Staying without Paying

Heading towards free tourism?

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Sociology and
Social Anthropology

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Budapest, Hungary

2007

Abstract

This paper looks at one strand of alternative tourism that has witnessed a great boom in the last decade: decommodified tourism. In trying to explain for this rapid expansion, this study first analyzes some of the basic aspects of the tourism industry and then goes on to follow the birth of alternative tourism. This strand tourism selected out of the very heterogeneous category of alternative tourism pushes for the replacement of the money economy within the sphere of tourism with one economy based upon gift-exchanges. The study then goes on to examine two Internet-based networks that promote this sort of alternative tourism: HospitalityClub and CouchSurfing and to look at the factors that contributed to their fulminating growth. Using Maffesoli's concept of the 'neo-tribe', this article argues that the loosely bound communities of tourists that are formed around these two sites adopt a more sustainable and more critical form of touristic consumption. Nevertheless, the conclusions of this research address the clear-cut distinctions that are being drawn in the literature between the tourist and the post-tourist, and strive to overpass the gap by pointing at some of the similar patterns of consumption which all tourists share.

Introduction

"Nowadays we are all on the move" (Bauman 1998: 77)

Keep moving, keep up or be prepared to be left behind. This seems to be one of the golden precepts of our global age. The category of mobility has exploded, as an Andersenian mirror, into billions of pieces which have been shattered all over the world, giving birth to population dynamics never encountered before. One particular dimension of mobility which has undergone a great metamorphosis has been that of traveling and tourism.

Not only has the tourism industry boomed for the last half century and colonized more and more spaces, but a spill-over effect into the realms of everyday life, has prompted some commentators to bring into question the 'tourism syndrome' (Bauman in Franklin 2003) that is altering some of the long established social patterns.

The beginning of mass tourism was characterized by a clear preference for organized group excursions, where one could visit exotic places, experience novel sensations and still have much of the home comfort due to living in a bubble that would carefully regulate the surrounding environment. This bubble, described as "a well defined part of town designed to envelop the traveler and to shield the visitor from the unpleasant aspects of urban living" (Newman 2002: 301) has been the focus of much attention and criticism but few studies have addressed the alternatives of this institution.

Nevertheless, with the permutations taking place in Western societies at large, especially those changes that aimed at exploding and fluidifying (Bauman 2000) the modern categories of

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social organization, as well as those aiming at being self-critical and reflexive about the grounds of modernity itself (Beck 1992), there has been a similar a paradigm shift in tourism. The metaphor used for describing this move in tourism has been that of the switch from the tourist to the post-tourist. If mass-tourism was about consumption, post-tourism is about critical consumption (Saarinen 1998).

Much of the literature on tourism emphasizes the commoditized aspects of traveling (MacCannell 1999; Urry 1990) and the commercialized side of it (Cohen 1988a). When reading the literature about tourism in the 20th century, one has the impression that the interlocking between tourism and capitalism is an immutable one. With the advent of late capitalism, this union is fetishized, so that it has almost become an academic fashion to decry the traps in which the "tourist" finds himself caught in his search for "leisure away from home" (Böröcz 1996).

Departing from such an approach, I believe that there are instances where an active de-coupling of commodification and tourism is taking place, the most fascinating exponents emerging in the sphere of alternative tourism. The alternative tourist networks that promote decommodification strive to forge a global community of tourists[1], where couches, trust and knowledge are shared and exchanged not for a price but for a loose sort of reciprocity. The resurgence and reconfiguration of the gift-exchange economy from within one of the bastions of capitalism, the tourism industry, has gained momentum with the spread of the Internet and the signs are that it will continue to expand. This global community that is being born on both the Internet and in real life shares much of the characteristics of what Maffesoli (1996) and Bauman,

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[1] I prefer to opt for the non-ideologically loaded definition of tourists given by Eurostst, according to which they are "visitors who stay at least one night in collective or private accommodation in the place/country visited", and thus supersede the fruitless debate between travelers vs. tourists.

building on the previous, describe as the 'neo-tribal' character (1991) of contemporary social forms of organization.

My subject

The aim of my paper is to look at how these counter-hegemonic movements that work against the over-commercialization and commodification of hospitality within tourism operate. For the purpose of my research I investigated two Internet-based virtual networks that are organized around the active promoting of de-commodification. The two networks that I have selected are Hospitality Club and CouchSurfing, created in 2000 and 2004, respectively, and together they have over 500,000 members scattered all around the world. The vast majority of members are from the North Atlantic area, especially from Western and Central Europe making it thus a mostly Western touristic phenomenon.

Their specified goals are to foster "intercultural understanding...bringing people together...travelers and locals" (www.hospitalityclub.org) and they describe themselves as "worldwide network[s] for making connections between travelers and the local communities they visit" (www.couchsurfing.com). What sets them apart from other touristic institutions is the fact that they offer their services for free. More precisely, this means that their members offer accommodation to other members without demanding any money in exchange.

But what are the motives behind such actions? After all, the members of these large networks do not know each other and the only way they find out about each other's presence is through the Internet. Why would anybody agree to host a stranger in his house, let him sleep on

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his couch, and spend time with him? And all of this for free, with no financial obligations following?

Some might argue that the purpose is to receive the same treatment by the person one is hosting, when traveling to his home. Nonetheless, this is rather improbable, as there is no obligation on behalf of the members to reciprocate, and there is an explicit recognition of a "no strings attached" policy for anybody deciding to join these networks. So what keeps these networks going, in spite of all the improbabilities of their existence? And not only what is keeping them working but what explains their rapid expansion (in the course of the year 2006 alone, they witnessed a cumulative increase of over 25%)?

Architecture of my research

My research will address these questions by surveying the existing literature on alternative tourism and also by complementing it with the data that I have gathered in my fieldwork with members from both CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club.

To begin with, because alternative tourism has evolved in direct contrast to mass-tourism, I will first discuss the appearance and evolution of mass-tourism in the modern times. I will briefly analyze the structure of the mass phenomenon in tourism studies, and especially inspect the main element that lies at its core: commodification. I will then change my focus to alternative tourism and how it has unfolded in a somewhat parallel and converse manner to mass-tourism. The next step will be to narrow the focus upon one single element of the ever-growing category of alternative tourism, i.e. decommodified alternative tourism and investigate its logic and workings. For this purpose I will also present the findings of the fieldwork that I have conducted with members from both networks in Europe. The fieldwork was a multi-sited one, with one part

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of the research being conducted in Budapest, Hungary, where I acted as a host for other members and the other parts of my research in different locations in some of the main capital cities and touristic attractions of the European Union (Berlin, Madrid, Paris, Rome, and Vienna) where I took the role of guest. After presenting the results of my inquiry, I will consider the potential for change that this kind of alternative tourism has, both for freeing travelers from the touristic bubble of mass-tourism as well as for fostering a sense of global community for the members of these networks.

My hypothesis

The guiding principle of my research is to investigate if within the field of tourism, basically seen as one where the "commercialization of raw travel experience" (Böröcz 1992) is the defining feature, there can be any instances and trends to the contrary, which move away from commercialization and commodification.

The guiding hypothesis of my research is that de-commodification is possible within the realm of tourism. I suggest that there are novel instances where one can eschew some of the constraints of the complete commodification of (post)modern life and especially of tourism. Therefore, I argue that the decommodification of certain parts within the field of tourism and their removal from the sphere of the market economy can lead to the creation of a tourist community, loosely coagulated, that bears many of the characteristics of Maffesoli's neo-tribes.

These touristic neo-tribes mainly defined by their conscious preference for decommodification have the advantage of empowering the people involved in the networks and by promoting more responsible consuming practices, can also lead to a more sustainable brand of tourism.

Perspectives on tourism

The relevance of tourism for our contemporary society has continuously been argued and empathized in tourism studies. As Franklin and Crang point out:

tourism has broken away from its beginnings as a relatively minor and ephemeral ritual of modern national life to become a significant modality through which transnational modern life is organized…it can no longer be bounded off as a discrete activity, contained tidily at specific locations and occurring during set aside periods (2001:6).

The birth of modern tourism

To begin with, if one wants to discuss alternative networks and infrastructures of traveling, taking into consideration the fact that alternative tourism is defined against the backdrop of mass tourism, one is obliged to take account first and foremost, of mass-tourism. These alternative networks are a direct reaction against the logics of mass-tourism, and most of their ideas reflect a conscious rejection of the capitalist ethos that is embedded within mass-tourism.

In Europe, certain aspects of tourism have existed long before the advent of the industrial revolution and the shift to modern mass-tourism and these different strands have usually been grouped under the heading of proto-tourism. The defining characteristics of this otherwise very

heterogeneous category are its elitist nature and the lack of specialized structures, aimed specifically at a group of people. Amongst the forerunners of tourism one can mention the traditions of religious pilgrimage, health and spa travel as well as the French tradition of voyage, with its emphasis on self-quest and personal improvement.

József Böröcz's analysis (1992, 1996) of the birth of modern tourism in Europe, addresses the most salient issues that mass-tourism is based upon: "standardization, normalization and commercialization of raw travel experience" (1992:737). In his understanding, tourism is equated with leisure migration which "is that type of trade in which the consumer travels to the commodity, resulting in the geographical movements of people for the purpose of consumption." (p.709)

The author traces the emergence of the modern tourism/leisure migration to the early industrial capitalism and the creation of the technological infrastructure necessary for the fast and cheap movement of people across large distances. Complementary to this change, the author also mentions "the transfer of a certain amount of surplus value to wages spent on such types of nonessential consumption as leisure travel."(p.713) Thus, the coupling of technological advances in transportation and the improvement in the standards of living for a high number of people have been designated as the main cause for the appearance and development of mass tourism.

Although in the early years of tourism research the origins of mass-tourism have been rooted in the Grand Tour tradition of the European young aristocrats of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, more recent studies (Nash 1981, Towner 1988), Böröcz amongst them, bring evidence of another historical precursor to contemporary tourism: the tramping tradition. I find this historical difference important as I believe that contemporary alternative tourism has more in common with the tramping tradition than with the Grand Tour one.

