

Chapter 2

Anthropological Perspectives on Conscience and Conscientious Destinations: An Interview With Michael Volgger

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Giulia Isetti (GI): *The possible interpretations of the concept of conscience are numerous, what is your personal understanding of it?*

Michael Volgger (MV): Romance languages capture the two notions of ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscience’ with the same word. Italians, for example, speak of ‘coscienza’ when invoking either. I am sympathetic to treating the two aspects as connected. Both refer to a sort of mental or spiritual sense that observes and reflects on behaviour. While ‘conscience’ is more about a final moral judgement of what is right and what is wrong, consciousness is closely related to reflection, reflectivity and ‘as if’ thinking. A combination of both mechanisms is required to change things that are going in the wrong direction into better courses of action. Conscience is needed to stop the wrongdoing, and consciousness is required to devise the alternative ways.

GI: *From an anthropological perspective, what happens when the concept of ‘conscience’ travels across linguistic and cultural boundaries?*

MV: Broadly speaking, conscience as a concept is strongly related to ethics. From a cultural anthropological point of view, an initial assessment would probably associate the notion of conscience closely with the Christian religious tradition and consider it as culturally embedded in a Christian context. However, some anthropologists might believe conscience reflects people’s universal feelings around morality. There is also a strong link between conscience and the right, if not moral *duty*, to dissent because of the understanding that conscience is the last instance of judgement which overrides other moral impositions.

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Cultural anthropology is most interested in the commonalities and universalities of collective human behaviour and thinking, as well as the differences between cultural groups. While psychology, philosophy and theology might have more to say about the individual dimensions of conscience, from a cultural anthropological point of view, the collective dimension of conscience is of greatest interest. This includes the interpersonal formation of conscience. Émile Durkheim, for example, coined the concept of ‘collective conscience/consciousness’, in French *conscience collective*, to describe the shared moral principles and moral ties of a group of people. He linked it to his idea of mechanical solidarity, that is, the glue of ideas that hold societies together. According to Durkheim, our socialisation into a particular society provides us with an interpersonal moral compass. What is deemed acceptable behaviour would, of course, not be the same in all cultural groups hence, a degree of cultural relativism drives which specific values are getting inscribed into the conscience of an individual.

A confusing feature of conscience is that it is presented as a concept closely linked to collective values, but it can also be a vehicle to justify individual deviance from particular collective impositions. Just think about the association between conscience and freedom of thought.

GI: *What does it mean for a tourism destination to have a conscience and what would a conscientious destination look like?*

MV: The answer to the question as to whether a tourism destination has ‘a conscience’ depends firstly on how we conceive tourism destinations. If we understand tourism destinations as sorts of localised social networks between tourism businesses, inhabitants and other stakeholders, then this group of people can of course share common moral principles. The more close-knit this community is, the more they have gone through a similar socialisation, the more likely there are more widespread commonalities among their values. However, in the context of individualised worldviews, the set of a group’s common values might become quite small.

I come back to my initial thought that conscience and consciousness should be treated as closely connected if we want to employ them as transformation agents. A shared conscience is a great basis to agree on red lines in order to avoid certain excesses in tourism development and prevent harmful tourism practices. Promoting a collective consciousness in destinations as a form of collective awareness can translate red lines into transformative energy: it can enable reflections on the status quo of destination development and help conceiving alternative models of thinking and doing tourism.

GI: *If we understand conscience as a result of one’s upbringing and social context, as for example Freud suggests, people’s consciences may be at odds with others’ in different cultural and social context. Starting from this consideration, how can a common understanding of conscience, shared by its inhabitants, guests and economic stakeholders, be achieved by a tourism destination?*

MV: The key techniques are reflection and imagination. Despite all the hype around creativity, I fear that we have lost some of our capability to imagine

fundamentally different alternatives. A lot of things today seem to be *without* alternatives, or are a priori declared to be beyond discussion. Tourism development, tourism policy and tourism management are no exception to this general trend. This unquestioned consensus has probably made our societies and collective decision-making more efficient as we do not always restart discussing the basics. Having said that, I am concerned we sometimes risk losing out on effectiveness by pushing too far into some directions without sufficiently reflecting on the ultimate purpose. On an abstract level, this inability to discuss radical alternatives might have something to do with the end of the dialectic between socialist and capitalist economic and sociopolitical systems, and the general acceptance that capitalist systems have proven to be superior. The result is that at least Western societies largely benefit from the strengths of capitalism, but we also seem to be unable to manage some of its less desirable effects such as, for example, an ongoing and quite dramatic increase in inequality. This also applies to the socio-economic context of tourism and tourism destinations, where the result is a loss in cohesiveness and shared understanding within the network of destination actors as well as, eventually, the emergence of more negative attitudes towards tourism, tourists and tourism entrepreneurs among the local host population.

GI: *In your opinion, does a conscientious destination appeal to already conscientious tourists seeking meaning in their traveling experience, or does it rather aim to appeal to a broader audience and raise awareness of its own specific concept of conscience? If so, how?*

MV: The underlying question is whether tourists or, more broadly speaking, consumers support value-based business or whether they do not care. The scientific evidence on this question is mixed. Of course, many forms of tourism are well-described as highly hedonic and sometimes self-indulgent forms of consumption. At the same time, research has shown it is possible to influence tourists to consume more sustainably. Ultimately, I think the decision on which type of tourism is pursued sits with the *local* stakeholders: invoking conscience and consciousness also means putting the local collective in front of an imaginative mirror and triggering a thorough reflection on what type of tourism they wish to encourage. It should be *their* decision, and this decision should be made in a conscious manner. Based on existing research, it is clear that tourists can be educated, and probably destinations *should* dare to educate them more. And perhaps, ultimately, we need to take a few steps back towards the very origins of tourism in the 17th and 18th century's Grand Tour, where educational objectives were the primary motivations behind travel.