

## ***The Right Price: Local Bargains for Global Players***

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*The cultural politics of touristic fantasies: addressing the 'behind-the-scene' scene*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The fact that, unlike commodities in general, the souvenir does not appear at first sight as a trivial thing but as immediately extraordinary and exclusive, needs to be unpacked. A souvenir is a souvenir only to the degree it can be made to stand in for the successful establishment of real social relations in a world where the reification of commercialism otherwise prevails. Hereof consists the Gordian Knot of the souvenir – as a symbol of a successful going-beyond what Marx famously dubbed commodity fetishism, that is, the de-humanizing displacement of relations between people onto relations between things, the souvenir is a reified social relation existing as an effacement of the causes of its own existence.*

*Taking as its starting point the above mentioned structural-dialectical paradox of the souvenir, the proposed paper examines bargaining as the method of choice for many western tourists to elevate a commodity to the level of souvenir-hood and, in the process, establish memorable authentic social relations with the locals. It is argued that undergirding this symbolic production of the souvenir is the excess production of the touristic Others as simultaneously both authentic overchargers and intrinsically poor. Accordingly, the intended critique of commercialism of budget travellers is exemplified as reconciling with a global economy where disruptive hierarchies are set flexibly as seemingly opposed fields of interests join forces and, from different flanks, impede and command movements while administer one-way global flows of wealth. The enduring result, however accidental from the point of view of the souvenir-hunters, is a safeguarding of capital and a division of labour with which the global poor are required to submit themselves as local – exotic, authentic, cheap, cost-effective, bankable – in relation to the plutocratic global.*

The world we have made for ourselves, it seems, is only tourable to the extent the local is tradeable, and so ‘travel beyond the world of commodities has itself become a commodity’ (Enzensberger 1958/1996: 129). Thus, being sympathetic with the inevitable typo, as well as the author’s impossible task of paralyzing in print an ever-changing reality, it will not do to accuse the guidebook of deceiving its readers by selling falsehoods as this would imply one will be lost if one follows guidebook directions. It is precisely because one is *not* lost when one follows the guidebook that it can be critiqued; one is not lost because with the guidebook one is producing the world as one travels – the powers endowed the reader by the guidebook is truly of biblical proportions.

In his critical investigation of guidebook representations of Vietnam’s on-going economic reform project, Scott Laderman concludes: ‘Whereas the case of contemporary Vietnam could offer tourists a tragic illustration of capitalism’s inevitable deficiencies, instead, guidebooks suggest to their readers, the miracle of the “market” is setting the Vietnamese free’ (2005: 265). What escapes this guidebook packaging of Vietnam is of course that it is this very same “market” that also enables the guidebook and its readers in the first place – the true miracle of the market is none other than the “Vietnam” – the commodity – that the guidebook is putting up for sale on the market. It is this spectacular absence/presence of the “market” – read, capitalism – that warrants the commercial success of the guidebook and the satisfaction of its followers, and indeed also the very possibility of international tourism in contemporary Vietnam.

On a more general level, the one who has taken this line of thought the furthest is perhaps Guy Debord, who writes:

The world at once present and absent which the spectacle *makes visible* [i.e. *gives form to*] is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived. The world of the commodity is thus shown for *what it is*, because its movement is identical to the *estrangement* of men among themselves and in relation to their global product (1967/1977: thesis 37; emphasis in original)

The Vietnam of the guidebook is a formalized Vietnam intended for exchange – the precise definition of the commodity. The guidebook *does* work – when commodity relations form the totality of social life, as is the case at least in commercialized hospitality, the guidebook works, not in spite of it, but precisely *because* it sells the world as a commodity.

I wish to consider this, focusing specifically on a phenomenon that lies at the core of tourism practice: the production of the souvenir. The fact that, unlike commodities in general, the souvenir does not appear at first sight as a trivial thing but as immediately extraordinary and exclusive, needs to be unpacked. The exclusiveness of the souvenir effectively negates mechanical production – you cannot ever make a copy of a souvenir. In other words, the souvenir exists as a remainder of a form of art of a Golden Age prior to our age of mechanical production that Walter Benjamin (1968) saw as the end of the aura. No wonder then that souvenirs so often are objects communicating nostalgia for use value – the handmade and samples of how-we-used-to-do-it. In their original context, such objects, by way of their

essential use value, are saturated with meaning and as such have their specific place in a local cosmology. As soon as they are appropriated as souvenirs, however, they transform into something transcendent and contingent.