The institution of tramping represented a "compulsory long-term international travel as part of craftsmen's training called *tour de France* in France and *Wanderjahr* (or *Wanderpflicht)* in Germany" (Böröcz 1992: 711).

According to Judith Adler:

[O]n the Continent, tramping was linked more explicitly to an early stage of occupational life, journeymen being required to travel for several years before being certified as masters in their craft. Justified as a necessary completion of craft education, the French Tour de France and the German Wanderpflicht (travel duty) served, like the English system, to regulate competition by geographically dispersing workers and delaying entrance to master craftsman status. (1985: 339)

In the heyday of this institution, for many of the youth engaged in it, it represented a rite of passage, one that would take them to the higher status of full grown and experienced adults. After the decline of the institution, the main historical change that it experienced was the shift from a labor-related youth practice to a leisure pursuit of the middle class.

Adler's perspective focuses on the importance of class and the variances that occur between the different ways in which people from the various social strata travel. The way she brings class back in is remarkable for the study of tourism, which tends to focus on overarching generalizations: "[t]ramping was perhaps one of the few activities in which youth of the poorer class could realize some of the highest values of the dominant class culture" (1985: 344) Among the main values that Adler mentions are "the tramp's cosmopolitanism, and hence, implicitly, [the viewing] of tramping as an education of sorts" (1985: 343).

One description of the youth tramps in the 1930s on the territory of the USA brings to mind astonishing similarities to contemporary situations:

Urban in origin and seeking city destinations, they showed a lively curiosity about tourist sights and historical places during the first few months of their travels… These youth kept notebooks in which they recorded names, addresses, directions, and other tips passed on by their fellows. (Adler 1985:344)

Although it has lost much of its search-for-labor connotations, I believe that today's backpackers' tradition shares much in common with the tramping institution. The backpackers have generally been defined as "self-organized pleasure tourists on a prolonged multiples destination journey with a flexible itinerary." (Maoz 2007: 123)

Some of the common characteristics that the two tradition share and which are of interest for me are: the predilection for low-budget or free accommodation, the emphasis on meeting other, especially local people, a more adjustable traveling schedule and the inclination for longer holidays.

Much of the existing literature deals with the backpacking phenomenon as an informal educational institution, a university of travel, for acquiring and improving certain social skills (Desforges 2000, Pearce & Foster 2006, Murphy 2001, Murphy & Pearce 1995). The alternative tourism networks that I am researching include most of the traits that are to be found in the backpackers' culture, but also add extra ones, due to their more heterogeneous composition.

Tourism in the 20th century

The importance of tourism for Western societies has continuously increased and is continuing to grow, as more and more places are marketed for being visited (Holcomb 1999).

The moment when the tourism industry really started to kick off was after the Second World War and during the so called "glorious 30 year period" that brought massive economical improvement to a large share of the population within Western Europe and the USA. Thus, according to the World Tourism Organization estimates, the number of international tourists has skyrocketed from about 25 million in 1950, to 160 million in 1970 and 700 million in 2000.

It is estimated that by the year 2020, this figure will reach about 1.5 billions, and rising (Williams & Balaz 2000). Most of the people that are doing the traveling are European and Europe has also been the main site that has been attracting tourists in the last century. International arrivals in Europe numbered about 414 million in 2003 and are forecast to reach 717 million in 2020 (European Commission report 2004).

When it comes to domestic tourists, there are no clear statistics, but it is estimated that "the overall volume of domestic tourists movements exceeded international tourist arrivals by a factor of ten to one" (Fainstein & Judd 1999: 2). International and domestic tourism are said to account for about 10 percent of global GDP and global employment. About half a million new hotel rooms are being built every year on the globe and at any moment there are over 300,000 passengers in flight above the USA (Urry 2002).

Despite the high increases that the tourism industry is witnessing, tourism will still remain the privilege of the few as the World Tourism Organization estimates that by the year 2020, only

7% of the world population will travel abroad. According to the same statistics, the figure for the year 1996 for the share of the world's population that traveled abroad was only 3.5%.

But what fuels this growth, and why do more and more people choose to travel? There have been a multitude of attempts to establish a conceptual framework for the answer to this question. I will briefly summarize four of the those endeavors which I consider to be the most powerful: Turner's 'liminality' concept, which applied to tourism portrays the tourist as a pilgrim that seeks to give meaning to his life by temporarily separating himself from it and entering into a 'liminality stage'; similar to it, MacCannell's contention that the tourist is an individual in search of authenticity (1990); Bauman's (2003) claim that the 'liquid-modern world' has loosened people's ties to place which in turn has given "rise to the sorts of mobilities, flexibilities and freedoms" (p.206) which fuel tourism; and finally, Urry's argument, which, building on Bauman, argues that the "shifts in the nature of contemporary social life [augment] the role that travel plays in establishing and sustaining social networks" (2002: 258).

To every age its tourists, to tourists their freedom

The main turn in modern tourism has been represented by a shift from standardized mass-tourism to more user adapted and flexible holiday tours and the explosion of the category of the tourist into a myriad of different sub-types and 'post-tourists' (Urry 1990, Ritzer & Liska in Rojek & Urry 1997). Of the many forms of tourism that have evolved consequently, alternative tourism (AT) is merely one possible direction, encompassing a number of other sub-categories. The coinage of the phrase 'alternative tourism' itself has been severely criticized by many authors for its lack of specificity and academic vigor (Dearden & Harron 1994)

For further clarifications and for narrowing down my focus, I will compare two definitions that can be found in the body of research on AT. Jari Järviluoma pointed out that:

[the] tourism literature has many different terms to describe this type of tourism: alternative tourism, appropriate tourism, sustainable tourism, environmentally sensitive tourism, soft tourism, etc. Generally speaking, alternative tourism is small-scale tourism developed by local people and based on local nature and culture. (1992:118).

The other definition, more precise, is that of L.A. Dernoi, who points out the essential importance of infrastructure for AT: " [i]n alternative tourism the 'client' receives accommodation directly in or at the home of the host with, eventually, other services and facilities offered there." (1981: 253)

What both of these definitions have in common is the emphasis on a more personalized connection between host and guest, and a focus upon intercultural knowledge. In the beginnings of AT, there was special attention given to North-South relations and this type of travel was seen as a development tool used by the 'rich' to aid the 'poor' as well as an empowerment strategy that could prove beneficial for the local communities from 'developing' countries. Since then, some strands of AT, especially ecotourism, have come under severe criticism, especially for their lack of sustainability and hypocrisy.

The decommodified alternative tourism (DAT) shares some features with regular AT, but also presents significant departures from the original model. The main departure, as its name suggests is the removal of price from the relationship linking the host and guest. Thus, if AT was still following a strictly economic logic and was part of the industry, DAT aims as operating parallel to the tourism industry and follows a logic that actively promotes decommodification.

The twin processes of commodification and decommodification are central to my research and I will now attempt to clarify their significance, by looking more closely at how they operate.

Commodification : Pay per view

In the course of the erection of the tourism industry and for the mechanics that govern it, commodification seems to play an essential part; it is essential for the processes that lay claim upon an area and mark it for being gazed upon. The most important element which is involved in putting places on the map/guidebook of the potential tourist is the tourist gaze, which has been extensively documented by John Urry (1990, 1995, 1999). Urry proposed the metaphor of "the tourist gaze", as a heuristic device aimed at understanding how people are educated into seeing as different something that they had been seeing before, and how they are encouraged to pay for getting to a certain site in order to see and "experience" it.

Commodification or commoditization, as it is sometimes found, has been described by Cohen as "a process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value [i.e. money], in a context of trade, thereby becoming goods (and services)" (1988:380).

Much of the literature dealing with modern tourism has been revolving around the changes ushered in by the translation and transformation of things, activities and experiences from their use value to their exchange value, and thus about their entry into the market. One of the heated debates that this theme sparked was whether commodification leads to the disappearance of authenticity (Boorstin 1964) or whether authenticity can still survive and take different forms in a commodified context (Olsen 2002). I do not wish to enter this discussion, as I

do not believe the question was asked right from the start. I prefer to look at authenticity as a Western construction and obsession, which have been cleverly marketed and exploited by the tourism industry.

The consequences that commodification brings can be studied at different levels, but I will focus here only upon those within the social sphere. The main change occurs at the inter-personal level where:

with commodification one can see a change from personal relationship towards often anonymous market relations. The relations between people are replaced by relations between people and things. [This process] can be demeaning and dehumanizing, but also liberating and progressive, giving room for social innovation by destroying traditional bounds. (Fleissner 2006)

And as Callon writes in the introduction to the edited book *The Laws of the Market*s:

We are all familiar with the attacks of Marx and Simmel against money and their denunciation of its destructive and alienating power. Marx saw money as the fetish par excellence of the modern world; one that concealed the reality of relationships between the people that lay behind the relationships between things. (1998: 33)

Although the commodification of accommodation is not a modern phenomenon, and has probably existed ever since money was invented, what modernity has brought about was the massive spread of institutions designed to provide shelter to anybody seeking it and willing to pay for it. Thus, besides the inns, taverns and church establishments that were providing a place where one could stay when in need, the industrial revolution brought about the appearance of hotels, motels, hostels and other similar institutions which were targeted at a different sort of audience: the tourist.

Watson and Kopachevsky's approach to the theme of consumption within the field of tourism, similar to Cohen's, is symptomatic for a vast part of the work done in the field of tourism research and casts a pessimistic and somehow downhearted view on tourism: "as in the modern culture of consumption generally, touristic consumption is 'sign-driven' and media-driven, subjects to the dictates of commodity exchange and consumption patterns" (1996: 283). The concluding remarks from their study on the 'Interpretations of tourism as commodity' ends in an equally apprehensive tone: "Perhaps, then, modern tourism…confirms Max Weber's melancholy conclusion that in modern society a highly reduced view of freedom and happiness was the most that intelligent people could expect from life" (1996:293).

