

REJOINDERS AND COMMENTARY

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Authenticity Matters

Yaniv Belhassen
Kellee Caton

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

The recent article on reconceptualizing the notion of authenticity by Reisinger and Steiner (*Annals* 33:65–86) provides some interesting and challenging reading. In that paper, the authors supply an overview of the varied past usage of the term in the tourism literature. They conclude by proposing that scholars should abandon both the expression “object authenticity,” on the grounds of its heterogeneous usage, and the concept(s) it represents, for the principal reason that it has historically been conceptualized in ways that are ontologically unsound. While many of their arguments are compelling, two of their primary assumptions are more debatable. Of immediate concern in this commentary is an epistemological issue, one that affects the very nature of research, how knowledge should progress within that domain, and what its purpose should be.

Specifically, Reisinger and Steiner’s characterization of tourism studies as a discipline within social science must be challenged, and, in its place, it is counter-suggested that it is better regarded as a continually unfolding, multidisciplinary discourse, a view that, as will be argued below, carries important epistemological implications. A second concern relates to their conclusion that the notion of object authenticity should be abandoned in tourism studies. Whereas it is conceded that past conceptualizations of object authenticity are ontologically problematic, and hence may pose practical limitations for tourists’ experiences, it is alternatively argued here that such conceptualizations are nevertheless alive and well in the minds of many tourists, tourism brokers, and members of host communities. Consequently, scholars cannot simply abandon a term/concept that continues to play such a significant role in as it functions in reality.

Regarding the first concern, Reisinger and Steiner position their paper around Kuhn's (1970) and Latour's (1987) argument that in order to achieve progress in a scientific discipline, scholars working within that field must arrive at an agreement regarding the definition of basic concepts (Latour calls these concepts "black boxes"). Given the centrality of the term authenticity in the literature, Reisinger and Steiner consider it to be a basic concept that can enable progress in the "discipline of tourism" as long as agreement on its essence can be achieved. However, it is alternatively maintained here that tourism studies cannot be effectively understood either as a "science," in the sense of the "natural" or "hard" disciplines that inspired the theories of Latour and Kuhn, or as a "discipline," in the sense in which Reisinger and Steiner use the term. Rather, and in line with Tribe's (1997) thinking, it is argued that tourism is best understood as a multidisciplinary social research discourse. As such, its nature is not conducive to the production of undisputed conclusions (such as Newton's laws or molecular theory) or to the settling of fundamental issues once and for all, and in such a manner, that further knowledge can accumulate linearly and infallibly above them. Rather, it is best suited to serve as a forum for a multi-paradigmatic (and sometimes contradictory) theoretical discussion that facilitates the investigation of society, in pursuit of richer and more highly nuanced understandings of social phenomena and their consequences.

In accordance with this view, "slippery" concepts like authenticity (or leisure, identity, or postmodernism, for that matter) can be seen as highly functional, rather than counterproductive, since they serve as flashpoints around which scholars working from different perspectives can congregate, debate, deliberate, and influence one another, thereby allowing new and more informed understandings to emerge. In short, it is maintained that the plurality afforded by allowing terms and concepts to remain open and unstable is precisely what enables growth and progress in the discourse and understanding of important tourism phenomena. As such, scholars should not aspire to the comprehensiveness sought by their colleagues in natural scientific disciplines, by seeking to establish the "true" or even the "best" meaning of ideas; rather, their terms and concepts should be viewed as analytical tools that facilitate tourism discourse.

One agrees with Reisinger and Steiner that the extreme heterogeneity of usage of the term authenticity can be a source of confusion and counter-productivity, particularly when it is tossed about casually in research texts, rather than carefully considered and situationally defined with a degree of precision sufficient to ensure successful communication between writer and reader. Nevertheless, Wang's (1999) approach of "sub-conceptualization" may be more fruitful, especially when it is combined with an increased demand for communicative accountability on the part of academics who address authenticity in their work, as a solution to this problem. Like Wang, who outlined various conceptualizations of authenticity, suggested an additional version of the concept (existential authenticity), and located it in relation to earlier notions of authenticity, scholars working in this area should be reflexive about their understandings of authenticity and communicate their positions clearly, with respect to the positions taken by earlier researchers. This seems to be an equally effective and much more appropriate solution to the problem of confusing and overlapping uses and understandings of authenticity than the elimination of the term/concept altogether, given that, as will be noted, this concept remains highly relevant to tourism as it functions on a daily basis.