In other words, as shown by Susan Stewart (1993: 135), souvenirs are metonymic – parts representing the whole – so extreme that the metonymic quality is transforming into a metaphor. With the extraction of the metonymic part – a sample or specimen – from its original context, the souvenir is designated to take on a new metaphoric role as a substitute for the whole (cf. also Olalquiaga 1998/2002: 76). The distinction constituted by a souvenir – its exoticness and quality as a trophy, that is, a marker of survival, not of the object itself but of its possessor – is thus not mainly experienced as loss, but forms a quality of surplus signification and authority. Suchlike trophies are crucial since, ‘The last stage of the tourist endeavour is the return, which turns the tourists themselves into the attractions’ (Enzensberger 1958/1996: 133-134).

It is imperative, however, that the souvenir remains a metonym. Its leaning towards the metaphor is cancelled just prior to deliverance, for the souvenir ‘must remain impoverished and partial so that it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse, a narrative discourse which articulates the play of desire’ (Stewart 1993: 136). As such, souvenirs, like commodities in general, need not be material objects. The autobiographical quality of the souvenir thus stems from a kind of practical solipsism; the narrative attached to it speaks not of the event, place or people it signifies – that is, its social relations – but of the souvenir’s proprietor (cf. Sohn-Rethel 1978: 42). This is why we cannot be proud of someone else’s souvenir unless its narrative is extended to include our relationship with its owner (Stewart 1993: 137).

It is the supplementary story attached to the souvenir that vouches for its exclusiveness. This story tells ‘less frequently about how the object is used within the indigenous culture, and more often about the details of the purchase – the bargaining and the acquisition’ (Bruner 2005: 24). This bargaining for, what I will call, borrowing from backpacker terminology, the Right Price, becomes, much more than the object itself, what renders the souvenir exclusive thus bargaining becomes a way to produce the authenticity of the Other as such.

Just like anti-tourism tourists, or so called backpackers, strive to disavow their role in the political economy of international tourism, the souvenir – speaking to its devotees as a marker of membership, not in the event it signifies, but in the prestige generated by the event – disavows its former being as a mere commodity. To fully appreciate this structural-dialectical paradox of the souvenir, it is necessary to insert some notes specifying the ideological machinery at work here. The first thing to note is how part and parcel of money *qua* social relation is a peculiar homogenizing effect. Posing as equity, it equalizes everyone with everything, it puts a price on everything, even things with no price-tag, even things not for sale, and even priceless things – pricelessness is the ultimate price; the price put on commodities yet to get grabbed by fetishists who already have everything. Very much in line with the revolutionizing logic of capital and its constant search for new areas of extraction,

this means that one of the most effective ways of producing a souvenir is to make it out of something not intended for exchange (Stewart 1993: 136). A system driven by money, exchange value and the extraction of surplus value, then, is formally equal yet grossly unequal in content. It is precisely the commodity form, its ability to be exchanged across boundaries of diverse fields of meaning and to accumulate and transform its value as it circulates, that provides the souvenir potential (see also Hutnyk 2004).

An enormous apparatus of production, distribution, sales, transportation, advertising, valorisation, and so on is at work here linking the exotica seeking tourist, the panorama view office international airline CEO, and the Southern souvenir toiler. And all of those to me, and to you too. Thus, whatever the kitschy or exotic trinket, handmade artefact, scar, seashell, malaria parasite, 'been there' T-shirt or 'done that' VD itch, stool test transcription or plastic Taj Mahal, a souvenir is a souvenir only to the degree it can be made to signify the successful establishment of real social relations in a world where the reification of commercialism otherwise prevails. This is quite an achievement, but one that has nevertheless stirred up relatively little concern. This points to a paradox that demands attention – while the commodity appears at first sight as trivial, and as such finds its normal place in daily social life, the souvenir appears exclusive but this exclusiveness, in turn, appears immediately extraordinary trivial. Its analysis, however, reveals it to be 'abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties', to paraphrase Marx. As it turns out, then, it is precisely that which at first sight distinguishes the souvenirs from the commodity that provides a hint on how the souvenir relies on the commodity form.

