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The Importance of Book Reviews in Tourism and Hospitality

In the last years the book review as a genre of scientific literature has experienced a considerable decline in quality. Unfortunately, some scholars preclude that book reviews are a genre of writing only aimed at stimulating debate in students. This can be true but book reviews can also play a crucial role in the advance of scientific and academic knowledge and education for many reasons. First and foremost, book reviews give insights to other scholars of new advances in the discipline on which the text was focused. Secondly, reviewers provide their personal judgments and thus allow readers to obtain a second view on the matter. Finally, book reviews serve to validate and refute certain points of discussion and place contents under the lens of scrutiny beyond the editorial review the book underwent. With this in mind, two main relevant points are here discussed: a) the lack of interest in scholars in writing book reviews and b) a decline of quality of published reviews (lack of critical perspective). In recognition of this, Katz (1985-86) has examined the poor quality of recent book reviews published in top-ranked journals. High quality reviews require careful examination of the topic of the book as well as a critical perspective. Basically, the book review should not be only a mere description of certain issue but it should put emphasis on the limitations and problems of the addressed text.

In parallel with this, in the last decades the unfettered growth of tourism as a discipline has reached a point of maturity, which can be evidenced in the number of conferences, books, papers, doctoral theses and reports published that involve issues in tourism and hospitality (Airey, 2008). An interesting primary point of entry into this debate

has been put forward by Botterill who convincingly argued that quality of assessments in tourism-related journals can be in decline because scholars seek to publish their works in journals related to Management, Geography or Anthropology (Botterill, 2002). One of the problems with this strategy is that the subject of tourism research will become marginalized. The future of tourism as a discipline is determined by abilities of researchers to develop a self-critical perspective and being aware of the limitations of their work (Airey, 2008).

In tourism and hospitality, book reviews most of the times do not undergo a process of double blind-review and are only subject to editorial assessment before publication. In addition, the books themselves are published under the responsibility and inspection of editors who generally seem not to be specialists in the focus area of a specific book. The problem related to the quality of book reviews seems to have two complementing explanations: one refers to culture and the other to branding policies by media and editorial mega-corporations. Following the contributions of Merton as cited by Douglas (1996) who was concerned about the lack of perspective of sociology in US, I strongly believe some existent restrictions in journal procedures and rules prevent the publication of valuable book reviews while at the same time books of poor quality are published because these discuss themes of common interests to readers and, thus, are highly marketable.

Merton (1980) reminds us of the value of discovering those works that have been published a long time ago. The ongoing quest for novelty tarnishes a much deeper understanding of theory. Similar concerns were overtly stated by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning whenever they intended to create a new matter of research, unexplored at that moment in Social Sciences (Elias and Dunning, 1992). To put this bluntly, the search for novelty leads scholars towards a temporal ignorance because they need to forget what today is presented in the vanguard (Merton, 1980; Douglas, 1996). This cultural aspect explains

why the present overload of information is not materialized in a much broader understanding of facts. Thus, book reviews are important and should not be limited to new books.

Returning to our point in debate, the existent obsession for novelty discourages students and researchers to review a book that has been published more than two years ago, even when the quality of the book or its content merits to be re-discovered. This practice is also driven by the before-mentioned (mis)use of book reviews for marketing purposes.

Unlike in the Hispanic world where almost all reviews are welcomed (unsolicited reviews), the Anglophone community works mostly on the basis of solicited book reviews (of course there are some exemptions that can be negotiated between reviewers and editors). Book reviewers are selected by editors in chief based on their expertise; however, there seems to be little motivation for established scholars to engage in this form of publication. Given this backdrop, the current interests of reviewers for doing this task are often associated with receiving from the publisher a free copy of the book at hand.

However, to a greater or lesser extent, this point reduces the reviewer's critical perspective. It is important to denote that being critical goes beyond describing book contents. A critical book-review focuses on the main thesis of the project, the historical context that ushered the author to think in that manner accompanied with a much broader discussion of utilized methods to collect evidence and of course, the review finalized by outlining limitations or contributions to the discipline in question. Furthermore, journals encourage the publication of small-length book-reviews (preferably no more than 1000 words equaling three pages). This restriction seriously affects the content of the report. Depending on the topic in assessment and how the book has been structured, an insight review might have the same length as a paper.

Ultimately, scholars in peripheral areas of this world have limited access to books. As a result of this many other scholars who are in these financial conditions utilize the book reviews as an instrument to develop their own investigations. Book reviews, under these circumstances, are considering the only available material these researchers can afford. This generates other problems (above all in the Third World) because researchers do not have full knowledge of the book they are citing.

Under the above mentioned circumstances, I strongly believe that it is of paramount importance for academia to return to book reviews as a valid and free instrument to promote a much broader critical gaze, to recognize valuable efforts of colleagues, and to disseminate scientific knowledge. Following this, the book review should not be limited to short papers about recently published books. Journals should thoroughly consider reviews beyond the procedures and restrictions of media and editorial companies. Since the review is voluntary and reflects the expertise of the reviewer, published books are placed under scrutiny enhancing their quality and veracity regardless of the year of publication.

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