

From Resources to Ruins: Perpetual Plundering and Cultural Tourism in Latin America

Despite only being within the “awareness” of the rest of the world for the last 500 years, the Western hemisphere has been a vital part of global development.¹ The abundant natural resources of the Americas enabled development and growth to levels never before seen on a worldwide scale—that is, for the Europeans who exported them.² The Latin American states have been continually dominated, exploited, and controlled by the Global North. Furthermore, the development and so-called modernization of these states has intentionally been halted by countries that concurrently shame their perpetual underdevelopment. This is not a novel development but rather a well-understood notion within anthropology and global studies. While this resource extraction continues in the form of export-based economies, a new form of plundering has arisen: Cultural tourism of the Ancient and Indigenous Americas. Through marketed tours, cruises, resorts, and more, the once-ignored cultures of the Americas have been commodified to survive and attract tourists. It is ultimately clear that cultural commercialization in the Americas provides economic stimulus and growth by attracting tourists to the “exoticized” ancient and contemporary Indigenous cultures while deepening systemic disparities and continuing a modern form of plundering and pillaging.

Uneven Development: Historical-Theoretical Background

The Americas is one of the most economically polarizing regions on Earth between the chart-topping GDP of the United States and the contrasting poverty of many Central and South American countries. As Mark Juergensmeyer put it, “The region that produced one of the world’s richest nations also includes some of its poorest.”³ To understand this, scholars initially used a social-Darwinist-esq mindset and developed modernization theory.⁴ Through this,

societies followed the progression from undeveloped to developed through modernization and industrialism. However, these ideas were rooted in Western ethnocentrism and began to draw criticism.⁵ In the case study of Latin American development, modernization theory would argue that Latin American states are simply still developing or refusing to develop, resulting in economic disparities between the Global North and South. Modernization theory is centered around the belief that following the industrial revolution, all societies should “evolve” similar to those of the West. However, this simpler notion was quickly abandoned when global studies expanded the developmental factors to include more than just intent to develop along the Darwinian ladder of “social progress.”

Immanuel Wallerstein is one such scholar who critically rejected modernization theory by prioritizing neo-Marxist ideas. Wallerstein and like-minded scholars created schools of thought that expanded the analysis of development to include previously ignored factors, including the exploitative interventions of the Global North.⁶ Through these new lenses, it is well-established that the underdevelopment of Latin America is not a failure of modernization but rather the result of the intentional exploitation of natural resources and capital by the Global North. Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory separates countries into three categories based on their economic power from most to least dominant: core, semi-periphery, and periphery. The classification of a state is not static and can change over time, but as Terlouw notes, “Only some Latin American states, like Peru, Colombia and Surinam, have always belonged to the periphery.”⁷ This background is crucial for many reasons, primarily the reduction of the Americas to a natural resource plant where materials can be exported without regard for natural or social consequences. As Wallerstein put it, “...a state in Latin America, has not yet industrialized as the consequence of its being dominated by such landlords.”⁸ As long as it

enables these core states to remain core, that will not change. Thus, the Global North—consisting of core states—was born.

From a historical standpoint, Eduardo Galeano's seminal work *The Open Veins of Latin America* follows five centuries of Latin American pillaging, plundering, and exploitive resource extraction.⁹ Galeano details the historical and contemporary consequences of the New World's "discovery." These consequences are direct and indirect, including population decline due to genocidal actions, environmental degradation and exportation, and lasting social consequences, some of which this paper will explore. Through this, Galeano and Wallerstein established a precedent for analyzing the harmful impacts of the Global North through a critical, neo-Marxian lens.

Global studies have generally accepted this new approach, but as the field grows, gaps in the literature develop. Tourism studies, for example, have many focuses including sustainability, media, and the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic.¹⁰ There is a notable lack of content focusing on the impacts of cultural tourism utilizing the critical lenses of commercialization and commodification. The present study uses Wallerstein and Galeano's approaches as foundations to understand the present state of the globalized world. Building off of this, the analysis will utilize Marxian and Neo-Marxist ideas to study the impacts of globalization on local cultures due to tourism.