Here we finally reach the Gordian Knot of the souvenir – flaunted as a proof of a successful going-beyond what Marx famously dubbed commodity fetishism, that is, the de-humanizing displacement of relations between people onto relations between things, the souvenir is a reified social relation existing as an effacement of the causes of its own existence. With all this in mind, I want to draw attention to bargaining as the method of choice for many western tourists to elevate a commodity to the level of souvenir-hood and, in the process, establish memorable authentic social relations with the locals.

It is of course not easy to justify a dispute over something like US\$0.2. Yet disputes over the Right Price are more often than not about spare change. US\$0.2 is not too much to give up, but too much for the locals to earn – a souvenir cannot be authentic if the local who sell it is inauthentic, and an authentic local is a poor local. With this I am not trying to deny that bargaining can result in a (marginally) better price, although one could ask; better for whom? The Right Price is said to be the price locals pay, yet tourists generally do not know what that is. Many times there is of course not much to know, because the locals have no need to buy souvenirs of their everyday life. Whenever the Right Price is thought to have been reached, it is not the locals one will try to impress but ones fellow travellers.

Failure to reach the Right Price triggers feelings deprivation as the bought object now fails as marker of authenticity and instead comes to signify a collapse of the all so important

tourist/traveller distinction. Such souvenirs are only good for the play of irony. Nevertheless, when tourists have established what they consider to be a genuine friendship with the local vendor, to celebrate the authenticity of this friendship they will often gladly depart from sums considerable higher than the presumed local price. There is an obvious correspondence here with the phenomenon of ‘open-ended prostitution’, where payments are euphemised as gifts or allowances.

With the Right Price, a way of climbing up the traveller hierarchy is to instruct others how to bargain. The following stratagem was proposed on an Internet travel guide:

Most people in Vietnam, especially outside of the main cities, are very poor. There is no doubt that travellers are seen as a potential source of money, and Vietnamese are tenacious negotiators. You will be frustrated at times in negotiating prices. You will feel like you are being ripped off. A couple of tips: Bargain very aggressively but keep it friendly. A smile in the middle of a negotiation goes a long way. In some situations, gently touching the person you are negotiating with (on the arm or hand) also helps to keep it friendly. Accept that you are going to end up paying too much for some things and try not to take it personally, it is not intended that way. If the bargaining and rip-offs are starting to really get you down and you are beginning to think that Vietnamese people are just plain greedy, try the following: When negotiating the price of something, bargain very very aggressively to get the absolute lowest price possible, then when you are paying, give them more than the agreed on price, smile and say thank you. Using this technique I have had some wonderful conversations, been given gifts, been invited to people’s homes for tea, made some very good friends, and discovered that Vietnamese people are actually very generous. (Peter M. Geiser’s *Hotel and Travel Guide 1995-2003*)

So much aggressiveness is needed only to discover that, ‘Vietnamese people are actually very generous.’ Paying the Right Price is about being one with the Other, simultaneously it relies on stern Otherness. Going from determining the Vietnamese as “very poor” to, once the Right Price has been reached, “actually very generous”, it seems the poverty was silently re-interpreted as a stinginess, not in terms of money but in terms of a reluctance to share and dispense the local culture.

Lonely Planet for Vietnam states: ‘positive contributions [of the recent arrival of mass tourism] include dollars flowing into the local economy’ (2003: 63). Nevertheless, caught up in the dialectics of tourism, in the Lonely Planet drama commercialism is cast as the evildoer, the worst threat to authentic experiences. Even while pointing a finger at the evils of commercialism, the section on books on Vietnam (2003: 81) starts off commercially by advertising Lonely Planet’s series of Vietnam books – a phrasebook, city guides for Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, a Southeast Asian compilation guide and a guide on Vietnamese food. No other guidebook than Lonely Planet is mentioned. Elsewhere it tips off readers on widespread sale of black market electronic goods and pirated CDs and DVDs (2003: 131, 437), but fails to mention that its own products, not only those for Vietnam but for all Asian countries and beyond, can be bought as bootlegs of excellent quality all throughout tourist Vietnam.

