differed from Dutch ones based on bicycles, motorcycles, trains and buses, which resulted in substantially different accommodation needs. Together with an American coalition of business actors and government, Dutch steam liner and airline companies with an interest in promoting American travel to Europe emphasized the need for new, modern, and large hotel facilities. The Dutch Hotel Union, however, branded such proposals as “un-Dutch” and pleaded for the preservation of small-scale “typically Dutch” hotel facilities instead. The outcome consisted of a mixed bag of hotel modernization that fit local contexts and respected prevailing traditions, while simultaneously attending to American standards with regard to hygiene, management, and service. Such selective appropriation is broadly representative of the results of negotiation processes elsewhere in Europe as well.

The manageable size of the workshop added to the liveliness of its debates. Two main observations can be made about the workshop in general. First, the contributions put users and travelers and their experiences in the center. This more bottom-up approach corresponds well to current trends in the history of technology. Second, the papers displayed substantial sensitivity to the mobility involved in tourism and how it impacts the experience, a trait that accords with fresh developments in new mobility studies and mobility history. Overall, the workshop contributed to the growing scholarship that takes tourism seriously as an important, if neglected, part of twentieth-century history.

Frank Schipper (GHI)