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EDITORIAL

Spinning out of orbit

The purpose of tourism is to produce better people, not bigger fortunes

Sergio Rodríguez Abitia

The richest man on earth has just taken the most expensive trip in the world. This jaunt, barely ten minutes beyond the edge of space marked by the Kármán line, is said to be one small step for Jeff Bezos, but a giant leap for suborbital tourism. In an Instagram post, the man who built the Amazon empire on what are, to say the least, questionable employment and business practices, claimed that seeing Earth from space is “an experience that changes your relationship with the planet and with humanity”. Chiming with the ideas of Rodríguez Abitia, vice president of International Social Tourism Organisation Americas, it remains to be seen whether this zero gravity experience and extraplanetary contemplation will make him a better person, or just swell his bank account.

But where is the progress in terms of tourism? Bezos assures us he founded the spaceflight company Blue Origin to move towards the future construction of floating space colonies where people can live and work. Since the rival company, Virgin Galactic, has got ahead in the commercial spacecraft race, Bezos seems to be aiming at opening up leisure—and business—spaces for astronauts. For now, the backdrop to his recent adventure was an extreme humanitarian crisis, an unrelenting pandemic and a series of climate disasters that threaten the supposed cultural and economic development of capitalism. Promoting space tours for a handful of millionaires does not, therefore, seem an obvious priority, unless the real priority is not the survival of the planet, but of its most predatory species.

In any event, this self-fulfilled personal dream bears a greater resemblance to megalomania than to any commitment to sustainability. What this hypothetical future of interplanetary destinations will actually look like is still science fiction, but we do need to start taking note of the terminology used to present this championing of private space expeditions, firmly grounded on commercial exploitation: *competition, race and conquest*. Far from the language coherent with the environmental ethics of a social tourism intended to make its activities economically, culturally and ecologically sustainable, this terminology ratchets up the idea of the tourism of recolonisation that the anthropologist David Laguna¹ warns against: a tourism that transforms places and creates services and products with the sole aim of satisfying the interests of the third parties on which it is based.

This edition of *kult-ur* sets out to challenge this model through reflection at the planetary level. Nobody can ignore the warning Covid-19 has placed on the agenda: our vulnerability to future pandemics will be reduced in as far as we are able to limit the population's exposure to dangerous substances, whether physical, chemical or biological, that may be present in the water, the soil, our food, the air and in natural environments. Public health management demands we re-examine consumer and lifestyle patterns that to date have been ecologically unsustainable, including mobility behaviours, the exploitation of resources and the socio-community relationship dynamics that define tourism.

As the reflections in this monograph show, it is no simple task to reformulate an industry to fit the parameters set by the ecological dependency of human life. The notion of economic recovery as the driver of social and cultural progress, assumed to be independent of and superior to the needs of the ecosystem, continues to predominate. Despite declarations from major international institutions supporting a sustainability agenda, the demands to revitalise a sector that has been particularly hard hit by recent events threatens to stymie this redefinition. However, and given the evidence

1 Laguna, D (2006) El espacio del turismo, *Alteridades*, 31 pp. 119-129



that this health crisis can neither be explained nor overcome without attending to its social, economic and environmental dimensions, there should be no wavering in the resolve to demand responsible actions in all areas of human activity.

In sum, if we can no longer systematically contemplate a form of human development that pits people's needs against those of non-human natural life, by the same token we cannot entertain a form of tourism –rural or urban– that fails to incorporate dimensions of community and cultural life that respect the environment. Touristification processes have long been questioned for the way they have, in some cases, got out of control, led to overcrowding and shown no planning ability. There is a way to avoid falling into indiscriminate tourism-phobia, however: awareness, responsibility and commitment are the conditions for the survival of tourism and the basic imperatives for the public policies designed to promote it.

Perhaps it is because of this immanent need for survival that we are disconcerted by Jeff Bezos's achievements and the appeal to a hypothetical universal desire to experience the glory of the universe through high cost flights. It must be the obstinacy of seriousness that anchors our feet to the ground: we do not understand the existence of a universal conscience without a planetary conscience. Without global justice, the rivalry of a few for the best views of the stratosphere is of little importance. We echo Shannon Stürone's exhortation to the magnates of suborbital tourism in the pages of *The Atlantic*: "Space billionaires, please read the room".

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