It seems commercialism is not bad when practiced by a three-million-books-per-year transnational guidebook corporation, but only when practiced by locals who, in Lonely Planet's own words, are 'hard working and educated' but still 'simply can't survive on [their] wages' and must 'scrounge on the side' resorting to 'part-time prostitution' and 'corruption' (2003: 42). These unfortunates need to be treated gently:

...don't assume that everyone is trying to rip you off – despite severe poverty, many Vietnamese will only ask the local price for most goods and services... Many foreigners just assume that every Vietnamese is out to rip them off. That just isn't true – you needn't bargain for everything... Many Westerners seem to take bargaining too seriously and get offended if they don't get the goods for less than half the original asking price (2003: 75-76).

And where do the cut-price people get such crazy ideas? Well, same lonely place:

Foreigners are frequently overcharged, particularly when buying souvenirs and occasionally in restaurants. ...find out the correct rate in advance and then bargain accordingly... In some cases you will be able to get a 50% discount or more, at other times this may only be 10%... As a general principal, items sold in touristy areas, with no visible price tags must be bargained for – expect the vendor to start the bidding at two to five times the real price ...foreigners are typically charged anywhere from twice to 10 times the going rate... Bargaining is almost always necessary... A reasonable amount of bargaining is called for ... Overcharging tourists is the norm (2003: 75-76, 130, 146, 158, 201, 476).

To this confusion, Lonely Planet adds that 'Tagged items may be negotiable, but more often than not the prices are fixed' (2003: 130). What the Right Price really is, is never fully explained, but, while the decadent truism – 'anything can be bought for the right price' – suggest a high price, it is well understood that the Right Price according to Lonely Planet is dead cheap. The rest is left to their readers to figure out – 'be aware of... what things "should" cost, and then use this information in conjunction with your better judgement' (2003: 106). It seems the extension of this reasoning suggests overcharging is the expression of an inferior judgement, does it not? Then, if overcharging is determined to be the norm, this would suggest the locals' judgement is typically inferior. The judgment is indicated in how the term 'right price' is used interchangeably with terms like 'real price' (2003: 312), 'fair price' (2003: 65), 'local price' (2003: 75, 151), 'good price' (2003: 471, 472), 'going price/rate' (2003: 146, 201), 'correct price/rate' (2003: 76) and 'Vietnamese price' (2003: 75). How can the Right Price be the local price if the locals ask for higher prices?

My aim is not to fix prices or to set the record straight, but I did check Lonely Planet's claims with some vendors in Vietnam. All I talked to did admit they worked with a creative fixing of prices, but they also said Western tourists, and especially the *tây ba lô* (backpackers), bargain considerably more aggressively than domestic tourists, overseas Vietnamese and tourists from Asian countries. According to my own observations as well as all Vietnamese tourism workers I have asked, overseas Vietnamese are generally big spenders. As if to flaunt their overseas success, and show how they are precisely *not* mere locals anymore, they often pay more than they need and they give considerable tips, up to twenty times more than what Lonely Planet recommend.

The vendors usually said their selling strategy would depend on the behaviour of the potential buyer, and they confirmed the rates of bargaining of Western tourists would generally follow the figures in Lonely Planet's instructions. Most vendors said they would start with a low asking price even for foreign tourists. If the potential buyer would start bargaining they would refuse to lower the price simply because there would be no margin to do so. Having learnt that this particular customer wanted to bargain, they would suggest a different product which they would offer at a higher price (see also Crick 1994: 121-122). Bargaining, then, would not produce lower purchasing prices, only higher initial asking prices and the stigmatization of the vendors as overchargers. As for Lonely Planet's 'general principal' that prices are 'two to five times the real price' in 'touristy areas'; I asked the vendors in the souvenirs sections of Dalat's market about this.<sup>1</sup> They all said, very much in line with market economy postulations, that precisely because this is a 'touristy area' with fierce competitions between stalls sell similar goods, it is impossible for them to inflate prices as the prospecting souvenir hunter would then merely go to the next stall.

But that touristy areas as a general principal are up to five times more expensive is most often true, I guess, because of the simple fact that touristy areas also are up-market areas. This holds even when the area is disguised as a 'budget traveller haven' as Lonely Planet christens the Phạm Ngũ Lão area in Ho Chi Minh City (2003: 458). Commercial premises in this backpacker ghetto are about five times higher than in equivalent areas with no tourists, so no wonder then that consumer prices are higher too. But in Lonely Planet's Vietnam, where a 'touristy area' is an inauthentic area of overcharging, one does apparently not have to bother with the material realities of the locals.