Contrary to much of the work that discusses the close interconnections between the advancements of capitalism and the ubiquitous extension of commodification within all spheres of social and economic life, the excellently argued and data suffused work of Colin C. Williams refutes many of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the proponents of what he calls 'the commodification thesis'. His endeavor is very similar to Karl Polanyi's attempt to map the limits of early capitalism in his classical work *The Great Transformation*: "[f]or a century the dynamics of modern society was governed by a double movement: the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by the countermovement checking the expansion in definite direction." (1957: 130)

Williams argues that the 'commodification thesis' is a "meta-narrative that is seldom challenged" (2005: 24-25) Most of the researchers that have dealt with it have considered it so obvious that few have bothered to bring empirical evidence that would support their argument, but instead opted for lamenting the negative consequences that commodification has had upon social relations. In support of his argument he offers evidence from the writings of authors such

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as Ciscel and Heath who argue that "capitalism is transforming 'every human interaction into a transient market exchange'", and Gudeman (2001:144) [who argues] that markets 'are subsuming greater portions of everyday life'" (2005: 23). Moreover, Appadurai's assumption that "the consumer has been transformed through commodity flows into a sign...a mask for the real seat of agency" (1996: 57) does not completely hold water, and the aim of my research is to look exactly at those particular instances that contradict this approach.

Contrary to the 'commodification theory', Williams convincingly shows that in our contemporary societies there exists a large non-commodified sphere, which not only is diminishing, but, on the contrary, is expanding and has about the same size as the commodified sphere. Nevertheless, posing the question in such a manner that frames the market versus the non-commodified sphere is not the best solution for coming up with an answer. Following Callon (1998), I will try to nuance my approach so as to leave space for a multitude of markets and non-commodified spheres that coexist and where translation of process from one entity to the other is possible, in all directions.

From Williams' three-fold description of the non-commodified sphere, which is defined as being made up of: the non-exchanged/subsistence work, the non-monetized exchange and the not-for-profit monetized exchange, I will focus upon the second dimension, as this will be the most relevant for the current study.

Although Williams's definition is rather vague and all encompassing, I believe that it can apply to my discussion of the hospitality networks that form the core of my research. Thus, for the author, non-monetized exchange refers to "unpaid work undertaken by household members for members of households other than their own. This can occur either through organizations, associations and groups…or on a one-to-one basis between individuals" (2005: 49). The first

instance is referred to as formal volunteering, while the second is known as informal volunteering. Another dimension of volunteering is unpaid reciprocity. Thus a person who agrees to host an unknown person and to take care of his guest without asking for any pay in exchange, as is the case of the members of the Internet networks I am studying, is engaged in a form of non-monetized exchange.

Although it is more difficult to quantify the costs and benefits of such sort of exchange, the literature usually makes the distinction between two sorts of benefits: output benefits and process benefits. The first type of benefit is transferable, while the second non-transferable. According to Williams, "[w]ith non-monetized exchange, the transferable [output] benefits are the services provided by others. The non-transferable process benefits are the pleasures obtained by the participants from the time spent giving." (2005: 52)

In the case of the two networks that I will be investigating, the main output benefit that is being transferred is hospitality and accommodation, while the main process benefit is the satisfaction of the host. I will come back upon the theme of the satisfaction of the host, when I discuss the circulation and accumulation of social capital through these hospitality networks.

Moving away from a strictly economic perspective of the non-monetized exchange I will attempt to move towards another paradigm from the social sciences, one that locates the individual and its role within society at its central point.

Alternative economies: gift exchange

Another useful way of framing the non-monetized exchange or unpaid reciprocity is to look at the theory of gift exchange, and especially Mauss's dwellings into the field. This anthropological perspective has the advantage of providing me with better tools, tailored for zooming in on the actual exchanges taking place within the above mentioned networks.

The original model that Mauss proposed had at its core the idea that gifts are never free, they are only "apparently free and disinterested but nevertheless constrained and self-interested" (1990: 3]. He then went on to investigate how exchange through gifts contributes to the forming of social solidarity and the ways in which they reinforce it. Mauss coined the terms "total social phenomena" and "total services" to explicate an intricate network of social institutions that act simultaneously, according to "special forms of production and consumption...and of distribution" (Mauss 1990: 3) in a certain instance. According to Mauss, the institution of "total services" has three main characteristics: reciprocity of presents, obligation to give presents and obligation to receive them.

In the case of the decommodified alternative tourism, hospitality is the main practice that is being performed and exchanged in the interaction between members of these networks. Hospitality defined as "the reception and entertainment of guests" (Heuman 2005: 407) can be of two types: traditional and commercial. The main difference lies in the fact that the second is being given in return for money, while the first operates according to a different mechanism.

Citing Aramberri, Heuman describes the three main features of traditional hospitality as being: "[the] protection of the guest by the host, reciprocity, and a batch of duties for both sides" (2005: 407-8). Although the word "traditional" can be misleading, and makes us think of past

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customs and societies, it is mostly this sort of hospitality that is being exchanged within DAT. Nevertheless, there are certain important differences between traditional hospitality and what I would call 'new-age' hospitality, and the most important one is the renunciation of the formal obligation to reciprocate.

Returning to Mauss's model, although his focus was mainly on primitive societies and some of his findings have been proven to be inexact, I will try to refine his model and apply it to the case of DAT and de-commodified hospitality networks. One of the most important corrections that have to be made to this model is that of considering downgrading the hospitality exchange from a total social phenomenon to a total voluntary social phenomenon. By this, I mean to say that all of the 3 conditions (reciprocity, obligation to give and to receive) should still be fulfilled, but the degree of constraint upon the agents to follow them is significantly reduced, and thus it is possible to skip them without significantly affecting the whole phenomenon.

The Internet and hospitality exchange

The main cause for the transformation of hospitality can be traced back to the architecture of the infrastructure that makes possible the networks' existence in the first place: the Internet. Peter Kollock's study on "The economies of online cooperation" (Kollock and Smith 1999) has proven to be a great source of inspiration and ideas for my research. While comparing the two types of classical economies, he affirms that:

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Gift exchanges should not involve explicit bargaining or demands that the gift be reciprocated, but a relationship in which there is only giving and no receiving is unlikely to last. The contrast to a gift exchange is a commodity transaction, in which no obligation exists after the exchange is consummated…Thus, gift economies are driven by social relations while commodity economies are driven by price. (1999:221-222)

The social relations that a network entails and the myriad of connections that are formed between the members of networks, whether they are virtual, real or both advances the discussion to the last crucial element that I would like to analyze: social networks within the field of tourism.

Social networks within the sphere of tourism are increasingly becoming to be noticed, and probably the most prolific author on this theme has been John Urry. I believe his in-sights and findings to be extremely valuable and pertinent and will make extensive use of them in my analysis of the two networks. In his most recent article, co-written with Jonas Larsen and Kay Axhausen, he pushes for the recognition of the importance of tourism for reinforcing social relations:

The rich societies of the West and North…seem to have shifted from little boxes, where there was strong, overlapping membership of different social groups, to a system of networks where connections are spatially dispersed…tourism should not necessarily be seen as marginal. Rather traveling, visiting and hosting are necessary to much social life conducted at-a-distance. (2007: 244-245)

The advent of the Internet has had a great impact upon both of the classical types of economies, but I will focus here only on the consequences that it has had on the gift-exchange economy. Of the most important changes, the ubiquity of anonymity and the vastness in the number of members are the main ones. Thus, an individual one-to-one exchange is not always

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possible and not even highly desirable within the networks. As Kollock remarks: "while a balanced reciprocity with a particular individual may not be possible, there is a sense in which a balance might occur within the group, as a whole" (1999:222). He brings into discussion Peter Elek's concept of 'generalized exchange', where one benefit given to a person does not have to necessarily be reciprocated by the recipient, but by any other member of a group. A similar way of framing this problem could be that of 'delayed reciprocity', where the time span of the return of the benefit is indefinite or very loosely specified in a certain social network.

The 'new-age' hospitality, and especially the communities and networks that have sprouted since the penetration of the Internet into the daily lives of Western societies are based upon a very loose organization, one that perfectly fits Maffesoli's (1996) description of the neo-tribe. I believe that the neo-tribe is a good framework for looking at the ways in which the decommodified alternative tourism networks work and at the people that make up their members. The main general characteristics of neo-tribes, according to Bauman's interpretation of Maffesoli, are that they are formed

"as concepts rather than integrated social bodies- by a multitude of **individual acts of self-identification**… 'Membership' is relatively **easily revocable**; and is divorced from long-term obligations; this is a kind of 'membership' that does not require an admission procedure or authoritative ruling, and that ca be dissolved without permission or warning. [Neo]-tribes 'exist' solely by individual decisions to support the symbolic traits of tribal allegiance. They persevere thanks only to their continuing **seductive capacity.** They cannot outlive their power of attraction. (1991: 249)

Nevertheless, the 'new-age' hospitality exchange brings with it one of the classical social dilemmas: how can a network both continue to offer free couches while avoiding becoming a network of free riders/surfers?

One tentative answer to this dilemma would be that there is a certain cohesive element that keeps the members together. This elusive element is what others have referred to as social capital. I mean to say that there is a certain configuration of social capital that makes some people join the network, where that pre-existing social capital is renewed and transformed, giving rise to higher rates of this kind of capital. But to clarify this discussion, I will briefly turn to some of the relevant authors that have dealt with this extensively. The triad of founding fathers identified as the main contributors to the early debate on social capital has been: Pierre Bourdieu (1979), James Coleman (1991) and Robert Putnam (2000), but I will only focus here on the later.

Putnam's approach is the one that I consider the most relevant for my analysis, and his definition of social capital, the most appropriate: "by social capital I mean features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam quoted in Barron, Field & Schuler 2000). A very similar approach, but one that emphasizes access to power belonging to Christiaan Grootaert, reads: "social capital generally refers to the set of norms, networks and organizations through which people gain access to power and resources and through which decision making and policy formulation occur" (2001: 10).

