Commemoration and the expression of political identity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Focuses on tourism, memorialisation and political identity.
- Highlights contested history and memorialisation.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a narrative approach to explore the role of tourism in mobilising political identity, focusing on international visitors to memorials associated with the Spanish Civil War. Analysis of narrative interview data found that political allegiance was an important component of personal and group identity, and it was influential in determining tourist behaviour and consumption choices. Visiting memorials stirred strong emotions. It reaffirmed political identity and was capable of reenergising political commitment. This paper marks an important contribution to knowledge on how identity shapes and is shaped by tourist activity. It also points to a disconnect between the desire of tourists to express political identity and a country's choice of how to (or not to) memorialise past events. A model is put forward to indicate how battlefield tourism can be developed in a country with a contested history.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore the role of tourism in mobilising and consolidating political identity through the vehicle of visits to sites associated with the Spanish Civil War, and in particular with the Spanish Republican cause. The paper first covers the issue of identity, and then it offers contextualisation by including a necessarily condensed review of the Spanish Civil War. Following an account of methods, the paper presents the research findings derived from narrative interviews with visitors to Spanish Civil War memorial sites, and presents a schema for understanding the link between political identity and tourism. It also discusses the way forward for the development of battlefield/war tourism in countries which have still not come to terms with their past. (see Fig. 1)

The subject of political identity has received little coverage in the tourism literature, despite the associated relevance to tourism motivations and experiences. The act of visiting memorials has been categorised as both a dark tourism activity and an example of secular pilgrimage (Brown, 2016a). Dark tourism is defined by Lennon and Foley (2000) as visits to sites associated with death and suffering, though increasingly its definition and categorisation have been called into question (Light, 2017). In particular, Brown (2014) argues that visitors to memorials are not motivated by an interest in death, but rather by a desire to honour and remember the dead.

Secular pilgrimage meanwhile is said to have increasingly replaced the religious pilgrimage, given a decline in religious sensibility in some parts of the world (Watson, 2006). As Hyde and Harman (2011) note, more and more tourists are searching for meaning through trips to places 'that embody deeply-held values or contribute to self-identity' (p. 1348). Indeed, MacCannell (1976) drew a parallel between the pilgrim's desire to be in a place with religious meaning to that of tourists visiting a site that has for them sociocultural and historical value. As Graburn (2001) observes, the tourist is often compared with 'a pilgrim making a sacred journey in order to be close to their sacred object' (Brown, 2016a, p. 168). Furthermore, Switzer (2005) describes the visit to a war memorial as a sacred experience.
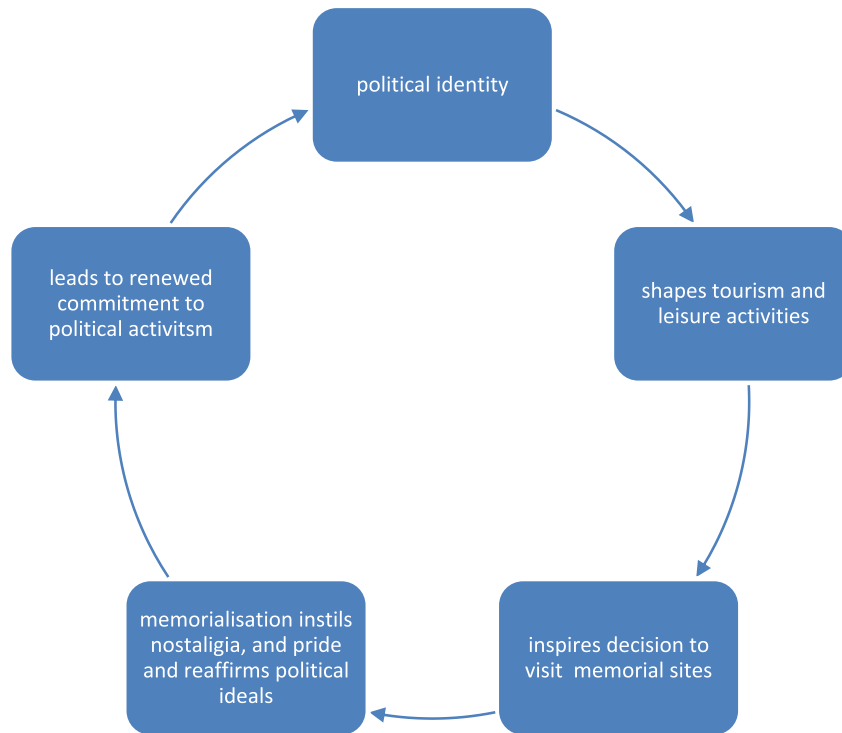
Fig. 1. Political identity and tourism.

