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Tourisme noir ou sombre tourisme ?

Taïka BAILLARGEON

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Behind the Scenes of Science

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Taïka BAILLARGEON

Interview with Dr. Philip Stone, executive director of the Institute for Dark Tourism Research

Behind the Scenes of Science

1 Dr. Philip Stone is the executive director of the Institute for Dark Tourism Research. Founded in 2012 and based at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), England, the iDTR largely contributes to scientific research on Dark Tourism while offering guidance to industry practitioners and collaborating with the media. In 2009, along with his colleague Richard Sharpley, Philip Stone published *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism.* This book has become one of the most significant works on the subject of dark tourism. Since then, the researcher has completed a Ph.D. in thanatology, published extensively, and presented papers at numerous conferences.

Source: UCLan

TB: Dr. Stone, you started working on dark tourism about a decade ago. What led you to study such an unusual topic?

2 PS: I first came across the subject of "dark tourism" back in 2001 when I was appointed to my first academic position at a college in North West England. Before entering academia, I spent a number of years in the UK private sector, firstly starting out as a project manager, and then working up to general manager, and later as management consultant. Whilst at the time I had a very strong business background within visitor economy management, I had relatively limited experience of the scholarly study of tourism, let alone "dark tourism."

3 However, one of my first tasks as a newly appointed college lecturer was to supervise undergraduate dissertations—one of which was focused on dark tourism—which itself had been inspired by John Lennon and Malcom Foley's book *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* published in 2000 (London and New York, Continuum). So I guess I was introduced to the subject area by an undergraduate student. And, I have been intrigued by the interdisciplinary concepts and contested nature of dark tourism ever since.

TB: How did your research evolve over the years and what are you currently working on?

4 PS: My master's thesis in 2000 focused on rural landscape ideology, whereby I examined UK countryside tourism as both a romantic perception and as a rational economic resource. I had intended to continue with the theme of rurality for my Ph.D. studies. However, once I had supervised that first undergraduate dissertation on dark tourism, I was inspired and, as a result, I began to "turn to the dark side"!

5 So in 2003, I registered for a Ph.D. within the area of dark tourism and the sociology of death. In 2004, after joining UCLan, I met Professor John Lennon at a dark tourism symposium in Lancaster, England. I recall saying to John that "I was studying dark tourism." He simply replied, "Are you really?" Three years later, in 2007, I invited John to speak at a dark tourism symposium I organized and hosted at UCLan…

6 Probably the single most influential factor in bringing dark tourism to light, so to speak, and to a broader academic and media audience was my 2005 launch of "The Dark Tourism Forum" website. Academics, generally, tend to be rather shy souls when it comes to promoting and, perhaps, disseminating their research. As someone with a business and marketing background, I was never shy! So with strategic purpose, the website at <www.dark-tourism.org.uk> became the go-to online place for dark tourism information and learning resources. In turn, I became inextricably linked with dark tourism research, and perhaps more importantly, became part of the "dark tourism" brand. To give credence to this contemporary academic brand, I followed it with a traditional strategy of academic output by publishing numerous peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, edited books, and giving conference and keynote presentations. I then advocated my academic output with international television and radio interviews and press reports. Combined with my search engine leading website and a key social media presence, my research evolved, in a relatively short period, to become internationally recognized within the subject field. So much so, that the publisher Palgrave MacMillian have recognized the breadth and scope of dark tourism and have commissioned me to edit a subject defining reference volume—*The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Research*—which is due in 2017.

7 I am also currently director of studies for ten Ph.D. students within the iDTR. So I am working closely with my Ph.D. students on projects ranging from the commercialization of dark tourism, to tourism development of natural disaster sites, to touristic representations of the Rwandan genocide, to examining visitor economy interpretations of Hiroshima, to transactional analysis within Holocaust museology, and to the psycho-geography of post-Soviet memorialization.

8 My own research at present explores the Anne Frank House Museum in Amsterdam within Foucault's notion of heterotopia, and the implications for both managing the site as well as for the tourist experience. I am also due to launch later this year a new online "Learning Resource Hub" for dark tourism called *Current Issues in Dark Tourism Research*. I am really excited about this particular project, which has been in the planning for a number of years. The project aims to bring publishing channels under the direct control and influence of the author —rather than the publisher. I also do a day job of teaching undergraduates and postgraduates in the subject areas of business management and sociology, and even teach a dedicated fifteen-week course on dark tourism. If that is not busy enough, I am also the managing director of a family company called Inkpot Illustrations (<www.ink-pot.co.uk>), where we design and retail original travel art for the gift and souvenir market.