Coming back to John Urry's extensive research in the field of tourism, his study on *Mobility and Proximity,* building critically on Putnam's analysis (2000), addresses in a direct manner the connections between mobility and social capital accumulation:

Mobility in general is central to gluing social networks together, while physical travel is especially important in facilitating those face-to-face co-present conversations, to the making of links and social connections, albeit unequal, that endure over time. Such connections derived from co-presence can generate relations of trust that enhance both social and economic inclusion. (2002:265)

Thus, relating these discussions to my work, I will try to investigate how the de-commodified alternative tourism networks manage to secure the active participation of their members in the absence of any financial sanctions they can use, which are the norms of the network and how are they reinforced in the absence of classical policing institutions.

Additionally, I will inspect how trust and security are generated in the disembodied environment of the Internet and then transferred to real life encounters between strangers and how all of these contribute to foster a sense of community for the members of these networks.

Methodology

In order to understand how the theme of decommodification is played out within the sphere of tourism, I decided to join and become an active member in the two main networks that are operating in the field of DAT: Hospitality Club and CouchSurfing. Thereafter, they constituted the focal points of my research. My joining the two networks coincided with my moving to a place where I had the opportunity to host people.

Besides some basic statistical operations, the main tools that I used to explore and map the two social networks were semi-structured interviews, participant observation and content analysis of the two sites.

Over a time-frame of 4 months, I have conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with people that I have hosted, people that I stayed with and other people that were passing through Budapest. Additionally, I have conducted two interviews with members of Servas, a non-Internet based network for hospitality exchange, which has been the predecessor for the two Internet-based networks. These last interviews allowed me to see to what extent the new media infrastructure affects this sort of networks and to contrast some of their features.

I believe the semi-structured interview to be the most adequate for an exploratory enterprise, such as mine. Flexibility is its main advantage and this form of interview allowed me to make the necessary changes and adjustments to my inquiry throughout the duration of the interview.

The main themes that I focused upon in the interviews I had with my informants revolved around their entry into the networks, their motivations and strategies for using the networks, the

encountered narratives about the network and their experiences of using the networks. One essential element that I paid great attention to has been the issue of trust and techniques for gaining, securing and reproducing it, in a disembodied medium such as the Internet. Most of the interviews were conducted in Budapest, with the exception of 4 interviews that I conducted during my fieldwork, in different locations around Europe. These interviews were conducted with my hosts in Berlin, Paris, Madrid and Rome.

As a member of the network can choose between being a host, a guest, or both, I believed that by only acting as a host in Budapest, some important aspects of the networks would remain uncovered and out-of limits for my research. Self-ethnography was one of the options that I considered, in order to correct this lack, but it proved insufficient for such volatile and dynamic networks. Therefore, I decided to organize a 3 week trip to some of the main capitals *and* touristic cities in Continental Europe. The main condition for the success of this trip was that I only stayed with people from either CS or HC, and thus tested the limits of this alternative touristic infrastructure. My chosen itinerary was: Budapest-Berlin-Paris-Madrid-Rome-Bucharest-Vienna-Budapest, and this order was mainly determined by the constraints of the transportation infrastructure (i.e. the routes of lost cost carriers).

Amongst the reasons for focusing on these places I would like to mention, first of all, that Europe has the largest share of members in both networks (44.7% of CS and around 60% in HC).

The capital cities of the selected countries have the highest number of members both in CS or HC, and they are the most popular visited places for people who use these networks. Additionally, they are also the main touristic cities of Europe, with a long tradition in mass-tourism. Thus, I could explore and contrast the different opportunities and possibilities offered by the two modes of traveling.

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Being hosted by other members of these networks, I got the chance to live with them for a period ranging from two to five days and the method of participant observation seemed but a logical complement to the interviews that I conducted with them.

This method proved to be very adequate for exploring how people structure their homes for accommodating their guests, how people react to the actions of their guests and what activities they perform in common with them. I could thus observe and participate in the daily routine of my hosts as well as accompany them at different events and meetings which they had scheduled for my visit. I had the chance to meet some of their friends and to see what importance they attach to the networks they are part of, within the larger sphere of their social activities.

One other instance where I combined the two methodological approaches has been at the HC/CS meetings in Budapest, which were regularly organized by some of the members, where I got the chance to see how people from these networks interact and socialize. What was particularly interesting about these meetings was the fact that almost nobody knew the other members from real life, but only from cyberspace and the translation from one medium to the other proved to be a fascinating process. I will discuss, at length, the translation processes as well as the patterns for interaction in the section dedicated to the findings of my research and I will make use of examples from my fieldwork to illustrate them better.

How it all works

Both networks were created shortly after the year 2000: Hospitality Club (HC) exactly that year and CouchSurfing (CS) in 2004 (following a server crash, in 2006 CouchSurfing 2 was launched). They both started as a grass-roots movement, the first being launched by Veit Kühne, then a 22 year old German student and the second by Casey Fenton, a 28 year old, New Hampshire born American

Before going on to analyze these two networks, I have to mention that they are not the only ones of their kind, and that there have existed similar attempts to create such networks in the past, the most notable being Servas Open Doors, an organization created in 1949 by Bob Luitweiler which aimed at promoting international peace, tolerance and a better contact between East and West. There also exists other similar networks to CS and HC in the present, such as GlobalFreeLoaders[2], BeWelcome[3] or TravelHoo[4] but their size and coverage is much more limited. Nevertheless, all of these networks are distinguished by their transnational scope, with linkages throughout the whole world, and members spread in most of the parts of the world.

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[2] http://www.globalfreeloaders.com/
[3] http://www.bewelcome.org/
[4] http://www.travelhoo.com/dotnet/main.aspx

Institutionalization: grass-roots move to the sky

As Borocz (1992, 1996) convincingly showed, through the creation of the tourism industry, mass-tourism has been able to standardize and institutionalize the 'raw travel experience'.

The globetrotters, alternative tourists, global nomads, backpackers and the people that identify themselves as global "travelers" (as opposed to "tourists") make up a group that has also been under way of being institutionalized, along with their experiences of travel. In the case of backpackers this phenomenon has already been extensively analyzed by such authors as (Bell 2002, Maoz 2007, Pearce & Foster 2007). In most of the cases it has been the tourism industry that has reached out towards these groups and has diversified its services so as to cater for them. For example O'Reilly's study (2006) of the British Gap Year convincingly shows how backpacker's travel has been mainstreamed and turned by the tourist industry into a commercial success). Nevertheless, these are not the only possible variants for institutionalization.

I will now turn to the attempts towards institutionalization that have come from within the group itself, and the two networks represent perfect examples. In the case of couchsurfers[5], the drive towards institutionalization has come from within the backpackers' group itself, the main tool for implementing it being the Internet. As can be seen from the autobiographies found on their sites, the "founding fathers" of the two networks were both in their early 20s when they decided to create these networks and were both active backpackers and travelers. Browsing through CS founder, Casey Fenton's testimony:

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[5] I will use this term from here on to refer to the members of both of the HC and CS

I drove across the United States more than 20 times. Went to Europe for a weekend. Drove to New Foundland in the dead of winter. Stopped in Black Rock City on a whim. On and on. I just couldn't get enough of these adventures…

This was a time when the concept of the CouchSurfing Project started to form. It solidified when I decided to take a weekend trip to Iceland one May. I'd gotten a cheap web-special from Boston to Iceland on a Monday and would fly that Friday. What would I do when I got there? Stick it out in a hotel? A hostel? I thought about the idea of contacting someone on the Internet and seeing if I could hang out with them and maybe sleep at their house… On the personal side, the CouchSurfing Project also represents an inward journey...

One can discover here some of the common elements that make up the travel biographies of young Western tourists, which, according to Desforges seek to find answers "to questions that are raised about self-identity at fateful moments" (2000: 936) through tourism.

Due to the ways in which they came into existence, both networks can be classified as grass-root movements aiming at creating a more 'stable' infrastructure for the tourist community. Both of them were constituted outside of the tourism industry and without any corporate support. This has been one of the pre-requisite of their philosophies and this attests to their counter-hegemonic stance, in their drive against the logics of the tourism industry and its capitalist mode organization. The reason why I am cautious about using the word 'stable' alongside the figure of the tourist, is due to the notorious incapacity of the tourist to form stable bonds with the place and the people visited, and, coming back to Bauman (1991) for a moment, this incapacity of long term commitments or of any commitment at all, on behalf of tourists is one of the main characteristics of contemporary neo-tribes. As one can recall, the neo-tribes are formed around a concept through the self-identification acts of numerous people, being defined by a very loose and flexible organizational structure, where one can easily gain or drop membership.

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Although due to their large numbers and global sprawl it is difficult to establish what sorts of people are drawn to these networks, I believe that a significant part of these are people that would fall in the general category of backpackers as they seem to form the group that is most likely to react to the advantages offered by the networks. A second group is made up by people who cannot travel themselves and who prefer to act mostly as hosts, out of different reasons.

I believe that looking at the principles of the networks and the general characteristics of their members will bring further evidence to substantiating my claim both about the neo-tribal character of the network as well as the, mostly, back-packing character of its members. As the backpackers have a preference for budget trips, the fact that they could save money on accommodation is a powerful incentive which few could turn down.

Networks' credo & the members

The rules and goals of the two networks are very similar, and the main differences that distinguish them are the design of their websites, the acquisition of membership[6] and the coverage area, with CS being better represented in North American while HC being better represented in Europe. Still, in both networks Europe is the best represented continent. Due to these minor differences I will treat the two networks as structurally equivalent entities in the realm of global tourism.

The HC network describes itself as a non-for-profit, volunteer run organization, which promotes "intercultural understanding...bringing people together...travelers and locals" Amongst the advertised advantages of entering the network, the most important of them are presented as

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[6] In HC every profile is reviewed by the administrators of the network, while in CS this filter is absent

being those of receiving *free accommodation worldwide*, the opportunity to *meet friendly people* and the chance of increasing *intercultural understanding* everything at *no cost at all*. Other advantages it brings: there are *no obligations* and the fact that the site is *non-commercial* and has built-in *safety features* (in italics is the exact wording to be found on the website).

