

# THE MECHANICS AND MECHANISMS OF TOURISM BROKERING

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Although most forms of tourism are, and have always been, highly mediated activities, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been given to the crucial role of human brokers in tourism (Salazar 2014). This neglect is partially the consequence of the dominant models that academics and tourism practitioners alike have relied upon to comprehend tourism. Anthropologists studying tourism have traditionally conceptualized their research as being about the encounter between “hosts” and “guests”. Although Valene Smith worked as a tour guide herself, only the third *Hosts and Guests* (the “revisited” version), published a quarter of a century after the original version (Smith 1977b), includes a chapter that deals explicitly with culture brokers. She defines them as “the mediator[s] between hosts and guests”, situated between “the demand and the supply sides of tourism” (Smith 2001: 276–277).

In the first version of *Hosts and Guests*, Smith had identified brokers such as “governments, carriers, and tour operators” (1977b: 13), but their pivotal role in tourism was only mentioned in passing. She drew on the anthropological concept of “marginal men” to refer to local guides who presented Eskimo culture to tourists (Smith 1977a) and noticed how “the culture brokers have converted the anthropologist’s ‘hidden corner’ of the world into a focal point for ethnic tourism” (Smith 1977b: 49). In that first volume, Dennison Nash (1977) wrote in very general terms about “cultural brokers” or “mediators” who tend to emerge to manage the relations between hosts and guests. The underlying idea here is one of

two discrete, bounded cultures, the group members of which often misunderstand each other during the tourism encounter.

Despite the early call by Philip McKean (1976), repeated a decade later by Malcolm Crick (1989), to pay detailed ethnographic attention to brokerage mechanisms in tourism, relatively few scholars focused on these aspects (exceptions include Adams 1984; Cohen 1982, 1985; Evans 1981). Erik Cohen (1985) developed an influential typology in which he traces the origins of tour guiding back to the two types the ancient Greeks distinguished: the pathfinder (“leading around”) and the mentor (“explaining”). The first “provides privileged access to an otherwise non-public territory”, while the second is concerned with “edifying his party as in social mediation and culture brokerage” (1985: 10). This second role is very evident in museum contexts, as we see in the articles by Irit Dekel and Jonathan Skinner. Social mediation involves “representation”, linking tourists to peoples and places, and making the host environment non-threatening for the tourist and vice versa. Cultural brokerage, on the other hand, involves “interpretation”: provoking thought and helping tourists connect with the peoples and places they are visiting. It is worth noting here that most of the more recent scholarship on guiding, including in this special issue, has abandoned this semantic distinction and uses the concepts of mediation and brokerage interchangeably (cf. Weiler & Black 2015).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides us with

various general descriptions of a “broker” (<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/23644>, accessed April 1, 2018). Interestingly, tour guides fit many characteristics (although usually not all at once). The first dictionary meaning of broker is that of *a middle person, intermediary, or agent generally; an interpreter, messenger, commissioner*: Many scholars, including in this special issue, describe tour guides as people who facilitate, but also control, the contact between different groups of people (Salazar 2010). They see a tour guide as a person who is familiar with and knowledgeable on all aspects of the host culture and who has some understanding of the background of the guest(s). A second meaning is *one who acts as a middle person in bargains*: Tour guides often direct tourists to souvenir shops and typically receive a commission from the seller if something is bought. The contribution by Annelou Ypeij, Eva Krah and Floor van der Hout illustrates this nicely. This economic aspect is important because many tour guides can only work seasonally, earning a highly unpredictable income.

Third, a broker is *a go-between or intermediary in love affairs*: Tour guides can and do help tourists with relationships, ranging from various types of friendship to commercial sex services, sometimes offering even themselves (and Valerio Simoni’s contribution to this special issue adds additional layers of complexity to this important but often undiscussed aspect of tourism brokerage). A fourth dictionary meaning is that of *a retailer of commodities*: Tour guides are those delivering the “products” being sold by travel agents or websites. One can think of tour packages or, more abstractly, the tourism imaginaries that nourish them (Salazar 2012). David Picard’s article on how guides on the island of La Réunion strategically position themselves between the imaginaries that separate as well as connect tourists and the destination is very illuminating in this regard. Finally, dictionaries also define a broker as *a retailer; contemptuously, peddler, petty dealer, monger*: This meaning resembles the previous one, but refers to the cases where tour guides do not act very professionally – behaviour that is often, but not exclusively, related to unlicensed guides (and Valerio

Simoni, once again, shows that the particularities of “guiding” in certain destinations may be far more complex).

