«BACKPACKER» IN CHILE AS AN EXPRESSION OF GLOBAL YOUTH SUBCULTURE

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This article discusses an experience that is key for many young people across the globe: *backpacking*. During the backpacking trip, interactions take place that help shape a subculture that is ephemeral and changing, but real. Although many studies claim that this subculture exists, a scientific analysis of it has been obscured by the prevailing use in social science of the concept of 'culture'. This concept was usually linked to territory, especially the nation-state. Now, however, a new way of conceptualising culture – one that emphasises the role of travel and flows in its creation and re-creation – has opened up. In this sense, it is possible to understand the emergence of a global backpacker subculture arising from an experience based on a specific type of tourism.

Firstly, we review the phenomenon of backpacker tourism. 'Backpacker tourism' is defined as a type of tourism that involves a long-term self-organised trip with multiple destinations that are visited along a flexible itinerary. In general, these tourists often reject the usual tourist fare. Although historical precedents have been sought in the 'Grand Tour' by young aristocrats during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or the travels of British working class youths in the nineteenth century in search of work called 'tramping', it seems that the appearance of this type of travel is frequently linked to the student movements of the 1960s and to the hippie movement. It becomes institutionalised, however, in the 1980s, when it ceases to be a minority movement and becomes a specific segment of the tourism industry.

Several studies have been conducted aimed at describing the most common demographic profile of backpackers, with results showing certain homogeneity within the group. Backpackers are usually Western, young, middle class and highly educated. They usually travel alone or with a single companion during a transitional stage of their life: the finalisation of their studies, while undergoing a divorce or when they are between jobs. There are, however, specific groups that do not match this description and that give us a more diverse picture of backpackers. These include Asian backpackers: especially Japanese, Chinese and Korean, and those from Israel. All these have specific sociodemographic characteristics and a distinctive manner of living the backpacking experience. In addition, among backpackers of Western origin, groups such as *flashpackers* – who tend to be older,

have greater purchasing power and take trips of shorter duration – can also be found. None of this invalidates the fact that the bulk of backpackers falls within the first description and that there is relative homogeneity within the subculture.

Secondly, the characteristics of backpacker subculture, as described by the literature, are presented. These are presented along three main analytical lines: the structure of meanings; practices; and the artefacts associated with this subculture. Backpacker subculture rests on a clear distinction between two roles: the backpacker – defined as a traveller – in contrast to the tourist. This dichotomy reflects the values of the subculture: the search for authenticity, freedom and frugality; and of their beliefs: «the real deal is away from home»; during the trip «authentic relationships are experienced»; and, by backpacking, one can get to «really» know the territory and its people. The resulting archetype is the «adventurer», who discovers the world by travelling outside the commercial circuit and creating his or her own path.

From this shared worldview, a series of common practices that govern interactions between backpackers is created. Through these, backpackers seek to create an ephemeral r*oad status*, built on both the ability to interact by the standards of the subculture, as well the proper use of its artefacts. With respect to the latter, the existence of a cultural industry providing materials of fundamental use by this group – guide books, films, TV shows, magazines, internet and a segment of the fashion and accessories industry – has been observed.

Thirdly, we present the results of research conducted in Chile on the backpacker tourism phenomenon. Methodologically, it was based on the triangulation of three research techniques: documentary analysis, qualitative interviewing and participant observation. With respect to the first technique, in addition to the scientific literature, films, television series, literature and guides addressing the backpacker tourism phenomenon were reviewed. Subsequently, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with backpackers, hostel owners and tour guides in three geographical destinations popular with backpacker tourism: Valparaiso, San Pedro de Atacama and Puerto Natales. Lastly, the narrative material collected in the interviews was supplemented by participant observations organised around three key general lines: interactions among backpackers, between backpackers and the local population, tourist sites, and the material culture associated with the subculture.

The research confirmed firstly that the sociodemographic characteristics of backpackers travelling in Chile did not differ from those of the rest of backpackers worldwide, although there was naturally a greater presence of Latin Americans. With respect to subculture features, it was found that the distinction between 'backpacker' and 'traveller' also formed an integral part of these travellers' cultural baggage. Furthermore, although the Chilean population considered them to be tourists, they did tend to be aware of their peculiarities. This was especially marked among those working with backpackers: tour guides or hostel staff. A peculiarity was found among Latin American backpackers, as they were not seen in the same way as «Gringos» (Western backpackers) by local people.

The latter tended to interact more among themselves than with the Chileans. Their contacts with the local population were usually restricted to those directly related to the tourism industry. The lack of Spanish was a major – sometimes insurmountable – barrier,

since backpacking community members relate to each other in English and much of the Chilean population does not speak it. In addition, the backpackers' material culture - particularly their clothing – made them even visually distinguishable from the locals. The use of specific clothing and a similar aesthetic was a constant among backpackers. It was also observed that Western backpackers tended to look at the local population as an undifferentiated whole, minimising cultural differences between the different countries they visited (it was customary to tour Latin America, in which Chile was simply one more stop).

In general, relationships emerged within the backpacking community itself, on the road or in the usual places where they would typically meet. These included hostels and inexpensive lodgings, often run by ex-backpackers, as well as the usual tourist routes from which – despite what the ideal image of the backpacker suggests – they rarely stray. In Chile, they could be found within the usual backpacker circuit, but it was rare to find them outside of it. In fact, travel guides and the internet were consulted daily and the trip carefully planned. Also remarkable was the fact that, despite the small size of the backpacker enclaves, there were shops – some of important and well-known brands devoted to this segment of the tourism market – designed especially for them.

The article concludes by suggesting that there are strong continuities between the components of the global backpacker subculture. It shows a relative homogeneity that does not cloak the existence of peculiarities among certain groups of backpackers. The article highlighted the backpackers from Latin America, who appeared to have distinctive ideological premises. Evidence obtained from the research seems to suggest the existence of a certain idea of 'cultural community' among them that groups them together and, at the time, sets them apart from other backpackers. It also suggests that it would be possible to link the appearance and development of backpacker culture not only to tourism, but also to the process of globalisation. In this sense, backpacker subculture can be linked to the emergence of global networks of globalised capital and the emergence of ideologies, practices and artefacts typical of a globalised culture.