From this succinct description one can see that decommodification is the main element that is being emphasized, with no less than four references to it (free, no cost, no obligations & non-commercial), out of a total of seven most important advantages of joining the network.

Like HC, CouchSurfing's description is remarkably similar:

"CouchSurfing is a non-profit organization dedicated to the global community. CouchSurfing was created specifically so that everyone can travel the world and partake in cultural exchange. Staying with your host(s) is also always free; it is contrary to the values of CouchSurfing and against our terms of use to charge someone to surf your couch. Our mission is to facilitate high quality experiences for people exploring the world and giving back to humanity. Our goal is to make diverse cultures of the world more connected, making the world a smaller, more peaceful place. We network travelers and locals on every continent, creating friendships and strengthening cross-cultural understanding."

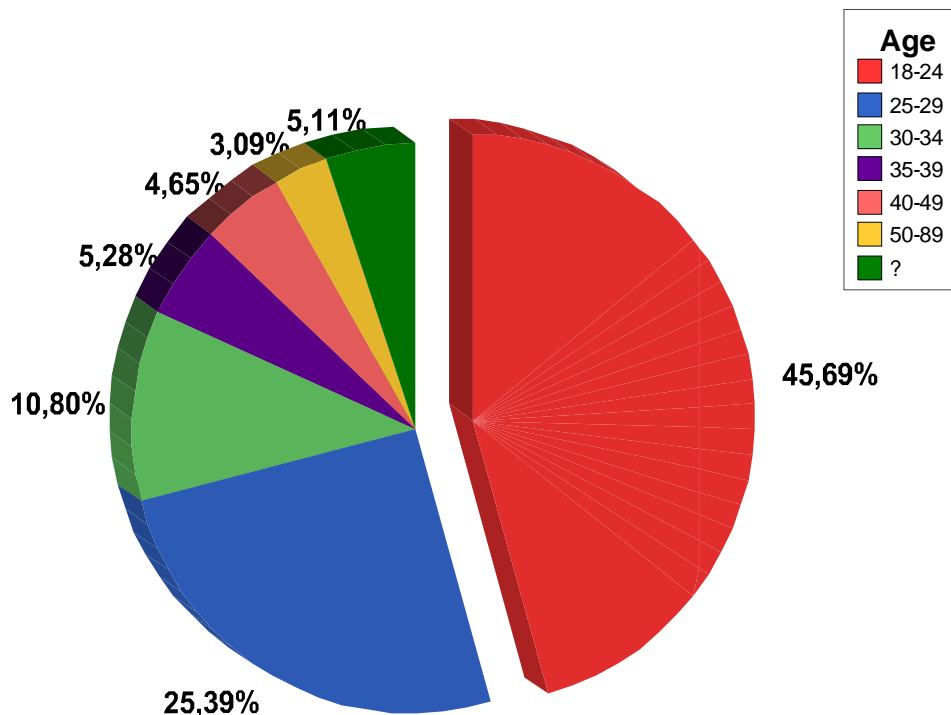 (http://www.couchsurfing.com/help.html)

Comparing the two statements, one can extract the main ideas that make up their philosophy: the promotion of de-commodified/free accommodation, which goes hand in hand with the fully voluntary aspect and lack of any formal obligations to participate in this project; the networking of people across the world and the attempt to create a global community of tourist; and the fostering of intercultural exchange. All of these features remarkably fit into Maffesoli's characterization of a neo-tribe, as previously presented. Before going on to consider

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each of these three features in more detail and to contrast them to the working of mass-tourism, I will try to give a general description of the members of these networks.

The statistics[7] available on the CS site are the most comprehensive about the characteristics of its members and I will mostly retort to them in my analysis. Because the two sites are very similar, most of findings regarding the members of CouchSurfing also apply to the members of Hospitality Club.

According to the CS[8] statistics (see figure 1) the average age of the users is 26 years, with the most of the members to be found in the 18-24 age cohort: almost half of the users falling in this category (45.7%); the next biggest group is that made up of the 25-29 age cohort, with a little

Figure 1. Age distribution in the CouchSurfing organization

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[7] From here on, all information about the statistics of the two networks will be taken from their sites, as they are the only ones having the database of their own numbers.
[8] www.couchsurfing.com/statistics.html

over a quarter of the total number of members (25.4%); 10.8% in the 30-34 age cohort while the rest, above 35 make up about 13% of the total (excluding 5.1% of the members who have not specified their age).

The gender distribution in this network shows a clear over-representation of men, against women, with 52.3% of the members falling in this 'male' category, while only 36.8% of the members falling in the 'female' category. The rest of 10.9% is equally divided between the 'several people' and the 'unknown' categories. The over-representation of men could be explained, amongst other things by the fact that some of the people who join consider it a good opportunity to meet women, in spite of the fact that CS warns the people who want to register that it is not a dating community.

The distribution of members according to world regions, in both networks, clearly points out to the fact that these networks are part of a larger Western phenomenon, and most of their members are drawn from North America and Europe (especially Western Europe) (see figure 2 & 3). The birth place of these networks has also affected, in a certain measure the extent of their coverage, with both the USA and Germany being over-represented in the American-based CS and German-based HC, respectively. According to the online statistics the USA has 25.5% of the total number of members in CS, but only 9% of the total in HC while Germany has about 18% of the total number of members in HC[9] but only 6.7% of the total in CS.

Germany occupies the first place according to number of members in HC, with over 50,000 members. France, Italy and Spain occupy the 3rd, 5th and 9th places, respectively. A similar situation exists in CS, where Germany, France and Italy occupy the 3rd, 4th and 6th places, respectively, with the first two countries being the US and Canada.

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[9] http://secure.hospitalityclub.org/hc/hcworld.php

Members

Figure 2. Number of members in CouchSurfing

World region

Africa | Asia | Europe | N. America | Oceania | other | S. America | unknown
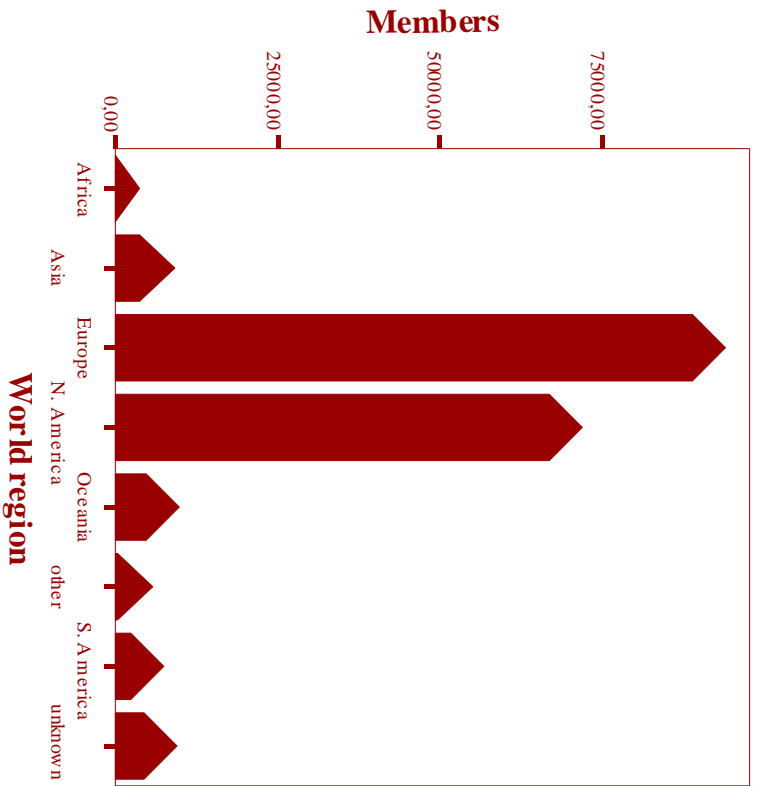
Members

Figure 3. Number of members in Hospiality Club

World Region

Africa | Asia | Europe | N. America | Oceania | S. America | unknown
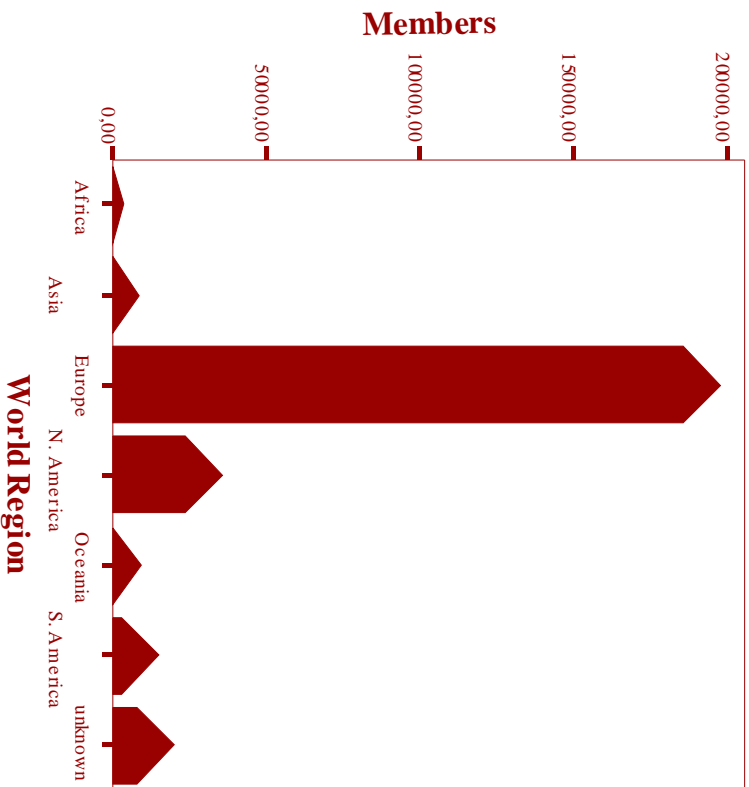
Finally, 83,7% of the members speak English, while the next most common language is French with only 31,1% of the members speaking it. There is no difference made between native speakers and non-native speakers as the site only takes into consideration the self-reported language skills of its members (ranging from beginner, intermediate to excellent).