Trouble in Paradise: Cultural Commercialization and Commodification

As aforementioned, the concept of Global Northern domination and Global Southern oppression is well established, but many of the cultural impacts have yet to be defined or explored. In recent years, the growing economies of some Latin American nations appear to contradict Wallerstein or at least suggest an "end" to the harmful impacts of early globalization

and prevent the need for further exploration. Many scholars would refute this with examples of the export-based economy that has only slightly shifted control of the means of production, and this is true, but an additional, lesser explored factor is at work here. This paper considers the growing tourism economy and the corresponding commodification of Indigeneity and the Ancient Americas as a crucial facet of the economic shift while considering cultural survival through commercialization.

Commodification, Commercialization, and Tourism

Commodification, as developed by Marx, refers to “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.”¹¹ To Marx, commodities have value, both materially and fiscally, and can be exchanged for other commodities. Appadurai expands on this concept in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Instead of limiting a commodity to a tangible possession, Appadurai approaches “commodities as things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of things, at different points in their social lives.”¹² In this view, a commodity can shift and change, and there is no single notion of a universal commodity; instead, they have been socialized, enculturated, and contextualized. This expansion of commodities is necessary for understanding the cultural and historical commodification present in contemporary Latin American tourism.

Furthermore, tourism studies contextualize the impacts of cultural commodification on local communities. Shepherd notes that proponents of cultural involution argue that “cultural tourism can stimulate a revival of local interest in traditional cultural forms, thus both strengthening cultural bonds and providing local actors access to material benefits” and thus cultural tourism should be applauded.¹³ By creating interest in local cultures through cultural commodification, the revenue generated can help support and strengthen communities.

According to Borowiecki and Castiglione, cultural tourism can involve visiting places to experience a form of a culture different from the tourists' place of origin.¹⁴ Anything from museums, architecture, and archaeological sites to less institutionalized forms of cultural experiences, such as traveling for regional foods, is considered cultural tourism. Even traveling to a location for its natural environment can be a part of cultural tourism, though there is also a distinct form of ecotourism that encapsulates all-natural features. By traveling to a place to experience the local culture, art, food, environment, and more, one becomes a cultural tourist. Those who visit Western Europe from the USA can be considered cultural tourists; many people travel to see new museums or to experience the “European” style of living. With a broad definition, a vast majority of tourism is considered cultural tourism, and the industry continues to grow.

While Shepherd mentions cultural innovators’ support for cultural tourism, there are an array of issues hiding behind the surface.¹⁵ Mainly, the question of Marx’s commodification and its impact on local cultures. Shepherd utilized Marx’s theory of commodities to show how the exchange-use value of tourism may “dilute” the culture of the destination. A key example of this is the Great Wall of China and the “restoration” of a portion of the wall to include parking lots, music, and even a roller coaster.¹⁶ A well-meaning tourist with hopes to walk along the long, ancient wall is thus confronted with gift shops and even freshly bricked portions of the wall. The for-profit expansion of this cultural landmark changes the experience as a whole. Roman archaeological sites in Mérida, Spain may be blocked by a pay-to-enter gate, but visitors are soon reassured that the small entrance fee goes to up-keeping the sites and funding further excavations; the small gift-shops down the block with mass-produced trinkets cannot say the same.¹⁷ As it stands, a general assessment of cultural tourism is not necessarily possible or

desired. Tourist locations differ in what cultural “attractions” they offer and how local communities are impacted. Some areas may be mostly focused on tourists and welcome them in high volumes (such as Las Vegas) and others may be more off the beaten path than most tourists ever reach; some locations are popular year-round, whereas others have notable busy times (Spring break in Cancún, anyone?). Only once the specifics of the region are incorporated can the concepts of environmental and cultural commodification be fully contextualized.

Many of the countries most dependent on tourism are part of the Americas and the Caribbean.¹⁸ These countries rely on the natural environment, from sandy beaches to lush tropical rainforests, to attract visitors. Not only is Latin America an export-based economy where natural resources are shipped off to the Global North, but the profit made domestically is from a similar commoditization of the environment. However, recent decades have seen a growing phenomenon: Cultural tourism of the Indigenous and Ancient Americas. Many Latin American countries are dependent on tourism, and areas not popular for the natural environment tend to be popular for their material and contemporary culture, a clear form of cultural tourism.