The contributions to this special issue by Jackie Feldman, Amos Ron and Yotam Lurie show that tour guides are excellent subjects to study processes of cultural brokerage in general. With more people travelling wide and far, tour guides have taken over some of the culture brokering anthropologists did when much of their authority was derived from “having been there”. Whereas anthropologists are traditionally seen as “outsiders” trying to access and disclose the inner cultural workings of a society or group of people, “local” tour guides do the opposite. They use their perceived societal positions as (relative) “insiders” and “gatekeepers” of what is culturally intimate to establish contacts with interested cultural outsiders. It should not come as a surprise, then, that many anthropologists have relied on tour guides as fieldwork assistants (e.g. Hastrup 2014; Salazar 2010).

### **Tour Guiding Technicians**

This special issue focuses on the technologies and techniques of tour guiding, a topic that has been dealt with more in hands-on guiding manuals (e.g. Amato 2002) than it has been analysed critically by anthropologists. I have conceptualized tour guides as “mechanics” (Salazar 2010). Mechanic is to be understood here in the sense of a highly skilled technician, working to keep tourism operating properly. Tour guides maintain the tourism system as it is, assuring the continuity and perpetuation of the chain of tourism imaginaries that exist about the destinations visited by tourists (Salazar & Graburn 2014). Their role can be machine-like because, at times, the circulation of tourism imaginaries appears automatic or even involuntary (Salazar 2005). In other words, tour guides perform partially as actors of hegemonic forces well beyond their reach. In old English slang, the term mechanic refers to a person who cheats (at gambling games). Guides are also mechanics in this sense of the word: independent social actors and cultural producers capable of manipulating the narratives and experiences they are supposed

to deliver to suit their own agendas.

Guides are thus more than mere transmitters of tourism imaginaries. On tour, guides broker not only cultural differences but also the interests and imaginaries of a variety of stakeholders, and, like ethnographic fieldwork, guiding is always to some extent improvised, creative and spontaneous, defying complete standardization. While guides perform scripted roles, having a variety of “puppeteers” manipulating their moves (e.g. tour operators, authorities at various levels, and law enforcement), they are not like shadow puppets with little or no control over their own performances. Narrating and enacting tourism fantasies can be liberating because it offers a small window of opportunity to undermine the structures of tourism power while, at the same time, reifying them.

Tour guides play a Janus-faced role in more than one instance. From a service-oriented point of view, they should look simultaneously towards their clients and towards their own (or the represented) heritage and culture. Successful tour guides are “sophisticated culture brokers who often very thoughtfully put together cohesive commodified personas drawn from multiple cultural frameworks” (Bunten 2008: 382). Ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy characterize this liminal state, and sometimes their sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation. This is even more so in cases where guides are marginally positioned in the society where they operate.

### **Broker Mechanics**

The various contributions to this special issue deepen our understanding of the toolbox that tour guides have at their disposal. The multiple tools on which they rely to do their job are eclectic, and their toolbox can sometimes be cluttered (Salazar 2010).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork on the island of La Réunion, David Picard looks at how guides mediate between various discrete imaginary and social spaces by transforming the banalities of local everyday life at the destination into deeply moving narratives. Going beyond the well-known fact that tour guides use their skillset to connect tourists with

places and peoples, Picard shows how they also connect the social worlds of local life with the imagined realities of global society.

Annelou Ypeij, Eva Krah and Floor van der Hout focus in their contribution on the tourism-related interactions between (urban) male tour guides and rural women at weaving workshops in the Machu Picchu region, Peru. These women are dependent on guides to bring tourists to their workshop, while the guides are dependent on the received commissions that accompany these visits. The authors make us aware of the fact that not only tour guides have a toolbox of techniques at their disposal. Because of gender and ethnic inequalities, the weaving women have developed strategies to maintain more equal relationships with the guides, based on mutual interests, trust and reciprocity.

Jackie Feldman argues for more in-depth studies of the ways in which power structures affect the off-stage identities of tour guides. Jewish-Israeli immigrant tour guides (including Feldman himself) use their performances of the Holy Land for Christian pilgrims as an expression of their own sense of belonging to place and history. This raises interesting questions about how “localness” is negotiated in tourism encounters. Feldman’s suggestion that the identity tour guides enact may also be who they become is not that far-fetched.

In a topically related paper, Amos Ron and Yotam Lurie discuss how Jewish-Israeli tour guides specialize in guiding Christian pilgrims draw on strategies of imitation, distinction and fabrication to achieve what they term “intimate mediation”. Through these cultural mediation techniques guides can let tourists see the same physical sites as something different and let them experience the sites in a distinct manner.

Irit Dekel discusses the special mediating role of predominantly freelance tour guides in four home museums in Germany. In these “homely” contexts, the guides draw the visitors in (making them feel at home) as well as keeping them at a distance. The latter is achieved through techniques of hierarchical differentiation and temporal displacement. Importantly, the position(al)ity of the guides, and the roles

they take, change between groups and is different in the four museums.