In spite of the benefits that seem to make alternative tourism very attractive, there are certain other obstacles that keep popping up and which should limit our optimism as: almost the entire communication taking place between members from different cultures and countries is being conducted in English. Thus, the language barriers do exist and for people who are not part of the dominant cultures of the world (i.e. English, French, German, Spanish etc.) and for those who do not speak other languages it is more difficult to join and participate in these networks, hence limiting the founders' claim that "everyone can travel". Therefore, one has to keep in mind that language, especially English, while acting more and more in our globalized world as a bridging element across cultures is also an exclusionary element for those who do not speak it. In this case, it is mostly the older generations from non-English speaking cultures that are disadvantaged.

Rules of the network

In order to join either of the networks one has to register online. The translation of one's self-hood from the real world to the virtual world takes place, as it is common to this environment, through the creation of an on-line profile. Anybody who is over 18 years of age and has access to Internet can become a member, thus making the network an almost all inclusive one.

One element that should be stressed is that these networks are hybrid networks which signifies that they need both virtual interaction *and* physical presence, or what Urry called 'co-presence' (2002) in order to work. The virtual network makes up the infrastructure which enables members to establish links with other members, but this only results in a disembodied type of socialization, one that is less likely to create bonds between the members. Only after the members travel and make contact in real life can the potentialities of the networks be enacted.

Upon joining the network, one can choose if he wants to host, be a guest or both. The rules in this respect are very loose, as can be seen from this comment:

You don't need a couch to join! As long as you anticipate sharing your couch sometime in your lifetime, or have already shared it, you're 100% welcome here! (www.couchsurfing.com)

Unlike other cases of tourism, the distinction between host and guest is not very relevant here, as anybody can change from one state to the other without any difficulty. Still, there are some cases where some members prefer only to act as hosts, and I will examine them in the last section, dedicated to intercultural exchange.

One has a great deal of leeway in constructing one's profile (for example see Figure 4), and there are few restrictions as to the length of self-characterization and picture uploading. The main categories that one has got to fill in constructing his profile, beside the purely factual ones (such as sex, age, occupation, etc.) fall into two categories: narrative identity and socialization. The first one incorporates the personal description, the description of the type of accommodation offered (if any), the personal preferences as well as the description of one's worldview/philosophy. The second category includes, first of all, the languages skills, then the

type of people one prefers to have around, and finally the friends that one has in this network. I will come back to this last element in the section dedicated to trust generation and social capital.

After becoming a member, one is free to start looking for hosts in the desired placed that one wants to travel to. The way it works is very simple: first one has to look if there are any members registered in the place to be visited and then to send emails requesting to be hosted. If there are hosts that are free and want to accommodate that person, they answer back signaling that they are available. After this a negotiating phase takes place, where the host and guest agree upon the number of days of stay as well as on how to get in contact.

Figure 4. CS profile of the author

Decommodified accommodation & generalized reciprocity

As I have mentioned previously, joining these network is free of charge, and so is the accommodation that can be found with the members. The types of accommodation available are very different ranging from having one's own bedroom (very rarely even a house) to sleeping on a mattress, on the floor or even camping in one's backyard. All this depends on the material possibilities of the members and it is usually indicated in one's profile, so that the people who travel know what to expect from the hosts they have selected. Additionally to free accommodation a host can offer free food or other perks, all depending on his willingness and his material conditions. During my fieldwork, all the hosts that I stayed with offered me my own room as well as the keys to their apartments.

Free accommodation refers to the fact that one does not to have money in order to stay with other people and sleep in their house. But this usually leads to the creation of an unbalanced situation between the guest and host, where the host is in a position of advantage, him being the one giving, while the guest is in a way dependent on what the other wants to share.

In order to balance this situation, the guest should reciprocate in some way, so as not to be only a receiver but also a giver. As there is no obligation to reciprocate by offering accommodation, the guest has to find alternative ways of reciprocating, ones that can be enacted in the present moment of his hosting. The most common option is that of cooking a dinner for the host, and this is also stipulated on the profile of the members.

Thus, for example, out of the 7 people I have hosted all but one has reciprocated in one way or the other: people usually preferred to opt for the universal language of taste, and cook something from their own culinary culture. While doing my fieldwork I have also chosen to

reciprocate in a similar manner. One of hosts from Rome, a 30 year old woman, with whom I spent 5 days as a guest, told me when I asked her about the free character of the CS:

I don't know because in a certain sense you pay. You cooked for us, you spent a lot of money. Usually CS offers us dinner. (C, 30, Italy)

But there are other ways to reciprocate, all depending on the character and skills of the members.

For example Neil from Oxford helped me with my lamp, and fixed some other things around the house. And he helped us with our English, with our grammar. And Simon brought us some wine and we got stoned every night. (C, 30, Italy)

One of my guests, a 21 year old boy from Wyoming, USA, traveling around Europe for 6 months similarly answered:

I got her [the host] a bottle of red wine. It's nicer to bring something from the place you have been: when I went to Denmark I bought them some wine from Paris. (J, 21, USA)

As there are no written rules and obligations to reciprocate in these networks, it is up to every member to decide for him whether he wants to reciprocate in the first place, and then how exactly to do it. This is what I have called the 'new-age hospitality' and it differs from the traditional type of hospitality by being less strict about the rules of reciprocation, the time span of an exchange as well as to the objects being exchanged. First of all one is not obliged to reciprocate at all, as there are very few measures or institutions for enforcing that and the chances of a second encounter between the guest and host are limited, secondly, the guest could get away

with a vague promise of hosting the present host, placed in an indefinite future without being considered a free rider, and thirdly he is not bound to reciprocate by offering accommodation in exchange but can choose other ways of 'paying back'.

Nevertheless, not reciprocating in any way does hold the risk of being considered a free rider and of getting a negative or neutral reference in one's profile, thus diminishing the chances of getting hosted in the future. In this case the risk of being excluded from the network by the administrators is small, but the chances that that person will be avoided or turned down from other members are high.

What keeps the networks coagulated, as in the case of similar Internet-based entities is the existence of a generalized reciprocity, whereby what one offers will come back to him not necessarily from the initial receiver of the accommodation, but from other people. What matters is the fact that other people can see on his profile that he has hosted, and thus acquired the necessary credentials for being considered an active member in the network.

One striking feature is that the less explicit the rules are, the more powerful they are to abide by. The people that I have met both as a guest and host seemed to share the same basic principles of hospitality. Communication with most of them was facilitated by this common background that we seemed to have. Out of the two possible hypothesis for explaining this common attribute of the members of the networks: one arguing that this similarity is an outcome of the structure of the network and the other arguing that the network itself is the outcome of the similarity of people who join it, I opt for the later and believe that it is an instance of selection bias, whereby similar people are attract by similar people to join a network.

But how similar are the people in the network? This is, again, difficult to establish precisely, but having in mind the general statistics of the networks as well as my own

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observations from the fieldwork I believe that some common characteristics can be established: they are mostly in their 20s and early 30s, college graduates or under way of graduating thus having a good formal education, working or studying. While they are not affluent people, they do are not financially strapped, and far from being destitute. They have a decent standard of living, and they can afford to go out for dinner with their friends several times a week. Nevertheless, they are not the very rich, with only a few outliers in the network. For example, one of my hosts recalled about a friend of hers couchsurfing experience in Moscow, where she stayed with the member of the Philippines diplomatic corpus, and being carried around Moscow in a limo.

Most of them own or rent an apartment big enough for accommodating extra people, besides the regular inhabitants of the house located in the proximity of the city center, or in a residential area well connected to the center. Most of them are fluent in speaking English or have a good knowledge of it.

One paradox of these networks is that although they are for free, it is not the people with very limited financial resources that use them, but the more affluent, those that otherwise have the means to pay for a hostel or hotel while traveling, but instead choose to stay for free in order to benefit both from the material gains but especially from the social and cultural advantages that come with the decommodified tourism. My host from Rome, who was working for a pharmaceutical company, related:

For me money is not important. For me being in CS is not because you don't pay but because it's a different way of travel. Being in a hotel is not like staying in a real house. (C, 30, Rome)

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Or as one Servas member similarly said :

I think that the membership was of a selected group of people because all the members were open and internationally oriented. Almost all of them. You could find some people who were interested in exotic things or justice and freedom. So of course not only for the money. I think this is a certain kind of people who offer you their home. I think these are the nicer kind of people, not only because I belong to this group. (Z, 57, Budapest)

By eliminating the costs that one has to pay for accommodation, the overall costs are significantly reduced. For example if one takes into consideration that the budget tourist guides for Europe recommend setting aside €50-70 a day in Western Europe and €30-€50 a day in Eastern Europe, of which €10-30 being directed for paying for accommodation in a hostel, one can easily save half of those money by using these networks (Lonely Planet 2005). The later versions of budget guides actually include reference to CouchSurfing, and recommend it.

Of the possible effects of this change: more opportunities for travel and longer stays for the people who are already backpacking as well as an increase in the number of future backpackers, especially from countries that have a lower GDP/capita (i.e. most of the Eastern European countries). As my other host from Rome, a 27 year old girl finishing her studies in International Relations said:

CS members are very young. So a travel around the world is very expensive. And this could have a very negative impact on your desire to travel. If you know that sometimes you can sleep with friends that would secure your decision to travel. (V, 27, Rome)

Taking into consideration the above description, one can establish that the members of the network have the material conditions of paying for accommodation in budget hotels and hostels,

even more expensive ones, but they choose not to use this touristic infrastructure. There are two main reasons that explain this: they combine an anti-capitalist, counter-hegemonic stance, whereby they promote decommodification in tourism on an ideological level, as a means of bringing in back the social and personal element that was lost with the erection of the tourism industry and its standardization, normalization and commercialization of the travel experiences. *But*, in the same time they also pursue an economic interest, whereby one does not spend money on accommodation anymore, thus cutting the costs of traveling and making the whole process dangerously similar to that of a capitalist institution.