Place is central to the tourist/pilgrim experience. As Buchmann, Moore, and Fisher (2010) record in their research on film tourism, it is the physical aspect of the tourist trip that permits an embodied physical experience. Herbert (2001) also refers to a feeling of awe that can be produced by a visit to a tourist attraction. The importance of place in the emotional response of the tourist/pilgrim is also found in Brown's (2016b) autoethnographic study of literary tourism.

When an attraction or place holds meaning for a tourist, it is easy to assume that their visit will also be personally meaningful and important for identity (Cheal & Griffin, 2012; Watson, 2006). In order for a deeper understanding of the link between tourism and identity to be achieved, however, Collins-Kreiner (2010) argues that researchers need to place more emphasis on subjective meanings. This is supported by Hyde and Harman (2011), Busby and Shetlife (2013) and Brown (2016a) who argue that the motives for secular pilgrimages are not well documented.

This paper helps to fill a gap in knowledge by focusing on the meaning attached by international tourists to visits to Spanish Civil War memorials and on the sense of political identity that is derived or enacted through their visit. Palmer (2005, p. 7) states that 'identity as a social construct is a key issue for tourism researchers', yet as she notes, 'few studies focus on the ways in which individuals experience identity through tourism'. Her own study, an ethnography of Englishness, details how people experience identity through visiting sites of national significance. Her focus was on the promotion of a sense of collective belonging, whilst this paper concerns itself with the cultivation of the political dimension of personal and group identity.

2. Theory: identity

As Palmer (2005) notes, identity is a complex concept, involving emotion, a sense of belonging and memory. It is also a concept that has relevance for the individual and the group. Bauman (2001) makes a distinction between personal and social identity. However, Lago (2006) argues that this distinction is not clear-cut, as individual and group identity is complexly and dynamically entangled. This is the case for political identity, which derives from identification with a group, but is highly important to an individual sense of self (Hinshelwood, 2005).

Personal identity results from a person's self-aware self-assessment as a distinct physical, social and spiritual or moral being (Gecas, 1982). Furthermore, Layder (2004) highlights the importance of uniqueness in personal identity. Turner, Reynolds, Haslam, and Veenstra (2006) meanwhile note that identity can vary, with an individual having multiple and overlapping personal identities, particularly in post-modern globalised society. This is supported by Hogg and Terry (2000) who define group membership as a process of self-categorisation, which involves making comparisons between the self, the group and others, and identifying similarities and differences. It is in this process that ingroups and outgroups are formed, with implications for group identity (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). Social identity is established through group comparisons (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus identity is as much about what one is as what one is not (Burke, 2003).

McLeod (2009) claims that membership of a culture is one of the main influences on the development of personal identity. According to Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001), cultural identification refers to people's self-categorisation as members of a group, which can instil a feeling of pride as well as serving as differentiation from other groups. For Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) and Branscombe and Wann (1994), group identity is central to a person's self-belief and self-evaluation. Hinshelwood (2005) states that groups share norms and values that perform powerful psychological and emotional functions. As Bauman (2001) points out, group identity offers confirmation of the self, and 'changes in what constitutes that identity can be destabilising' (Brown & Brown, 2013, p. 4). Ward et al. (2001) see an association between positive self-perception and group self-esteem; thus, maintaining a positive social