TB: As director of the iDTR, how would you describe the general evolution of research on dark tourism? In which direction is it heading?

9 PS: Perhaps I should state that there is no such thing as "dark tourism"! Rather strange thing to say I know for someone who has spent much of his academic career researching so-called dark tourism. However, I suggest that dark tourism is simply an academic label, a scholastic trademark, a cerebral branding exercise to bring together interdisciplinary research from across the globe, whereby we can shine light on the contemporary commodification of death and disaster sites. From the early conception of dark tourism by Professor John Lennon, who together with Professor Tony Seaton and his scholarly sister term of "thanatourism," dark tourism as a subject field has captured the imagination of many international scholars from a range of disciplines. In practice, however, dark tourism is simply a name given, or even

imposed on, the production and consumption of visitor sites that represent death and dying and, which in turn, have difficult or contested heritage.

10 Of course, there are many scholars across the world that have research interests in death and its fundamental interrelationships with the cultural condition of contemporary society. What dark tourism does as a branded subject field is to allow international scholars, from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives, an opportunity to scrutinize the implications and consequences of packaging up death and dying within visitor economies. So I think the general evolution of dark tourism research, over the past decade or so, has been one of interdisciplinary advance. We have seen sociologists, thanatologists, artists, historians, geographers, and other social scientists all publish work under the broad remit of "dark tourism." I also think the research agenda for dark tourism should continue to transgress traditional disciplinary borders and interests. I argue such an approach and direction will build a formidable body of knowledge on the commodification of death, and reduce the restrictive dogma and parochialism of disciplinarity. So I would say to established and emerging scholars of dark tourism and heritage to expand the boundaries of the field by going beyond your own disciplinary confines and comforts and engage with scholars outside your subject.

TB: In your opinion, what areas of dark tourism remain unexplored?

11 PS: There has been some tremendous work by international scholars over the past few years who have explored critical intersections of death, dark tourism, and contemporary society and culture. There also has been some good work on the management and politics of dark tourism, the ethics of dark tourism, theoretical perspectives, and how dark tourism narratives are both represented and interpreted. However, I think two areas of dark tourism remain under-researched.

12 Firstly, the tourist experience at dark tourism sites has not been fully interrogated within a broad range of global case study settings. There tends to be a lot of emphasis—both from students and the media—on the motivation of tourists to visit particular dark tourism sites. To me, many of the motivating push-and-pull factors to visit dark tourism sites are fairly obvious. These might include neo-liberal market forces, or the wish to pay respect and reverence to the deceased, or media and historical validation of particular tragedy sites, or acts of curiosity, serendipity, or an inherent inquisitiveness about mortality and the Significant Other Dead. What is less obvious, to me at least, are the emergent motivations and consequences of the tourist experience at dark tourism sites. For instance, how does the visitor feel and perform at particular dark tourism sites? What are the meaning-making processes at play within dark tourism consumption? What are the fundamental interrelationships of the visitor experience of dark sites, and why are these important for contemporary society and culture? These are some of the research questions that perhaps should be the focus of future dark tourism scholarship.

13 The second area of unexplored dark tourism is within Eastern and African perspectives. Much of the current dark tourism research has a Western Euro-centric bias attached. Of course, I make no apologies for my own contribution, but I really do think dark tourism is not confined to particular geographical regions or to specific cultures. That said, there have been some recent attempts to address dark tourism within Asian markets and contexts, but I suggest much more needs to be done to rebalance geographical and cultural perspectives of dark tourism research. I often say that death is universal, but dying is not. In other words, death is a biological certainly, but dying and approaches to mortality and afterlife is enveloped within a multitude of religious, secular, and cultural discourses. To that end, cross-cultural studies will expose how different societies and cultures approach dark tourism, and how the cultural interplay of mortality affects the representation of death and the dead within global visitor economies.

TB: In one of your first articles on the topic, you made a very good portrayal of the dark tourism product, shedding light on what makes its commercialization possible (aka your now famous Dark Tourism Spectrum). Could we draw a similar portrait of the dark tourist? Is there a typical dark tourist and did he evolve as did the product in recent years?

14 PS: Ah, the famous Dark Tourism Spectrum! This was a typological model I published in 2006 and has become a widely cited paper. I think the appeal of this student-friendly paper was the visual nature of how I presented dark tourism as a concept, and researchers and the media

tend to easily relate to it. However, the model does have certain flaws and limitations, many of which I outlined in the original paper. Not least, my model does not address what "dark," "darker," and "darkest" actually means within the co-creation of meaning between producer and consumer. Even so, the spectrum model attempts, albeit simplistically, to define certain parameters of dark tourism and what particular sites may have in common.