The fact that the Right Price is determined to be the local price while at the same time the locals are determined to be overcharging suggests something more than merely a mix up of facts. Two specific definitions are at work here, creating a curious paradox. The locals are overcharging and the local is cheap and thus it is the locals who prevent the tourists to reach the local – the inhabitants of the local do not belong there. The answer to the question how the Right Price can be the local price if the locals ask for higher prices, would be that the local does not belong to the locals but to the tourists, to Lonely Planet. 'Visitors to Vietnam play an important role in conveying the value and potential for international friendship and business', Lonely Planet asserts (2003: 9). So what kind of value of international friendship and business have the Vietnamese not yet been taught? Here again the usual trajectory of hospitality is reversed – the local, in its transcendent commodity form, can be bought and sold and as such it cannot be said to truly belong to the locals.

As Hutnyk comments, 'The one who gives – as so much anthropology describes – is the one who claims power... Charity, then, is yet another way of making a mark for capital' (1996: 161). A close reading of Lonely Planet's shoptalk exposes a transformation of tourist

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<sup>1</sup> Dalat is a major tourist town in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

expenditures from obligated payments to benevolent charity. First, under the heading ‘Costs’ it says, ‘Rapacious bus drivers and taxi drivers will often bump up their rates several times the Vietnamese price.’ Then, a few lines further down, under the revealing combine heading ‘Tipping & Bargaining’, they instruct, ‘You should also consider tipping drivers and guides – after all, the time they spend on the road with you means time away from home and family. Ditto if you take a tour with a group – the guides and drivers are paid next to nothing’ (2003: 75). As if to say to the downtrodden, ‘you can have my money as charity, for you labour is nothing worthwhile.’ But then, under the same heading a few lines down, as if regretting this sudden strike of generosity, it asserts, ‘Most cyclo [pedicab] and motorbike drivers also try to grossly overcharge foreigners – find out the correct rate in advance and then bargain accordingly’ (2003: 76).

Moreover, under the heading ‘Theft’ it is suggested, ‘Perhaps most disturbing are attempts by foreigners to rip off the Vietnamese’ (2003: 104). Even if one does not accept the more radical view of the Right Price as theft in itself, here Lonely Planet actually seems to encourage a scam aimed at the Vietnamese. Complaining how awful it is that with a officially sanctioned pricing system foreigners are charge more than Vietnamese for train fares, Lonely Planet tells about how ‘some foreigners have managed to pay local prices...’ (2003: 151). Describing this in some detail, concluding it is terribly difficult to achieve unless you have ‘Asian features’, they present this, not as the scam it evidently is, but as something of an upright civil disobedience in face of a gross injustice.

There are times when Lonely Planet celebrates the commercialism of the locals. Overly optimistic about a tourism boom that never really came, an overbuilding of hotels throughout Vietnam has occurred. Apparently not troubled with how their precious locals are loosing their life-savings by turning their homes into hotels, Lonely Planet writes this up as all good – ‘this means that ... travellers are in a better negotiating position’ (2003: 126). As for the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the ancient town of Hôì An – a world souvenir; not locality but a *global* site per definition – Lonely Planet has nothing against its commercialism, instead celebrating it as a ‘shopper’s Mecca’ (Florence & Storey, 2001: 376).<sup>2</sup>

It should surprise no one that an abundance of tricks have developed in the wake of the Right Price. In Hôì An, a bunch of souvenir-selling orphanage kids have developed a masterful scam to relieve cold-faced non-buying tourists from (negligible portions) of their riches. Presenting

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<sup>2</sup> Curiously, in the 2003 edition the pre-9-11/Gulf War Redux tag ‘shopper’s Mecca’ was rephrased as ‘shopper’s haven’ (2003: 348). If this was a strive for political correctness, it was efficiently nullified by the eager guidebook company wanting to send scouts to Afghanistan in the summer of 2002, but decided against it as Operation Enduring Freedom had yet to bomb the place safe for tourism. It seems likely they have to wait longer than expected as the US is busying itself with other places, but for Lonely Planet this is a win-win deal – interviewed while scouting in Dili, East Timor, its legendary co-founder, Tony Wheeler, said Iraq, along with Angola, was up next (Blomgren 2002). This was six months before Junior’s take on Iraq.