Cultural tourism as an elite practice is seen throughout human history. Ancient Greeks often visited Ancient Egypt during the Antiquity period, and Elite English often embarked on ‘Grand Tours’ of the European continent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁹ Throughout Western European history, the rich and elite have been fascinated by the far-away and “exotic.” Cultural items and ancient structures were plundered and the brightest and best-kept objects were taken as treasures to European Menageries and put on display. The mysticism of the past has long been used to enable the rich and powerful to dabble in ancient history with little-to-no respect for the earlier peoples.

When it comes to Latin America, it is often the case that indigenous peoples descend from the early builders and creators of the same local areas. In the aforementioned Roman archaeological example, there is no direct *cultural* community of Romans living in Mérida.²⁰ In Latin America, though, there are contemporary Maya communities in the Yucatán Peninsula who descended from the Ancient Maya people who built temples such as Tikal or Coba. Profiting off of the Romans and their abandoned city is one thing, whereas relocating Maya people to create a nature reserve for eco-tourism or blocking off cultural sites to charge entrance fees is an entirely different abuse of power.²¹ Thus, while ancient tourism especially has little impact on, say, those of “Roman descent” there is a much more direct correlation when it comes to Indigenous groups in the Americas. Furthermore, while this concept of ancient tourism and cultural tourism has existed for centuries, the impact it has on contemporary Latin America has grown exponentially due to globalization.

The commodification and expansion of cultural tourism have impacted Indigenous and Ancient Latin America uniquely. Indigenous groups like the Maya in Yucatán and the Andean Quechua peoples are descendants of the same Ancient people who built some of the most visited landmarks in Latin America. Machu Picchu, the Inca Citadel in Peru, was built by the ancestors of the Quechua; descendants of the Aztecs are the Nahuatl peoples in Mexico and El Salvador. There are living, breathing connections to ancient culture all across Latin America. These connections have been exploited in ways unique to the Americas; because of the vulnerable and dominated position of Latin American economies, many have little choice but to commodify their culture to survive. Indigenous groups are especially marginalized, leading to an expansion of cultural tourism of indigeneity, and material cultures and practices both contemporary and ancient.

Cultural Degradation through Commodification

The commodification of culture is not a cut-and-dry topic, with plenty of scholars, local communities, and more on either side of the issue. The greatest concerns for this cultural commodification and subsequent privatization of indigeneity go back to Marx's means of production and class divide. Due to the historical and ongoing extraction of natural resources by outside companies and elites, people in popular destinations may have little employment prospects besides the entertainment, service, and greater tourism industry. Even if other opportunities did exist, Wallerstein's World Systems Theory discusses how core countries focus on importing resources and producing high-skilled laborers. In contrast, due to interventions by the Global North, peripheral countries lack the structure to create high-skilled laborers, and therefore workers are limited in economic attainment without elite support. Thus, working in Global North-focused sectors, such as service and tourism, is one of the most available and profitable opportunities in some regions.

Examples of cultural commodification of Indigenous ancestry and contemporary cultural practices are abundant in Latin America. In Ecuador, an ethnographic museum opened by an ethnographic NGO led to contention among indigenous groups who debated "who could claim cultural authenticity and therefore the right to benefit from the museum."²² What the NGO started to link "culture with the market economy (to) create a more harmonious relationship the market and Amazonian indigenous peoples" ended in confusion, contention, and the clear fact that the NGO was created to imbed economic development into long-established indigenous cultures.²³ Likewise, one tourist website boasts many "Cultural Tours" in Latin America including "Maya Encounter" and "Mayan Sun Southbound: Boat Rides & Ruins," effectively combining both cultural and ecotourism. However, these so-called Maya cultural tours were not

organized or promoted by the Maya. Instead, a Canadian company “G Adventure” hosts these tours, and just by first glance most of the activities offered include drinking or sunbathing with a single lunch at a Maya Women’s co-op or a guided tour of ruins. Despite being marketed as an educational, cultural experience, most of the events are Western-Resort style disguised as enriching, and little to no profit is given to the Maya, whom the tour is named after. Instead, the name is commodified to attract attention from outsiders who may view it as an “exotic” or “enlightening” experience.