15 If dark tourism is simply an academic brand, as I suggested earlier, then to segment groups of tourists visiting death sites would appear to be the next logical step. However, by implication of the term "dark," there is an obvious and inherent suggestion that tourists who visit sites of death, disaster, or the seemingly macabre are somehow disturbed or ghoulish by their act of visitation. There has already been an attempt within the literature to create a "Dark Tourist Spectrum," but I am afraid it falls well short of a comprehensive visitor typology. In short, I would argue that there can never be a so-called "dark tourist," because motivations to visit particular sites will be so varied and visitor experiences will be laden with varying levels of emotional intensity, that to try and categorize visitors beyond simple parameters is all be futile. There are no dark tourists to dark tourism sites—only individuals who are interested in the social reality of their own life-world.

TB: On the one hand, journalists often label the practice and products of dark tourism as sensationalist and immoral; on the other hand, academic research tends to underline its positive side? How do you explain this dichotomy? Where would you say it actually stands?

16 PS: Death sells! It always has… whether for salacious gossip or for factual reporting, death is an often mainstay feature of many newspapers and television news. So when we have the juxtaposition of the terms "dark"—with its implied focus on the macabre—and "tourism"—with its focus on hedonism and leisure—some journalists resort to the lowest common denominator and attempt to represent dark tourism and the people who visit such sites as somehow defunct of morality. That is such a naïve view. My own work on modern secular construction of individual ethics and collective morality within dark tourism raises profound questions of how we represent the dead and how and why we consume their memory. We live in a dominion of the dead, where the dead co-habit the world of the living. The significant dead mediate their passing as warnings from history and, often, of our inhumanity, through graves, images, architecture, and monuments. I argue that dark tourism be added to this list of "death mediators" and that touristic representations of death may shape the communion of the living. So for journalists to dismiss dark tourism as merely sensationalist and immoral is far from accurate, and that contemporary morality as well as mortality is at the crux of dark tourism.

17 Of course, some journalists I've consulted with over the years have clearly attempted to balance their stories with well-researched material, but I also met many others who are just out for a quick cheap headline. The dichotomy between objective academic research and subjective media reporting is, of course, not new. A key aim of the iDTR is to work withlnd to help try give balance and rigour to any potential news story. To some extent, that has happened and there has been some very good media reporting of some dark tourism themes, issues, and consequences over the years. However, in general terms, the media will probably remain focused on dark tourism and death and dying, whilst academia will continue to examine dark tourism and its role in life and living.

TB: The media also present the practice as being recent. You have, however, demonstrated that dark tourism actually finds its roots in distant history. Is contemporary dark tourism different than its historical counterpart? What is contemporary about the dark tourism we encounter today?

18 PS: Professor John Lennon in his 2000 dark tourism book claimed that dark tourism was a postmodern phenomenon due to issues of mass communication and globalization, increased technology, and societal anxieties. However, Professor Tony Seaton and I have suggested that dark tourism as an activity has historical precedent and we can trace its development through a history of mobility of people for leisure travel. Tony came to UCLan recently to give a guest lecture, and one of my students asked him what he thought was the first ever dark tourism "attraction." Tony replied: "The crucifixion of Christ." Of course, what he was getting at is the fact that travel, death, and pilgrimage throughout the ages have been intertwined. There is even an argument that contemporary dark tourism is a form of secular pilgrimage. As the

sacred canopy that once enveloped and guided the Western world has become fragmented, religion has been negated for many. So when tragedy strikes, we often turn first to the Internet and tourism for answers rather than to the priest. It is here that modern secular dark tourism takes on an unprecedented meaning-making role and that is why the modern visitor experience is so crucial to understand.

19 So I guess dark tourism does have historical pedigree, if not in concept, certainly in context. The question is, of course, what are the differences and similarities between, say, those who attended a local public execution event in the Middle Ages to that of international travellers today visiting the gallows at Auschwitz? The answer, apart from obvious historical, contextual, and political differences, is that which focus on the consequences for individual visitors and broader society. While attending medieval public executions might have been viewed as lessons in feudal justice, morality, deterrence, or even social control, these were very much against the societal backdrop of the time. Similarly, with modern dark tourism, the emphasis has to be on the implications and relationships with broader contemporary society and culture. So a tourist visit to Auschwitz in 2015 has consequences for modern politics and how heritage that hurts is interpreted; there are inherent issues of commemoration and memorialization, and not to mention governance issues of managing mass visitation to what is, in effect, the world's largest cemetery. People throughout history have always travelled to sites of death, for one reason or another. What is contemporary about global dark tourism today is not only the societal and cultural implications and consequences of the mass tourist experience, but also the increasing mobility of people as they consume death and disaster in once far-fetched corners of the world.

