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Sociology – A

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New York City: Concrete Jungle where Dreams are Made of

“New York, you're perfect, oh, please don't change a thing” (Murphy, Mahoney, Pope, 2007)

Without a doubt the poster boy of urbanity, modernity and the perfect antidote to monotony, New York City is an experience in itself. Composed of several boroughs, each with a distinct flavor and identity, New York exemplifies the melting pot hypothesis where a multitude of cultures, ethnicities and races coalesce into a single metropolitan area – coexisting, growing and breathing as units that are heterogeneous within yet homogenous in their being.

Before delving into analyzing New York City's tryst with tourism sociologically, a little context is required. The city receives over 60 million tourists, international and domestic, every year, as of 2016 (Sugar). This puts the city as the fifth most visited city in the world, behind the European behemoths of London and Paris, and expatriate powerhouses of Dubai and Bangkok. Quite like most parts of the United States of America, New York City's very existence is a mere two or three centuries old and lacks the old-world charm offered by Europe – be it cities like Prague or Rome, or smaller countryside towns. We can thus conclude that New York City's rise as a tourist destination has been parallel to the USAs increased hegemony, one that began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New York City's glory lies not in any heritage sites or profound historical culture, it lies in its unfathomable pace and its mammoth scale.

There is much documentation that testifies to New York City's agglomeration of romance. Be it music (Jay-Z and Alicia Key's Empire State of Mind), film (the seminal sequel, Home Alone 2: Lost in New York) or literature (Nick Allbrook's “Creative Darwinism”), New York City has come to be a city frenetic in nature yet spirited unlike any other. It has been the birthplace for a

wide variety of music genres – from the indie rock movement of the early 2000s typified by the Strokes, or East Coast rap from Harlem, the banality of the financial capital of the world provides the perfect backdrop for some of art's proudest movements. This juxtaposition is another feature of New York that sets it ahead of the pack. Being both the financial capital of the world – Wall Street being ubiquitous as an indicator of the global economy – and what is termed as a “cultural capital” by Allbrook makes the city rife with gleaming corporate bigwigs drinking \$7 coffee in a building with street art plastered all over. It is a dichotomy in itself – with blacks, whites, Muslims and Jews synchronized well into one another's lives.

It is these dichotomies and contrasts that make New York City a tourist destination unlike any other – although it has its fair share of sights (Statue of Liberty, Times Square, and the Empire State Building) – its attraction lies in being static and observing a city so dynamic. From a functionalist point of view, and from a tourist's point of view, New York City ticks all the boxes. It provides tourists a plethora of cliché experiences and sufficient and more photo-ops, fulfilling their expectations of a tour. These occurrences are enabled by the simultaneous functioning of a plethora of complex systems – the tourists themselves, tour operators, airlines, public transport systems, urban planners and the local New Yorkers. Even though the visit of the tourist may be transient, their presence tends to solidify and fine-tune the relationships among all other elements – fostering a Durkheimian organic solidarity. All the above elements have distinct, dissimilar roles that work in harmony in order to create an atmosphere conducive to the tourist's arrival and enjoyment. Another facet of Durkheim's theory that can be applied to New York City is the sacred-profane distinction. What is profane to the local New Yorkers, such as the ubiquitous metro system, is sacred to several tourists. Tourists, especially from countries with poorly developed local infrastructure, are enthralled by the mesh of multicolored lines that traverse the length and breadth of the city. Another example of the same can be Central Park, which is romanticized greatly by tourists and considered sacred, while to the locals, the Park is a place of daily exercise or relaxation. Unlike most small tourist destinations, local New Yorkers seem to be unbothered by the presence of these non-natives. The manic pace of the city envelopes locals and tourists alike.

Analyzing the tourism industry in the tri-state area from a conflict narrative is quite appropriate given the vicinity to the obscenity of the helm of the capitalist world. While New York's allure is

undoubtedly due to its status as the stalwart of all things urban, the idea of New York has been manufactured and commodified in a great manner. In a Chomskyian sense, the American Dream has been marketed impeccably. Through popular television shows (Seinfeld, Castle, Friends) and through the dirt cheap “I <3 NY” shirts, the city itself has been commodified. Another more sinister manifestation of this widespread commodity fetishisation has taken place in a part of New York that was until the turn of the millennium known for crack addiction and ethnic Armenian neighborhoods (Rascoff and Humphries, 2015). The borough of Brooklyn has seen massive gentrification take place over the last couple of decades. Gentrification, like tourism, is considered neo-colonialism, and there exists a frightening marriage of the two. Bushwick, a gentrifying neighborhood, is known for its street art collectives that moved in as rents in neighboring Williamsburg rose. In an unprecedented turn of events, certain white individuals have set up “street art tours” that locals refer to as “ghetto tours”. These tours are given not by the artists themselves, but by third party, profit hungry individuals to “travelers” (not tourists, these are individuals who go off the beaten path in order to fall for capitalist schemes that provide them with the illusion of authenticity) who are clad in North Face jackets, wielding Nikon DSLRs and wearing Converse (Glazma, 2017). All this in a neighborhood where walking alone at night can mean getting jumped. Tourism allows the commodification and the capitalization of what was a cathartic expression of local unity by a powerful few seeking to earn profits, not giving heed to the identity and status of the neighborhood they are offering these curated experiences. The façade of curated packages is one that the modern day, well educated and young tourist falls for. Marketed in a manner that avoids the mainstream tourist destinations, these packages will take tourists to small, off-beat spots in Chinatown, Brooklyn and elsewhere, so as to explore the city in a manner that a “tourist” (used commonly as a pejorative) does not.

It is abundantly clear that tourism is a thriving commercial industry for New York, yet the effect that this has on the daily lives of non-tourism locals is not very profuse. Thus, the functional relation between tourists and locals remains weak and non-afflictive. Tourists will tend to be enraptured by the locals engaged in the tourism industry, as their abundance and their personas are quite magnetic. Tourists must be aware that more often than not their eagerness is part of a profit making endeavor, and is simply a ploy. Thus we can see that New York City, unlike several other tourist destinations, does not have an explicitly detrimental or controversial tourist-local relation (barring, of course, instances like Bushwick). New York City, is, and will continue

to be, considered the greatest city on earth. Whether this tag is justified or another well-executed marketing strategy is open to debate.

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