The concept of commodifying culture is inherently capitalistic. While ancient tourism has always existed, it was a practice for the elite, and it continues to be reserved for those with the resources and accessibility to do so. According to Forbes, 11 percent of Americans—that is, those with residency in the USA, the country with the highest GDP—have never left the US state that they were born in.²⁴ Travel, even low-cost backpacking trips, is highly inaccessible to many Americans, let alone residents of lower GDP countries. To travel, one has to be successful under capitalism and have the overhead and flexibility to spend money on non-necessities, like flights and hotel stays in addition to their regular rent or mortgage payment. Even the commercialization of culture is capitalistic at its core. Culture, practices, and beliefs alone have no fiscal value. Instead, they are exoticized to add fiscal value by those in search of a profit. The word “Maya,” for example, has become associated with everything from representations of the current culture, such as locally stylized pottery and textiles, to exaggerated and false images of ancient sacrifice. If someone mentions “Egypt” or “Egyptians,” nine times out of ten the conjured image will be centuries old; in a travel-networks article about famous Egyptians, five of fifteen died centuries ago.²⁵ For many tourist-centric areas, the past is present, regardless of the opinion of local populations.

Western-centric views posit that tourism, even if it paints untrue and exaggerated pictures, is for the benefit of impoverished areas. However, trying to “develop” the economies of indigenous people—to fit Eurocentric views—by commodifying culture without even getting the consent of the involved groups is another harmful and infantilizing intervention of the Global North. In Guatemala, Maya culture has been commoditized in the “colorful” coffee exports.²⁶ Guatemala coffee exports stand out due to the marketing of their product as exotically Mayan. Despite this, the Maya laborers are ignored and instead replaced by a more “positive, marketable image.”²⁷ Marx’s mystification is clear in the Maya during the labor process; despite their culture being exploited for sales, there is still a separation between the Maya laborers and the profit or even authentic acknowledgment. As in the museum example, culture is exploited for profit, attention, and tourism without any consultation or compensation to the indigenous peoples involved.

Efforts to combat the mystification and exploitation of Latin American indigenous cultures have not been successful. Díaz-Andreu discusses the ethics of archaeological tourism in Latin America.²⁸ Some have attempted to involve local indigenous groups in the commercialization of archaeological sites; this is, in part, to avoid exploiting ancient cultures and their descendants into contemporary indigenous groups. Regardless of this minority, archaeological tourism is a global phenomenon, from the iconic Pyramids of Giza and England’s Stonehenge to lesser-known local sites and museums. Most—if not all—of these ventures involve commodifying the past for profit. Hopefully, these proceeds go towards site upkeep and expansion of excavations, but in more commercialized sites, the profit is simply profits.²⁹ In Latin America, archeological sites have become increasingly privatized and removed from their original context and cultures. By shifting control to local groups, Días-Andreu notes that

archaeologists hope to protect and preserve lesser-known sites by returning control and care to nearby communities. However, many more profitable sites are still out of indigenous control, and even when they are in the hands of the local people, loopholes to extort profit are often found.³⁰ Thus, even when Indigenous groups are willing and interested in commodifying their cultural heritage, the likelihood of them making as much profit as commercialized and privatized sites is small and discouraging. Going further, many governments, companies, and archaeologists still do not acknowledge local indigenous groups when discussing site control despite the clear heritage links.

The resulting cultural commodification of Indigenous Latin America is dichotomous: Latin America was underdeveloped and exploited by the West so to combat this, the tourism industry developed to profit off of rich westerners with a taste for the “exotic.” The vulnerability of local indigenous groups was increased, as their likeness is exaggerated, twisted, and marketed to foreign populations. Overall, to stand on the same level as the Global North, Latin American governments, NGOs, archaeologists, and business owners collectively exploit indigenous laborers, market their cultural practices and objects, and overall put profit over people.

Cultural Survival through Commercialization

While many examples of American cultural commodification occur more-or-less outside of the control of indigenous populations, it would be an oversimplification to say that all examples of commercialization are due to “market forces” to make a profit for the Global North. Instead, there are multiple cases in which indigenous groups opt to commercialize culture for economic survival and to revitalize and protect the culture, or in which the tourism industry uplifts marginalized populations.