Jonathan Skinner shares his personal experience as a docent at Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill House in Twickenham, England. Docents (or room stewards) are a particular type of guide in that they are learned persons trained in identifying the types and needs of the visitors. No historical roles are re-enacted here. Actually, the opposite happens. Relatively empty spaces such as the Tribune Room leave plenty of room for tourism imaginaries to fill in, a process guided by docents and guidebooks alike.

Finally, the informal guiding activities Valerio Simoni studies in Cuba, a highly regulated tourism environment, make him problematize the identification of who counts as a tour guide and what counts as "mediation". This attempt of classification becomes an ethical, political and epistemologically fraught act when it confronts the resistance of people under study who wish to avoid univocal identifications as "guides" and "mediators".

### **The Future of Tour Guiding**

An old-fashioned term for tour guide is "mercure", referring to the Roman god Mercury. In Roman mythology, Mercury was the messenger of the gods (Hermes is the analogous Greek deity). His role as a guide consisted of leading departed souls on their journey to the afterlife. Always on the road, wearing winged sandals and a winged hat, Mercury was known for his eloquence, ingenuity and aptitude for commerce. A perfect patron for tour guides, so it seems. Unlike the Roman god Mercury, however, guides are expected to be the messengers of worldly ideologies and imaginaries. Rather than resembling the Roman god Mercury, many tour guides must survive in working environments that are decidedly "mercurial" – unstable, liable to sudden and unpredictable changes.

The context in which tour guides are operating has dramatically changed. Guiding in tourism settings now increasingly happens in conjunction with, or solely by non-human agents. Maps, travel guides, interpretative signs, and information boards have existed for a long time. However, the explosive

growth of new information and communication technologies, Geographic Information Systems and Global Positioning Systems has led to a revolution in the touring landscape, which has evolved from loanable audio guides and digital display guides to applications and content (e.g. podcasts) that can be downloaded at any time, in different languages, and often free-of-charge, to one's own mobile device (cell phone, PDA, tablet, MP3-player, etc.).

One consequence of these developments is the perception that information and communication technologies can, in some cases, substitute for what human tour guides previously provided, notably the one-way delivery of directional and services information, commentary, site interpretation and language translation. However, the tour guide profession itself has been undergoing an entire transformation, through which guides have gradually lost some important mediating roles. The widespread availability of guidebooks already "mediated" access, but new GPS-based apps make this even much easier than before. Not only do tourists draw on electronic sources to obtain information about the places and peoples visited, they also use these to double-check what tour guides tell them (in case they still rely on such services). However, the biggest threat to "traditional" tour guide practices does not seem to come from technological developments, at least not directly.

The main competitors to (professional) tour guides are not machines but people, partially outside the traditional tourism sectors, who offer guide-like services (Salazar, Bryon & Van Den Branden 2009). This can take different forms, and many of these are linked to internet-mediated hospitality movements. In the same way that hospitality historically led to tourism, internet-based hospitality networks such as Couchsurfing have inspired for-profit initiatives such as Airbnb (AirBed & Breakfast). In terms of guided tours, the internet offers an incredibly wide range of possibilities. Most internet-mediated guiding initiatives are oriented towards the international market and thrive on the stereotypical distinction between (mass) tourist and (individual or small-group) traveller. The stress is on highly personal-

ized and tailor-made tours and narratives in which the interaction with locals and the gaining of novel experiences are dominant. The growing popularity of internet-based hospitality networks are widening and broadening the field of hospitality actors. They both challenge and contribute to a redefinition of professional tour guiding.

### No “Tourism Machine” without Mechanics

The broker, a once classic figure in anthropology, is back in view. Already in the 1950s, Eric Wolf remarked that “the study of these ‘brokers’ will prove increasingly rewarding, as anthropologists shift their attention from the internal organization of communities to the manner of their integration into larger systems” (Wolf 1956: 1075). Human tour guiding is a brokering service that adds to the tourist experience in ways the latest information and communication technologies can impossibly match (yet). The most obvious aspects are that human tour guiding can be interactive with both tourists and others, and that the tourism experience can be flexibly changed and even customized to individual needs and expectations. Tour guides are instrumental in tourism because they provide the system (“the tourism machine”) with not only a local(ized) but also a human face – giving them an advantage over developing technologies tools such as virtual, audio or mobile guides.

Aside from assuring they have sufficient tools in their guiding toolbox, guides need to understand the currency of their services in a global market that is highly unstable and influenced by continuous changes in tourist preferences. This requires them to endlessly vary, reinvent and customize their services. Moreover, the various contributions to this special issue nicely illustrate the minefield of power relations through which tour guides skilfully must navigate. In this context, mastering fashionable tourism discourses (e.g., the vocabulary of nostalgia and ecotourism) is an asset. In other words, guides need to learn how to tell seducing tourism tales (Salazar 2013). They are *mechanics* because they must be well skilled, and they must labour hard to mirror fashionable tourism imaginaries, selling and tell-

ing a message that is not always their own, providing stories and experiences that keep the well-oiled tourism machine going.

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