themselves as hobby numismatists,<sup>3</sup> the kids will ask tourists to please contribute with one small banknote from their country. Before they put the question there is the necessary prep work; putting on their best photogenic poverty faces, displaying some banknotes from their ‘collection’, and making sure the dupe in question is not American, this because US dollars are used as a second currency in tourist Vietnam. If successful, the kids will then run off to the next tourist haunt and beseech an innocent tourist of the same nationality, ‘Please, Madame, please Sir, could you change this foreign bill to Vietnamese đồng? A tourist from your country bought a souvenir but didn’t have any đồng left.’ In case the tourist doesn’t know the exchange rate, the kids will not be caught off guard – they have learnt the rates for most currencies by heart. The very same tourist who refuses to pay 15.000 đồng (approx. US\$1) for the kids’ merchandises, claiming it is too much, will gladly donate more than that to the kids’ banknote collections, given that the donation is made in a non-local currency. This trick has served the kids well for years. It confirms the crucial role the local – here in the guise of local currency – plays. It also exposes tourists’ reluctance to pay for the labour of the kids, and their willingness to give money which, they believe, does not have any monetary value, only aesthetic value, for the kids.

Tourism is big business, the biggest in the world; as such it brings with it an equally big number of problems. “Sustainable tourism” has therefore become a common catchphrase, and so-called budget-travelling, or backpacking, is often promoted as such. Here two problems arise. How can people well-heeled enough to go country-hopping for years on end, while sightseeing predominantly poor natives, be called “budget travellers”? How can North-to-South tourism be truly sustainable if the monstrous global geopolitical and economic inequalities that pave its travel routes are not sustained too? Tim Leffel, author of the guidebook *The World’s Cheapest Destinations: 21 Countries Where Your Dollars are Worth a Fortune* has this to say about Vietnam:

If you go to Vietnam, prepare to be ripped off on a daily basis. Gouging foreigners seems to be a national obsession here, from the highest government officials on down to the lowest street vendor selling baguettes or noodle soup.

Need I mention that Vietnam is one of those twenty-one enchanting bargain countries? Now read that together with the following recommendation made by former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kenneth Clarke, in a 1995 report to the British Department of Trade and Industry.

Labour rates are as low as \$35 a month... Take the long view, use Vietnam’s weaknesses selfishly. Vietnam’s open door invites you to take advantage of its low standard of living and low wages (quoted in Pilger 1998: 575-576)

It would be easy to submit the standard critique of a certain Marxian variety here – a critique which would expose how particular Western interests have effectively hegemonized the Universality at work here, thus rendering it a false Universality kept together by means of silent yet violent exclusions. My concern here is that this critique, however relevant it

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<sup>3</sup> Numismatics – collection of money for aesthetic values.

obviously is, is not radical enough. A third quote will help pave the way for a more radical reading. In an interview, Nguyễn Xuân Oánh, economic adviser to ex-Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt and brain behind Vietnam's current economic reform project and 'open door' policies, insisted that:

We have *inexpensive* labour. I don't call it cheap labour. It allows us to be competitive on the international market (quoted in Pilger 1998: 576).

I am not interested in Oánh's limping attempt to dress up the global garage sale of Vietnamese labour power that the re-introduction of capitalism inevitably entailed, though I think it is worth mentioning that Oánh is known to have cited Margaret Thatcher as an inspiration in his attempt at 'harmoniously blending socialism with capitalism' (ibid.). It is also worth noting that he was wartime deputy Prime Minister of the US backed South Vietnamese regime, that he earned his PhD in economics at Harvard and that prior to importing capitalism to Vietnam he was an adviser at the IMF. The point I want to make is that Oánh seems to have more in common with Kenneth Clarke and even Tim Leffel, all of whom, I presume, have never met, than with the Vietnamese street vendor outside his office building.

