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Independent Travel: Creative Tactics in the Margins

This research note outlines research into the marginal practices which tactical independent travelers employ to operate critically within their worlds. Through ongoing fieldwork (interviews, stories, conversations, participation and observations), I argue that by utilizing Michel de Certeau's description of everyday practice, the 'tactical positions' taken by independent travelers can be revealed. Focusing on the reflexive tactical practices of hitchhikers (and their travel across motorscapes) and backpackers (and their travel across travelerscapes), I argue there is enough practice-based evidence to suggest that small and fragmentary informal and/or purposefully performative practices can operate as creative 'tactics' for navigating or negotiating space differently to convention, expectation or habit. The research note argues that 'tactical' backpackers feel they can take possession of the 'travelerscapes' in which they operate, using their abilities and skills to produce their experience of it through their own tactical appropriations, if only within its limits and bounds of the travelerscapes. Similarly, hitchhikers can through tactical maneuverings in 'motorscapes' activate different ways of navigating public space (roads) to produce temporary and experiential forms of social interaction and connectivity. The note will suggest that the tactical practices employed by these independent travelers resist and/or maintain a critical relationship with the dominant order in their worlds and therefore, suggest the need for further research into whether such travelers suggest a harbinger of worlds to come as barriers to mobility fall.

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Performing Scapes

Alternative mobilities and mobility lifestyles need spaces in which to enact mobility. While hitchhikers utilize the sea, roads, air to railway lines to further their mobility, the majority of those interviewed for an ongoing research project, hitch lifts on Europe's motorway network for leisure (O' Regan, 2012). While systems of automobility have produced a strong structural effect on road infrastructures and the practicing of mobility, motorscapes do not generate one specific kind of body, with performances increasingly 'acted out by competing actors on the same stage' (Edensor, 2006: 385), Motorscapes and its amenities can become a territory in which individuals can use their (mobile) bodies and senses in 'doing' movement differently, the practice of hitchhiking requiring them to leave their homes and occupy a highly visible space on the world's motorways and roads.

Likewise, I argue that backpacking works through a system of complex global flows that operate through landscapes of globalization. I argue that travelerscapes emerged through a global disjuncture, in which new kinds of possibilities for subjectivity and agency were formed; creating a new habitual reality for independent travelers we now call backpackers. These landscapes of mobility and practice are a domain in which those who are globalized can engage, their involvement in the travelerscapes seeing them interact with many others in their accumulation of (sub)cultural capital, a conceptualization that belies the existence of a relatively autonomous field within which specific capital can be accumulated and validated. I argue that once individuals seek to belong to the scapes, they must master certain kinds of practical action which derive from moving within, amongst and between the particular social relations and practices available to them. While those backpackers beginning their journey accumulate objectified capital in a strategic way as they monitor their practice and performance of backpacking, I argue that there is room for individual reflexivity, leading to

the capacity to behave in ways that are not necessarily accommodating to the dominant social relations or discourses within which they are located. In fact, backpackers, I argue, become locked into relations of conflict and cooperation as they constantly renegotiate and rework their position in the scapes. If a strategic position attains a ‘feel for the game’, they do so by colonizing a visible and specific (proper) space designed and regulated for them in mind. I argue that through mobility, one develops the capacity to be reflexive about the scapes and one’s role. Therefore, backpacking has a depth and breadth that matches that of the scapes, with strategic and tactical positioning.

Related to Goffman’s (1961) role continuum, the tactical backpacker displays ‘role distance’, a distance that requires skill, competencies and knowledge to renegotiate the travelerscaapes and their place in it, the ‘struggle for being... a course steered between a variable environment and the equally variable capacities of persons’ (Jackson, 2005: xi). While strategic backpackers are acted upon strategically, ‘the horizon does not merely close off the landscape; it opens it up for further exploration, that is, for bodily ingression’ (Casey, 2001: 690). While roles ‘reflect norms, attitudes, contextual demands, negotiation’ (Biddle, 1986: 71), the ‘evolving definition of the situation as understood by the actors’ (ibid, 71) can see individuals become tired of playing out the social role into which they feel cast, as conforming and adjusting to others becomes strenuous and repetitive. Disinvesting themselves of its performance, tactical backpackers can dismiss the backpacker label or any action or behavior that could be termed touristic, collective or herd-like. Becoming cynical about the role rather than rejecting it, they aim to convey qualities new backpackers might consider risky, the creation of a more ‘genuine self’ (Goffman, 1961).