TB: The iDTR works extensively on establishing and consolidating dark tourism as a multidisciplinary field of research. However, many academics state that dark tourism is only a subgenre of other types of tourism such as heritage tourism or extreme tourism. What is your opinion on the matter? Why create an institution that focuses on this specific subject?

20 PS: As I said earlier, one of the key advances of dark tourism scholarship over the past few years has been establishing the subject as a global multidisciplinary field. I am delighted if the iDTR has played some part in that. I am, of course, well aware of the criticisms that are often levied at dark tourism as a subject field. I probably agree—dark tourism may well be a subgenre of broader heritage tourism—but what a subgenre it is! Tourism at its most rudimentary level may be simply defined as the "movement of people." This mass movement of people needs to be understood on two fronts; firstly, as a social scientific study of the impacts and implications of mobility; and secondly, as a business concept.

21 So if people "move" within tourism for heritage or even "dark heritage," then we can begin to offer defined typologies. My take on the matter is that heritage tourism is a macro-niche of tourism, whilst dark tourism is a micro-niche of heritage tourism. As for creating a dedicated university centre for the study of dark tourism, I think the micro-niche of dark tourism is broad enough and incredibly intriguing as to warrant suitable scholastic spotlights. UCLan was visionary in granting the iDTR. In turn, we now have a recognizable "shop window" in which dark tourism is not only branded into a multidisciplinary field, but also we have an identifiable global learning hub in which scholars may scrutinize the multi-hued nature of representing death and the dead within visitor economies.

TB: Many scholars have expressed discomfort with the terminology "dark tourism," stating that the practice can be as bright as it can be dark. They have wondered: "What is so "dark" about dark tourism?" In your research you also acknowledge bright sides… why then keep the terminology "dark tourism"?

22 PS: I agree the term "dark tourism" can be as unhelpful as it is helpful, especially when scholars interpret literal meaning. And, ironically, as dark tourism implies a focus on death and dying, the concept is more about a focus on life and the living (through the dead). Creating scholarly terms within academia to describe phenomena can often become something akin to an academic cottage industry, and I am not one for using terms for terms' sake. Otherwise, taxonomy can become frustratingly protracted and turgid. I did not create the original term "dark tourism" nor imply its meaning. However, I think it is probably fair to say I have been instrumental in bringing the terminology to mainstream academic and media attention over

the past decade or so. When I first named the iDTR, I did ponder with colleagues as whether to call the new centre the Institute for Dark Tourism Research or the Institute for Thanatourism Research. Outside academia, the term "thanatourism" is difficult to comprehend. So the marketer in me won the day, and I opted for the term dark tourism to describe the institute.

23 Ultimately, the touristic representation of death is becoming a pervasive feature of contemporary visitor economies. Whether we call that dark tourism, dissonant heritage, thanatourism, or any other term, we have to identify its parameters and, subsequently, interrogate both its conception and practice. So I would urge scholars not to wonder too much about typological concerns and what is so dark about dark tourism, but rather wonder how dark tourism may shine a light on both life and living through consuming the Significant Other Dead.

TB: The research on dark tourism can be strongly critical toward tourism-related institutions that profit from the spectacularization of death. The iDTR is equally critical, but it also goes beyond research and offers guidance to practitioners. Why? Can you give us examples of how the Institute has helped in that area?

24 PS: The iDTR has no intention of trying to be the moral guardians of dark tourism practice, nor the gatekeepers to the academic subject area. But we are very keen to work in partnership with industry and together take a more informed stance on representing the deceased or portraying contested heritage.

25 Tourism is a commercial activity and dark tourism is also very likely to be commercialized—in some shape or form. Of course, there is a fine blurred line between commercialization and commemoration. It is here that the ethics of dark tourism production and consumption come to the fore. It is also here where industry practitioners are at the coal face and, perhaps, require some guidance on how to interpret or memorialize tragic history and heritage. This guidance may include visitor management and site governance, retailing, marketing, as well as curation and interpretation. The iDTR has provided consultations to an array of visitor institutions, museums, local government authorities, and industry associations; each offering bespoke guidance on how to avoid the so-called spectacularization of death. We will continue to work with industry, government, and the media. We will also continue to bring together scholars who seek to deliver research that contributes to the ethical and social scientific understanding of dark tourism and heritage.

26 **TB: Thank you Dr. Stone for doing this interview with *Téoros*. We will eagerly follow your work and the iDTR's future projects.**

Pour citer cet article

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