All this point to the fact that capitalism is *actually* and, one should add, ruthlessly, Universal – with it the cultural particularities of whatever locality appears as a vast collection of staged events waiting to be consumed. This is an abstract Universality in the sense that rather than simply being hegemonized by a particular content or a particular bias, it instead abstracts all possible particularities, rendering them contingent and, as such, exchangeable and mobile. This, I argue, is the precondition of the phenomenon of bargaining for Right Price souvenirs. Something along these lines was undoubtedly what Marx had in mind when long time ago he suggested looking at fixation of prices for 'a comprehensive view' of the world market as an escalating paradox of '*connections of the individual with all, but at the same time also the independence of this connection from the individual*' (Marx 1939/1973: 161; emphasis in original). Abstraction thus becomes a direct feature of social life. This abstract Universality, then, cannot be regarded as 'mere' form in itself. It is, rather, form *for itself* – it is performative in a deceivingly subtle way. To quote Žižek,

Marx shares Hegel's insight into how Universality becomes 'for itself' only insofar as individuals no longer fully identify the kernel of their being with their particular social situation. An attendant circumstance is that these very individuals experience themselves as forever 'out of joint' with regard to this situation: the concrete, effective existence of Universality produces an individual without a proper place in the global edifice. In a given social structure, Universality becomes 'for itself' only in those individuals who lack a proper place in it. The mode of appearance of an abstract Universality, its entering into actual existence, thus produces violence: it violently disrupts a preceding organic poise. (2007: 7-8).

The disruptive violence of being 'out of joint' in this abstract Universality need not be experienced as such, but is paradoxically often described in positive terms. It is clear that the emergence of leisure travel as a desirable pastime relies on this abstract Universality, as do the common mythologies of being 'on the road' and celebrations of travel, the cosmopolitical, the hybrid, the rhizomatic and the de-territorialized. It is possible to get a glimpse of this dynamics

by making a double reading of two seemingly opposed definition of globalization. President Bush defined globalization as such:

What some call globalisation is in fact the triumph of human liberty stretching across national borders (quoted in Carver 2001).

Now consider this together with Percy Barnevik's (former President of the ABB Industrial Group) much quoted definition of the same globalization:

I would define globalization as the freedom for my group of companies to invest where it wants when it wants, to produce what it wants, to buy and sell where it wants, and support the fewest restrictions possible coming from labour laws and social conventions (quoted in Greenfield 2000)

Both are obviously true in the sense that the human liberty that President Bush talks about is precisely the same as the freedom of Capital that President Barnevik identifies. What we have here, then, is an expression of commodity fetishism – ‘the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1867/1976: 165). In Marx's identification of commodity and capital fetishism and Debord's update of it as image fetishism (the spectacle) a third variety was already inherent. The Right Price is not the result of some new evil conspiracy. It is merely vintage commodity fetishism heightened to a more totalitarian mode. It follows the exact same formula – ‘I know this is not X, but for me it means X’ – and the exact same structure, that is, ‘individuals themselves, in their daily lives, relate to themselves, as well as to the objects they encounter, as to contingent embodiments of abstract-universal notions’ (Žižek 2007: 7). It should be noted that the formula of fetishism contains no inherent contradiction. That is, the first part of the formula is concerned with knowledge – ‘I know this is not...’ – and the second part – ‘but for me it means...’ – is concerned with symbolic structures (meaning).

The more subsumed one is in this abstract Universality, the wider the gap one will experience between oneself as an individual and the traditions and peculiarities of the cultural context of ‘home’. Abstract and contingent, culture as such thus appears to oneself as a life-style choice. In the same process, the culture of the Other starts to appear more and more like the scene of an essential authenticity, or, less favourable as fundamentalism, but one that, however rooted, can be abstracted and exchanged. Where commodity exchange prevails we are thus faced with the peculiar paradox by which the price both abstracts the object, making it contingent and, as such, exchangeable, while at the same time the price tags the object as exclusive, rooted in a specific context. The Right Price is made to stand in for the particular essential content of the object which was lost as it was turned into a souvenir.

Undergirding this symbolic production of the souvenir, is the excess production of the touristic Other as simultaneously both authentic overcharger and intrinsically poor. Meanwhile, proud juridical specifications at ‘home’ – here a different hierarchy is put to work – and, I add, a too often myopic focus on the evils of so-called child labour (most of those

chained in servitude are so from cradle to grave)<sup>4</sup> obscure and legitimize the continuous exploitation of workers at the new global sites of surplus extraction. I want to insist that other links can be traced from here, for instance to the fact that the richest country in the world is concurrently the world's loudest free-trade preacher and the most frequent anti-dumping lawsuit filer,<sup>5</sup> as well as the actuality of people being declared illegal simply for being on the wrong side of a border. Carrying the symbolics of bargain local markets with them, arriving checkmate by protective legislations, illegal immigrants are exploited in Right Price drudgery. The impulse of relegating this everydayness to some kind of 'shadow economy' merely testifies against us. As does the belief that all is good and done for when illegal Right Price drudging is legalized.