The changing attitudes towards touristic consumption reflect the more general shift that Beck (1992) was discussing in reference to society and modernity, in general: the shift towards reflexive modernization and critical consumption: tourists are becoming more and more aware of the contrived environments that they temporary inhabit and try to find alternative channels of information which could enrich their experiences of the localities they visit. Nevertheless, these alternative channels act only as a complement to the mainstream channels, and alternative tourism and tourists still follow some similar consumption patterns as the regular tourists. The fact that, for example, the most popular places visited by couchsurfers[10] and HC members coincide with some of the most popular touristic attractions is evidence to this. The Tour Eiffel and the Colosseum are still being visited by the alternative tourists, but there is an equal stress on the people one meets in the meantime.

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[10] according to the statistics on the CouchSurfing site

Community building: can tourist participate?

Securing one's decision to travel takes more than just finding cheap or free accommodation. One also has to find a cozy environment, what Bauman, building on Goran Rosenberg referred to as a 'warm circle', where "human loyalties are not derived from external social logic, or from any economic cost-benefit analysis" (2001: 10-11, and where safety can be assured. But how is it possible to generate security and confidence in a medium characterized by disembodiment and quasi-anonymity? I will turn to answering this question and look at the different possibilities of acquiring, stabilizing and circulating of trust within the two de-commodified networks.

To begin with, in the case of commodified tourism, security and trust are secured through the means of standards and prices. One knows that when a service is bought, it has to be worth its money. If it turns out to be otherwise, and the client is dissatisfied with the service, there are a set of institution that are established in order to correct such errors.

In the case of decommodified tourism, there are no universal standards, there is no money involved, and the classical institutions that one can fall back upon are quasi-absent. Nevertheless there are certain mechanisms within the networks that are meant for recuperating the missing parts.

The most important of these is the rubric "friends" from the profile, which most often includes the people one has met while traveling, both online and in real life, each of them being marked accordingly. Thus, a user who has got only online friends is in a disadvantaged position, compared to one that has both type of acquaintances or only friends that were met in person. As I

have mentioned previously, these hospitality sites aim at networking people through real life encounters, whereby the Internet is just a medium designed to facilitate these contacts.

Additionally, next to each friend in one's profile there is a short comment or reference about the meeting, usually coming from both parties that participated in the rendezvous. A part of the comment is standardized, being an overall evaluation ranging from negative, to neutral, positive and extremely positive. The other part has to be filled in by the users.

All of the people I have interviewed have considered this category to be very important in their decision to either accept to host that person, or *mutatis mutandis*, be hosted by that person. In the absence of these references, there are still other ways in which one can create a 'trust-worthy' profile, with enough hints as to the personality of the person. Thus, by completing one's profile with pictures and a relatively self-description increases one's chances of getting hosted or asked to host. My hosts from Madrid shared with me on of her experiences:

Once I said to the person [who requested me to host him that] he takes the time to fill his profile. If you complete your profile, put a picture and tell me something about you, who you are. And the guy end up doing it and I met him.

And if they have pictures of other couchsurfers [it's better]. I like to see also their references and things like that. (M, 31, Madrid)

In spite of the fact that seeing the face of the person in an important element in generating a light form of trust, only 60% of the members of the CS network have pictures posted on their profile. There are several explanations for this: some have to do with the fact that some people join thinking it is a good opportunity for dating, and are not active members, others join out of curiosity and soon lose interest in it.

But the most important explanation for this, which has surfaced many times in my interviews with women members is that in order to avoid being stalked and bombarded with spam demanding dates and sexual encounters by the people who believe this is a dating site, they prefer not to post a picture, and only to describe themselves in words. Thus, they believe that the spammers will ignore them, while the active members will be able to tell the difference. One of my guests did not have a picture in her profile and after she asked me to host her and after I acknowledged, she sent me a picture of herself on my personal email.

One woman member from Rome, who showed me around the city, told me:

This is not the feeling of CS. I received a lot of time "You are beautiful, I want to meet you". I think that they are not good members of CS, if you look at their profiles they don't have friends. (E, 27)

The previous elements are important in generating trust over the disembodied environment of the Internet, but what happens if neither of them are present? There is still another crucial element which can contribute to the production of confidence in the virtual world: the email.

There are two ways of requesting to be hosted: either send a "request to surf your couch" email which has a standardized character and informs the host about the details of the trip and how many days the guest would like to stay. The other option is to send an individualized email to the host, tailored according to some elements in the description of the host, and also mentioning the days and period when one wants to visit the place of the host. This second method is the most effective one in both securing a couch and the trust of the host, as it shows the guest took the time to read the host's description and to write an interesting email. Thus, in contrast to

the standardization of mass-tourism, this sort of alternative tourism aims at a much more personal style of relations between hosts and guests.

But for example for Sebastian and Vincent they didn't have reference or photos, they didn't have anything. But we enjoyed the email. But now they have photos, because we told them that they have to complete their profile. (C, 30, Rome)

Or in my personal case, my German host from Berlin, a 28 year old guy finishing his degree in Social Work, told me:

I think that also reading the email. Because I usually first read the email and then I watch the profile. If I like what they write…for example in your case it was your study and it was a good way to help you and also to know why you were doing this. It was very fascinating. (C, 28, Berlin)

Meeting people in real life and creating friendships online are crucial for the existence of the network, as it provides the possibility of linking profiles and forming of clusters and groups of people. The trust gathered through the Internet has to be put to the test and reinforced in the real world, otherwise the chances that it dissipates and fades away are high. The test for this is that of "co-presence", whereby the people that have met online meet in a face-to-face encounter. As John Urry stressed:

co-presence affords access to the eyes. Eye contact enables the establishment of intimacy and trust, as well as insincerity and fear, power and control... Likewise co-present people can touch each other, and there is a rich, complex and culturally variable vocabulary of touch" (2002:259).

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Therefore, meeting the guest or host in person can confirm, or on the contrary, infirm one's previous expectations. If both actors feel comfortable with the encounter, then they will continue the interaction, otherwise they can break the connection. This is a very important element, that of disengagement and it is stipulated explicitly in the rules of the site. As there are no formal obligations, not even that of having to host one person in real life after agreeing to do on the Internet, everybody is free to go his own way.

Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind again that the category of "references", where one describes the types of encounters one had, is still a powerful tool in regulating the behavior of both host and guest. Thus, in order not to get a negative reference, they might become more tolerant and less critical of the other, or, in other words, more flexible. One self-description coming from one of my hosts in Rome expresses this idea in a nutshell:

CS try to adapt to every situation, to the culture of your host and your host tries to adapt to the culture of your guest. (V, 27)

There are still situations where communication between the members is flawed, and a negative reference is inevitable. My host from Madrid told me of one such story:

I met an Italian guy from Firenze and he had a bad experience with a couple of American girls, who were in their early 20s. And they thought that maybe CS was like being in a hostel, and you have to be there to serve them. Bad experience or misunderstanding but at the end he end up getting bad reference from the American girls. But I know that guy, and he also had very positive reference so I think these girls didn't know what CS was. It's not a hostel, it's people that have their houses and their lives. (M, 31, Madrid)

In the case of several negative references, the administrators of the site can intervene, and use one of the few policing methods available in these networks: the exclusion of the member from the site, by deleting the profile. Except in the cases of fragrant break of rules (theft, abuse, etc), there were few cases of which I have heard of this measure being used. One example of an extremely negative reference on the CouchSurfing site was that of a member from Amsterdam (all references about the identity of the person have been removed by the author)

Extremely Negative

Whatever you do, do not stay with him. He's a serious problem. He seemed alright at first, when we first got there...a little anal about everything and gave us no space. But then the next morning when we didn't want to smoke anymore, he started having a random fit...talking to himself, hitting himself...screaming. Needless to say we ran out of there, didn't even have time to pack our stuff. For your own safety especially for women travelers don't stay with him.

Even if this user had 4 negative references out of about 81 (mostly positive) others, his profile was not removed by the administrators. Most of the policing methods are thus decentralized and privatized, whereby it is up to every member to use his reason and abilities to tell 'good' members from 'bad' ones, and choose accordingly.

Intercultural exchange: tapping the local knowledge resources

Having discussed some of the elements that contribute to the coagulation of the network as a tourist community, I will now move on to the third and last component which makes up the philosophy and political agenda of the two sites: that of fostering intercultural exchange.

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Initially mass-tourism was seen as an activity that would lead to a better understanding of the Others and a better communication between the people of the world, especially between the rich and the poor, but the subsequent evolutions turned to the contrary and led to the creation of tourist bubbles where the contact between the tourists and the others were highly mediated. Although one has to avoid any Manichean distinction between alternative tourism and mass-tourism, I believe that many of the earlier promises of mass-tourism have been abandoned, and the focus has shifted only upon leisure, without much consideration for its impacts upon local communities.

Alternative tourism and especially the decommodified alternative tourism hold a greater potential for bridging the gap between tourists and locals, by circumventing some of the obstacles that impeded greater communication. By being hosted in the house of a local[11], the tourist is able to engage in direct communication with his host. As one of my informants told me:

You can see Rome, the buildings but it's good to know the people. I want them [the guests] to know how we live in Italy. (C, 30, Rome)

The preoccupation for gathering extra knowledge, especially by word of mouth from the local dwellers, and not only relying on travel guides and certified travel guides is one of the main concerns of the active members in the networks:

Because with a guided tour you are alone. With CS you are not alone. You meet friends so you can go out with your new friends, it's your choice. In a guided tour you have to go there, you have to see this. (Imitating a tour operator):

- 'Look at this! Ok, now we have to go. No, no, we don't have time to see this.'