The second concern centers on Reisinger and Steiner's argument that object authenticity should either be eliminated as a concept or else viewed strictly in the Heideggerian sense they propose in the second half of their article, because previous conceptualizations of object authenticity are ontologically untenable. They maintain that previous attempts rest upon incomplete understandings of the nature of the human experience. Reisinger and Steiner reckon that these

(mis)understandings are biased in favor of the external world (as in the case of objectivism, in which the external world is viewed as existing independently of human interaction with it and as being accessible to humans in its “true” form if they approach it using the correct methods). They are also said to be biased in favor of human agency (as in the case of constructivism, in which individuals are regarded as being capable of total interpretive authorship of their experiences in the world).

In their view, premised on the philosophy of Heidegger (1962, 1977), the nature of the world occupied by persons lies neither solely with themselves nor with external phenomena; rather, it is constituted in the “web of relations among things, people and human purposes” (Reisinger and Steiner 2006:80). Furthermore, these authors argue that traditional conceptualizations of object authenticity serve to limit the experiences and enjoyment of tourists who consistently compare their actual experiences with their preconceived expectations. Therefore, they contend that “tourists who can embrace all experiences, good or bad, authentic or not, as the gifts of tourism are likely to have far more pleasant experiences than those who travel with a head full of expectations that are bound to be disappointed somewhere along the line” (2006:80). It is difficult to fault such a sentiment. Indeed, it is a highly insightful suggestion, which, if followed, has much potential to bring happiness and enjoyment to tourists and to human beings more generally.

Unfortunately, from the reality of being tourists and scholars, one can justifiably observe that many tourists still compare their experiences with their expectations. As Reisinger and Steiner note, they are still disappointed when they see a child with a Walkman in an Indonesian village, and many researchers, particularly those working within postcolonial paradigms, would argue that such perceptions during tourism experiences have serious consequences for marginalized people and cultures. In short, it is counter-argued here that one of the primary purposes of social research is to understand why humans act and believe as they do, as well as to explore the consequences of their actions and beliefs for others and the natural world. If travel agents use the word “authenticity” in their brochures, then it is apparently still relevant for brokers and for potential tourists. Indeed, it is not denied that the word “authenticity” means different things to different tourists and brokers—that even in common parlance it is conceptualized in myriad ways.

Furthermore, it is conceded that although traditional conceptualizations of this idea within the academic literature are philosophically problematic in numerous ways, as long as the many notions of object authenticity are still “out there” in the minds and lives of individuals acting in the “tourism world,” it is for academia to study them. Such notions play a significant role in the tourism industry; they are quite real in their consequences, and thus cannot be ignored if scholars are to understand society. Tourists still go to the Louvre in order to see the Mona Lisa, and many of them would be disappointed if they were instead presented with a reproduction without being given what they considered to be an adequate reason for the substitution. Likewise, many Christian pilgrims are still interested in archeological evidence from the era of Jesus. Many tourists, too, who visit the Route 66 National Historic Corridor in the United States are concerned to know that they are driving on the original pavement of the roadway, and many going to New York continue to flock to Ground Zero to be at the actual site where the September 11 terrorist attack occurred. All these examples show that object authenticity is still relevant to tourists, and as long as this is the case, it must be relevant to scholarship as well. **A**

Yaniv Belhassen: Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign IL 61820, USA. Email: <kcaton@uiuc.edu>

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Reply to Belhassen and Caton

Carol J. Steiner
 Jitter Philosophical Services, Australia
Yvette Reisinger
 Florida International University, USA

The thoughtful commentary provided by Belhassen and Caton invites discussion of new issues that are perhaps every bit as contentious as the definition and possibility of object authenticity. Like the original paper that inspired their comments, these issues also involve categorial definitions and concepts.

Although the terms “tourism,” “tourism studies” and “tourism research” appear to be used interchangeably, they can mean quite different things. As the commentators suggest, “Tourism is best understood as a multidisciplinary social research discourse.” Governments and tourism policymakers, operators, tourists, and host communities, however, might think tourism is better understood as an economic, cultural, or recreational instrument for generating wealth, cultural awareness, and pleasure. *Tourism studies*, on the other hand, is perhaps, indeed “best understood as a multidisciplinary social research discourse.” *Tourism research*, the distinguished primary focus of *Annals*, might more closely resemble the Kuhnian/Latourian notion of the institutionalized scientific research enterprise, with its focus on methodologically rigorous quantitative and qualitative research