Tactics

The tactical stances taken by hitchhikers and backpackers are not evidence of a negative attitude by hitchhikers towards automobility or tactical backpackers towards strategic backpackers. However, those with a tactical stance behave in ways that are not necessarily accommodating to dominant forms of social and spatial organization within which civilized routines can become repetitive and sometimes oppressive. However, following on from Said (1983: 232), individuals ‘by thinking through what it is that causes reality to appear to be only a collection of objects and economic donnes’ (looking behind processes which appear eternally given and objectified), enable them to go beyond ‘empirical reality or its horizons into a putative realm of possibility’ (ibid, 232). The performance of hitchhiking, then, makes motorspaces a fluid space, an assemblage of signified features evolving in function according to the activities they need to perform. Objects, amenities, other bodies and infrastructure are positioned according to their ability to meet the requirements of the practice. Service stations become a place where hitchhikers can replenish their bodies, interact with drivers and sleep overnight, the maintenance of sprawling transportation networks becoming a place of movement relations and exchange with other hitchhikers, drivers and service station employees. These motorways and roads constitute the hitchhikers’ territory, its drivers, cars, petrol stations and trucks enabling them to orchestrate in complex and heterogeneous ways their mobilities and socialities, and therefore their identities across very significant distances (Butler and Hannam, 2012). Nevertheless, driving (especially on motorways) is based on an ensemble of institutionally defined and socially recognized behaviors based on prescribed ways and rules (traffic systems, speeds, tolls). Any practice that lies outside the range of prescribed ways, irrespective of their potential value are defined as inappropriate by some drivers (many of whom have considerable physical, financial and social resources) who seek

to defend their personal space. They often regard hitchhikers as unsettled, transitional and nonintegrated, their mobility deviant, suspect and potentially dangerous.

Likewise, as backpackers who have built up the competence, skill and knowledge over time can come to see and exploit opportunities, using embodied capital to gain valuable resources that can advance their position. As creative tensions between the subjective world of the ego and the given world increases, individuals will find they have a certain independence to assist themselves, so as to affirm and confirm to themselves and others, their ability to create a world of their own definition, one that idealizes the fundamental truths of this field (the search for something ‘real’). De Certeau (1988: 34) acknowledges these ‘[u]nrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers’ who trace ‘indeterminate trajectories’ that are apparently meaningless, ‘since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move’. They remain unpredictable; locked in negotiation, cooperation and conflict with the dominant rationality visibly inscribed on the scapes and become adept at near constant tactical and improvisatory performances: ‘a way of doing, which is a way of knowing, in a performance’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 196). ‘Natural’ sites, objects places and services are preferred over purposely designed spaces, services and products; their consumption enacted through less privileged and ambivalent heterogeneous spaces located to serve passing trade and the local population such as small businesses and street vendors. They are often weakly classified heterogeneous spaces characterised by spatial fragmentation and discontinuity, the ‘the switched-off areas [that] are culturally and spatially discontinuous’ (Castells, 2000: 33). From small unregistered hotels, food stalls and markets, they look ‘for the unexpected, not the extraordinary, objects and events that may open a window in structure, a chance to glimpse the real’ (Jenkins, 2003:

311), ‘ambushing’ the scapes with the aim to discover its authentic meanings even if such actions are unhygiene, unsafe, irrational or illegal.

Hitchhikers and those backpackers who develop a tactical stance, demonstrable by undertaking roundabout paths – define and individualise their presence within their scapes. They are performance that must not appear to be performance, but does not precede but follows from practice, as individuals over time-space realise the reality they live in is their own construction and it can be changed by the way they engage with it, by how they use their bodies, through their sense of time or upping the ante. For de Certeau (1988: 31) such idiosyncratic trajectories ‘remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of different ruses interests and desires. They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain’, using clever tricks, ruses; ‘persistent as it is subtle, tireless, ready for every opportunity, scattered over the terrain of the dominant order and foreign to the rules laid down and imposed by rationally founded on established rights and property’. The development of human capacity for such a position involves ‘being-in-the-world through our ever changing capacity to create the conditions of viable existence and coexistence in relation to the given potentialities of our environment’ (Jackson, 2005: xv).

Like the flâneur, greater sense-derived knowledge, competencies and skill, they seek to get as close to the real world as they can by manoeuvring to pursue desirable resources. Lacking the homogeneity required by analysis; they refuse neat divisions and classifications, since being labeled or typecast means anxiety, their avoidance from ‘representations’ meaning ‘[n]ot everything shows up on the map..... the chance encounters and cross-cutting paths...the tricky and momentary ways in which people make space’ (Tonkiss, 2005: 128). Actively resisting conformist performances, their movement is used ‘as a tool for creativity and self-fulfillment’ (Kesselring, 2006: 270) with individuals approaching and consuming the

‘scapes’ in a different manner so as to highlight the competencies and knowledge they have built up over time. Their manipulation of texts, objects, people, infrastructure and spaces produced by others, ensures the scapes perform for them in ways they argue represents their social world more accurately, or at least more accurately than any industry can offer or impose with hostels, trains, guidebooks or any institution that seeks to channel or nudge them through time-space. Their fleeting victories are the victories of the weak and are often via ‘clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, manoeuvres’ (de Certeau, 1988: xix), ‘poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality’ (De Certeau, 1988: xviii), developing their own erratic ‘trajectories’, ‘unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths’ (ibid, xviii), ‘[o]ccupying the gaps or interstices of the strategic grid’ (Colebrook, 1997: 125) which ‘can corrupt or pervert the strategy’s system’ (ibid, 125).