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[11] my understating of the term 'local' is very flexible and included any person that has resided in a certain place for a longer period of time and thus has a certain knowledge of that locality and not just people born in that location

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No, I don't like this. Maybe you are with a lot of other people, more than in CS. But the crowd, I mean the people, are very alone. (V, 27, Rome)

One of the explicit 'duties' of the members is to go beyond the classical clichés and stereotypes attached to places and people and learn more about the localities they visit, taking an active stance to go out of the tourist bubbles and also explore less touristically marketed sites. As can also be seen from the testimony of a CS member from the site:

CS. is giving a large number of people the opportunity to travel, to meet and get to know travelers from all over the world and & to share experiences with them. Since then we have enjoyed:
 *Meeting people: talking, cooking, eating, traveling, and even sailing together
*Priceless info: (safe roads & weather during storms in Iceland)
*Relaxed moments: Eating fresh fish accompanied by deeply detailed local history, enjoyed from a terrace with a great view of the Izmir Gulf. (Tindaya 32, Bath, UK)

Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind the fact that most of the members of these networks are people in a relatively well economic position, most likely to be living in the center of the city, in one of the trendy neighborhoods of the city around the city center or in a safe residential neighborhood. Thus, while being able to break free from the touristic bubble, one will still most likely remain inside one of the "decent" parts of the city, where the contradictions of the system are carefully masked and embellished. The chances that the "bad" parts of the city or the "poor neighborhoods" will be ignored even by the alternative tourists remain still high, thus limiting the extent to which other people could benefit from the intercultural exchange.

To continue, as my hosting experiences have showed me, there is a certain tendency of reproducing some of the stereotypes, especially the positive ones, during an encounter, thus

limiting the extent of a real intercultural exchange. For example: the two French girls I hosted cooked *crepes* for me, the German couple made sour salad soup, while the Japanese guest prepared *mizo* soup and *wakame* sea-weed. But when it come to the negative stereotypes, the attitude that I have encountered has been one that strove for their dismissal, on behalf of both the guests and the hosts.

In my personal case, as a citizen of Romania, one of the countries that have been placed at the 'bottom of the heap' of Europe (Judt 2001), and one currently associated with a multitude of the negative stereotypes, I was expecting to have more difficulties in finding a host, in the several Western European capitals I visited. To my surprise, all of my hosts were very interested to find out more about me, the country where I was born as well as the inhabitants. As one of my hosts told me, she had not even noticed that I was Romanian, as she did not care to look at the "ethnicity" rubric in the profile.

Or in the case of another member coming from an Eastern European country, but part of the Servas network, the same attitude was encountered:

And the people who we had as hosts or guests were all very interested in Hungary, in us. We always had very, very good experiences. And also we made some very good friends. (E, 35, Budapest)

One last element that I would like to discuss is that of the relations between host and guests. As I previously mentioned, there is no clear cut distinction between the two situations, as every member can change from one state to the other easily. But looking again at this issue, from the light of the discussion about the members of the networks as well as from my own personal experience, a certain difference could be observed. All of the 7 guests I had were in their early 20s, the oldest being 27 years old. Of the 6 hosts I stayed with, only one was the same age as me,

while the others were in between 27 and 40 years old. My guests were very active travelers, with an average of 3 trips outside their home country in the previous year. One of them had been traveling for 6 months when I met her, and had 6 months to go, as part of a one year excursion around the world.

As to my hosts, although they had traveled extensively in their youth, they seemed to prefer to host for the period that I met them. Many of them were busy with their work and told me that they could not travel for this year very much, and believed that joining this network would allow them to meet the people they would have met if they had traveled, but without actually having to travel themselves. This was sort of traveling without moving for them, but different from virtual travel, in that they meet people face-to-face. My host from Madrid was both working and finishing her university studies, and did not have the time for going abroad, but because she was interested to meet people from other cultures, she decided to join the network. She did not really use the network for traveling, but mostly for hosting. Thus by looking from a strictly economic perspective she was giving more that receiving. But applying Williams' non-monetized exchange (2005) terms the output benefits (free accommodation) that she was offering to others were balanced by the process benefits (personal satisfaction for an intercultural exchange) she was getting in return. Or the way she put it:

I like traveling very much. And I [believe in] meeting people and meeting people from different cultures so you can learn from them. I think that as much as you learn from different cultures you grow more as a person. (M, 31, Madrid)

For other people who are in the impossibility of traveling, either because of financial restrictions or restrictions of other sorts, by hosting people they can both feel useful by helping people who

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travel as well as meet and socialize with new people. One of my French guests told me of one of her experiences in Krakow, Poland, where the host had join so that she can compensate, to a certain degree for her restricted mobility:

Her [the host from Krakow] husband was ill so he had to go to hospital every 3 days and they couldn't go abroad. I think she was learning English because she couldn't travel and she wanted to meet people. (M, 23, Nantes)

For one other of my hosts, the 30 year old woman who was living in Rome, but had just moved there from the North of Italy, receiving couchsurfers was a good opportunity of making friends and also

The first motivation was that I and V. came here in Rome one year ago. And we were alone, we didn't know a lot of people and when we've met roman guys and girls we didn't like them because they were different from us. And when we found out about CS we said 'Why not?', because we loved being with foreign people so why not host them To make new friends and also to know their way of live because it's a good way to know the place where they are living. It's a good experience because for me it's like being on a holiday, every time I have a CS. (C, 30, Rome)

The use of these networks as a means of socializing the tourist with the local people as well as the people who have just moved to a new to a locality with others in similar situations seems to fit a larger re-configuration of the social life that seems to be happening in Europe. For example, 3 of my 7 guests were Erasmus students who joined the networks only after they started their academic exchange program. Or in Madrid, the host couchsurfers had regular meetings with other ex-pat organizations or similar organization that gather the foreigners living in Madrid. Thus the two DAT networks enter a larger global constellation, or a new infrastructure that is meant to facilitate the social integration of the "up-rooted".

Conclusions

This study has been concerned with exploring one niche trend in the evolution of contemporary tourism: alternative decommodified tourism. Having first analyzed how the tourism industry emerged in the 19th century and the previous traditions in Europe that contributed to giving the shape that it subsequently undertook, the study then followed the course of the mass-tourism industry and its development in the Western World. The gradual amplification and extension of this industry has led to the realm of tourism's becoming "a metaphor of contemporary life" (Bauman & Franklin 2003: 207).

In the contemporary period, one of the main transformations that have been taking place in tourism has been the shifting from the classical form of touristic consumption epitomized by the figure of the tourist to the critical form of touristic consumption, symbolized by the figure of the post-tourist. As part of the later, and one of the many trends that make up the so-called alternative tourism, alternative decommodified tourism has witnessed a boom in the last half-decade. This has been driven mainly by the dashing spread of the Internet in Europe and North America and by the profound socio-economical changes that these societies have faced in the last decades. Thus, for example, since the appearance of Internet networks that promote the alternative decommodified tourism, the number of members has gone from 0 to 500.000, sprawled throughout the whole world.

The main interest of this study has been to look at how these decommodification networks operate and organize their own space within the larger sphere of tourism. My hypothesis has been that there is a double movement that drives the spread of decommodification in tourism: one of

them, with an anti-capitalist stance and discourse aims at recuperating some of the lost social elements of hospitality and traveling, and emphasizes the cultural exchange to be gained by becoming a member of the network; the other one, having a quasi-capitalistic character, aims at reducing the overall costs of traveling, by eliminating those related to accommodation, and thus increasing the available financial resources to be spent on other items. Or, to put it in a more plastic manner, the post-tourist involved in these networks trades his social capital in exchange for saving on financial capital and tries to correct some of the flaws of the touristic market through non-monetary interventions.

I have argued that one of the most interesting lenses for looking at these decommodified networks has been that of Maffesoli's neo-tribes. According to this interpretation, these networks are part of a larger movement and change taking place in the post-modern world. Maffesoli has accused the fact that most social researchers have only focused on the breaking up of traditional societies and the endless differentiations taking place in the modern one: "we have dwelled so often on the dehumanization and disenchantment with the modern world and the solitude it induces that we are no longer capable of seeing the networks of solidarity that exist within" (1996: 72). His writings have a well-balanced dose of optimism, and in this respect, he provides the socio-anthropologist with better conceptual tools for looking at and analyzing reality than just the never ending lamentations of post-modern thinkers.

The two neo-tribes that I have investigated, those formed around the sites CouchSufring.com and HospitalityClub.org, organized about the principle of decommodification of accommodation in tourism, have been able to thrive especially in the Western World due to the changes in the technologies of travel (the low-cost airlines having the largest contribution), the

rapid spread of the Internet, the loosening of people's ties to place (Bauman 2003) and the shifts in the nature of contemporary social life (Urry 2002).

I have suggested that, by operating outside the tourism industry, these nascent tourist communities have a great potential for overcoming some of the obstacles and problems of this industry. The main promises which they hold are those of breaking out of the tourist bubble and allowing the tourists to explore more extensively the localities they visit, a more balanced and equalitarian host-guest relationship, and a better circulation of information and knowledge between members. Nevertheless, there are also limitations to these promises such as instead of the breaking of the touristic bubbles, only a mere extension of their covered area, possible abuses of the trust that circulates within these networks and the multiplication of free riders/surfers, or the reinforcement of certain stereotypes due to the short length of the encounter.

It is still too early to say for sure what impact these networks have had upon the larger sphere of tourism and the tourist industry, but the fulminating increase of their members in such a short time span, portends the fact that they will represent a factor to be reckoned with by the industry, and an alternative that is becoming increasingly more attractive. Nevertheless, the fact that most visited places by the members of these networks coincide with the most visited places in the tourism industry means that the touristic consumption patterns of the two groups are similar to a certain extent, and the dividing line between tourist and post-tourist is not as strong as previously heralded.

To conclude, I hope that by having looked at the attempts of these networks to give birth to communities of tourists, and the strategies for keeping these communities going and growing, this study has brought its humble contribution to the body of research concerned with the re-configuration of sociality and solidarity in the context of globalization.

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