Indigenous populations across the world, including in the Americas, have turned to the tourism industry to prevent culture loss. Instead of losing members and carriers of cultural tradition to other industries, many groups have begun to self-employ or self-commercialize workshops, crafts, and more. Some research shows that the commodification of culture has aided community resilience in the Cornish people of the British Isles.³¹ In North Sumatra, the Batakese commercialized the ulos, a traditional craft fabric, to continue the practice and fiscally sustain the community.³² In Belize, many Maya communities have founded cooperative communities to sell their crafts, host workshops for curious visitors, and otherwise carry traditional practices into contemporary times and shape them for capitalist consumption.³³ Overall, indigenous groups have begun to take the commercialization of their culture into their own hands and present it from a direct, authentic standpoint rather than the watered-down or false narrative presented by outsiders for profit.

Tourism in Latin America also serves women and indigenous women in intersectional ways. The former president of Costa Rica, Laura Chinchilla Miranda, reported that 80 percent of tourism jobs benefitted the lowest quintile and that 60 percent of tourism jobs are held by women.³⁴ The World Bank Group found that:

In some countries, tourism has almost twice as many women employers as other sectors, offering significant opportunities for women to run their own enterprises. In Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, more than half of tourism businesses are run by women. In Latin America, 51% of tourism businesses are managed by women, more than double the proportion in other sectors. In Nicaragua and Panama, more than 70% of business owners are women, compared to just over 20% in other sectors.³⁵

Through this, some positive aspects of the tourism industry are assumed. Women have more power in this industry than many others, and in some Latin American states, most tourism-related businesses are owned by women. This provides economic and social power not otherwise afforded to women from the Global South. Many business and for-profit organizations, such as

the World Bank Group, wrongly stop their analysis here, and a connection between negative forcibly commodified culture and consensually commercialized culture remains unanalyzed.

Culture after Commodification

There are clear benefits and damages caused by cultural tourism, and these consequences are intrinsically connected. A simple connection between past and present shows how the Global North remains dominant in the tourism hegemonic system. Wallerstein's World Systems Theory and Marxian theory show how elite forces, such as the owners of production or core countries, hold ultimate control. By causing damage and extracting resources, Latin American states were relegated to the periphery. The commodification continued when these states and their cultures were commercialized for the entertainment and pleasure of elite individuals. Even when indigenous groups willingly commercialize their culture, they do so in the context of a system that left them no choice.

Periphery countries, as aforementioned, serve the Core economic powers by providing resources and low-skill labor. By reinforcing low-skill employment opportunities, the Global North creates the necessity for tourist sectors in Latin America. Women and indigenous groups are only impoverished due to the initial actions of Western Europe in the "New World." Without that initial intervention, cultural tourism in Latin America would not have been exoticized, commodified, and overall demanded. Furthermore, indigenous groups commercialized culture to prevent it from dying off. In most cases, culture loss is due to capitalistic market forces, such as direct genocide or indirect population loss through job markets and a lack of resources.

Finally, by commercializing culture to survive, the traditional parts of culture are often lost in the process of reaching capitalistic "efficiency." The Batakese ulos tradition was interrupted by modernization and mass marketing, leading to the ulos not being produced in the

traditional, cultural manner.³⁶ Once traditionally symbolic, the ulos became a mere product to buy and sell, exemplifying Marx's commodification. In Belize, one Maya Women's Co-op survives by selling traditional crafts. However, ceramic pottery making has completely changed. To be produced faster and more consistently, these women switched from traditional hand-rolling to using modern pottery wheels.³⁷ The materials used remained the same, but the final product and methodology were changed to pursue profit. By commercializing culture to save it, you inherently end up losing it to a capitalistic culture of efficiency and uniformity. While the benefits of cultural tourism do exist, it is impossible to analyze them in a vacuum and ignore the initial harmful actions of the Global North.

Conclusion

Cultural commercialization has a dichotomous impact on the Americas. On one hand, cultural tourism is the product of commodification and exoticism of often neglected or fetishized cultures, and the tourist industry is run by Global Northerners for the benefit of other Global Northerners. Concurrently, cultural tourism and its commercialization of culture provide fiscal benefits for retaining localized cultures while providing marginalized people with some economic power. Ultimately, the cultural tourism industry in Latin America is indicative of Wallersteinian theories of World Systems and the global impact of early elites. Whether the consequences are positive or negative, cultural commodification in Latin America is the direct result of "New World" plundering, globalization, and exotification. By commodifying cultures once villainized or ignored, the Global North retains social and economic power while local people and cultures strive to retain autonomy in our post-Globalized world.

ENDNOTES

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