In the end, the intended critique of commercialism and commodification of budget travellers reconciles perfectly with a global economy where disruptive hierarchies are set flexibly as seemingly opposed fields of interests join forces and, from different flanks, impede and command movements while administer one-way global flows of wealth. The enduring result, however accidental from the point of view of the souvenir-hunters, is a safeguarding of Capital and a division of labour with which the global poor are required to submit themselves as local – exotic, authentic, cheap, cost-effective, bankable – in relation to the abstract Universality of global Capital.

Whatever the amount of heroics one can assign the switcheroo of the Hôi An orphanage kids, and however sympathetic one can be to the vendors who comply with the eccentricities of their costumers and agree to secretly raise their prices to make grounds for a bit of friendly bargaining, all this really amounts to nothing but empty gestures and an habitualization of the Right Price. At the end of the day, it literally amounts to nothing (no lowering of the price), yet at the same time it means everything in the sense that without these empty gestures, authenticity as we know it will not be experienced and the object-commodity will not be sublated as souvenir. It should now be clear that the point is *neither* that the poor are paid too little, *nor* whether the overcharging is real or not. The point is instead that, 'In capitalism, the *definition* of the 'proper price' is a *discount* price (Žižek 2001: 43-44; emphasis in original), which means that *regardless of what they are paid*, the overcharging souvenir vendors are

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<sup>4</sup> How often do the charges of child-labour serve as an excuse for protectionism? How much does the condemnation of child-labour supersede radical actions of redistribution? How often do sacked child labourers end up in the hands of child traffickers? It is difficult to know how the right to a childhood came to discord with the right to a livelihood. When politically correct universalism put all focus on certain age-groups the public debate often slights how the kids oftentimes are family breadwinners. Already there more overarching inequalities should be noticeable. The critique here should not be that cultural relativism could somehow understand the good of children drudging, but instead focusing on the fact that working conditions do not improve with age. The children are of course the future of the world, but what is the future for child labourers? Once they become legitimate age-wise it becomes legitimate for the benevolent world community to close their eyes to their sweatshop existence.

<sup>5</sup> In 2001, the US Department of Commerce found price-dumping in 94% of its filed cases, the vast majority of which was, incidentally, directed against nations often frequented by budget tourists.

exploited – the degree of exploitation is not determined by subjective judgements but generated by objective contradictions.

As global players with seemingly opposed fields of interests join forces to work from different flanks, local markets are disarrayed, kept apart, some for protection others for exploitation and always following Capital's greedy necessity to forever expand by subsuming the outside within. Every tourism researcher should recognize this dialectical logic by which Capital creates and destroy its own object in the same process. It is of course the same logic that, at least, Western modernist tourism obeys, the well-known discourse of touristic shame being its symptom.<sup>6</sup> The logic of capitalism provides the key to the logic of tourism in the sense that tourism is the form travel takes in an era when the abstract Universality that is global capitalism prevails.<sup>7</sup> With reference to the subtitle of this panel, *this*, if anything, is the 'behind-the-scene scene' to be addressed.

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<sup>6</sup> Touristic shame constitutes the realization of the paradox by which 'tourism destroys (in the very process by which it constructs) the authenticity of the tourist object; and every tourist thus at some level denies belonging to the class of tourists' (Frow 1997: 95). (see also e.g. Enzensberger 1958/1996; MacCannell 1976).

<sup>7</sup> In his economic notebooks, Marx concludes that 'Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient' (1939/1973: 105). My implicit reference here is not only to Marx's dialectical anti-evolutionism, but also to Gregory Bateson's notion of the inference of abduction. Abduction is an inference that is not used to infer ideas into entities, but instead to creatively explore abstract systems of ideas. Gregory Bateson defines it as a mapping of patterns under one tautology and he developed as an investigation into the process by which a 'double description', i.e. the abduction, becomes a 'double requirement' or a 'double specification' (1980: 158). In this sense, abduction is more than an inference; it has to do with the formation of a systematic worldview which includes in it a reflexive exploration of that very same system.

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