De Certeau (1988: 36-37) argues tactics ‘must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. . . . It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its positions and plan raids’. Improvised by individuals and unknowable in advance, tactical practices work to resist and re-appropriate the ‘strategies’ of power, the ‘institutionalized frameworks, scripts, or patterns of action that serve as general guides to behaviour’ (Carlson, 1996: 49). Those with a tactical stance seek to hurl themselves ‘headlong into the midst of the throng’ (Baudelaire, 1970: 7), their embodied participation in activities and spaces which are typically off-limits, ‘drawing on a mobile and private language of the streets’ (Tonkiss, 2005: 128). From living amongst locals, asking drivers for a lift or skilfully navigating a foreign language, particular individual encounters can address the fear they are passive, their ability to read and consume the ‘real’, meaning

like the flâneur they give themselves ecstatically to the crowd. Their ‘scrutinising, detective work, and dreaming’ (Game, 1991: 50) sets them apart from those rushing through the centre of the travelerscapes/motorscapes. Bauman (2004: 31) argues that ‘[k]eeping up the speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore. Most importantly, that nasty uncertainty and that vexing confusion, which you hoped to have shaken off thanks to your speed, refuse to go’. Like the flâneur attracted to the city’s dark corners, they hope for ‘the chance encounters to confront the unexpected in a kind of counter-tourism that involves a poetic physical proximity with the marginal, and to experience supposedly ‘real’ ‘authentic’ life. The flâneur by enacting role distance and detachment seems relaxed and at ease ‘in order to ruminate upon encounters and experiences’ (Adey, 2009: 63). Their silent protest like the flâneur demonstrates a perpetual urging to ‘figure things out for oneself... to rise above and escape the fetishism’ of the proper (Harvey, 2003: 56). Everyday acts (food, transport, routes, and accommodation) become a re-staging on the personal level, each choice a performance for themselves and their identity, each opportunity evaluated against socially constructed versions of real travel, a negotiation of their scapes that is time consuming and tiring as they alter the way they represent the world to themselves.

Fleeting Victories

For these independent travellers, their tactical position is an expression of emancipation, empowerment, skill, competencies and knowledge that’s unavailable in a guidebook or through a hostel or tour package. Utilising cracks as they work through space, their skill in exploiting ambivalence and ambiguity are fleeting victories. However temporal, superficial, imagined and shallow, one should guard against writing off these victories. Victories won in opposition to the counting of time that are important in transforming their travel experience,

their ability to live in hotels that are barely inhabitable, eat food of unknown origin from service station dumpsters and stretching funds to expand the trip simply reinforcing their subjectivity. Choices are not made on the basis of rational decision-making but because they are ‘procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time – to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favourable situation’ (De Certeau, 1988: 38)¹. Each victory highlights their fluency and ease in their worlds, each individual success, from a sought after lift to a cheap market meal highlighting their mastery of their scapes. These victories are clinged to by individuals as evidence as ‘contact with the ground’ (Wylie, 2005), their practices proper to the land, the scapes folding out in front of each individual providing clarity about the self, others and the world. The ‘landscape no longer takes shape as a set of readily affording surfaces for purposive and smooth motion’ (Wylie, 2005a 244) but instead the world contracts, time-and space decompress as they push out the scapes boundaries as they purposely live without the convenience and speed for acts of heroic everyday resistance.

The conceptualization considered in this research note of a tactical independent traveler does not suggest senseless tactical provocations, mobile warfare by post-tourists who seek outrage or disruption. It suggests these travelers don’t ignore transformative forces of modern travel and mobility, but place themselves in the margins (by and large, they are not disempowered like those forced to hitchhike for economic reasons) in order to produce a more tactical, and therefore critical form of subjectivity. Shifting from thinking of these transformations forces as proper (as defined by the more dominant authorities), these travelers ‘make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers’ (de Certeau, 1988: 37). Rather than been ‘forced’ to travel in the

¹ Tactics are not counter-strategy, they are ‘within’ but ‘other’, they ‘escaped it without leaving it’ (de Certeau 1988: xiii).

margins, they take up a tactical position to collide with people and cultures along the way; valuing the harsh sensations of encounters and interactions; even if its emancipatory potential comes at the cost of speed and seamless, smooth mobility.

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