Applying Habermas to Tourism

Reflection

It is the end of a hot day of lazing about on the beach with what feels like half of the entire population of northern Europe. We have had a proper English, Bangladeshi curry for our tea (what others more refined might call dinner, or supper), and we have walked across town against the flow of Dutch and Germans just starting to go out for their evening meals. Now we are sitting in the Turbo Rock Pub which is in the Centro Commercial Kasbah in the huge tourist destination of Playa del Ingles, Gran Canaria. Rammstein, an industrial metal band from Berlin, are on the sound system, and the bikers in the bar are howling their appreciation and headbanging away.

The history of the Canary Islands is one of invasion, genocide, exploitation and poverty. In the capital city of Gran Canaria, Las Palmas, there is a museum in the old town that attempts to explain the culture and lifestyle of the island’s pre-European Guanche inhabitants (http://www.elmuseocanario.com/index.html). It is not a museum on the tourist trail – Las Palmas is at the other end of the island to Playa del Ingles, and the coach trips up to the capital stop in the shopping area of the city. When we went on such a trip, it took us a good thirty minutes to cross the city to find the museum, and even then we had to wait until the long lunch break had finished before we could get inside. No one else from our coach got anywhere near the place, and when we were there we were the museum’s only northern European visitors. There are modern-looking exhibitions and reconstructions of everyday life, and artefacts in cabinets that have been found in a number of archaeological sites, but the most impressive display is that devoted to physical anthropology. Filling one entire room is a collection of over
a thousand Guanche skulls. Guanche, of course, is the name the Spanish originally used to describe the indigenous inhabitants of the Canary Islands when they invaded and colonized in the late middle ages. It is the name the tour guides use to describe these people on coach trips up into the mountainous interior, it is the name used in most guidebooks and popular histories. The museum’s website designers, perhaps conscious of the colonial origin of the name, now refer to the museum’s subjects as just los canarios, a vague, inoffensive term. But the room of a thousand skulls remains as a reminder of a now discredited notion of racial difference. As the website says of this display:

The anthropological remains are displayed in this room according to the exhibiting criteria of the founders of the Canarian Museum. There are over a thousand crania, which together with other bones bear witness to the anthropological features of the aboriginal population. These early settlers came to the Archipelago from Northern Africa some time after 500 B.C., and brought with them their own cultural heritage with which to face the peculiar challenges of life on an island.

The Museum is almost apologetic about this exhibit of the racial ‘laws’ of physical anthropology, and the website justifies the continued display of the thousand skulls by referring obliquely to the wishes of the museum’s founders. Yet the museum’s web-designers also go on to claim that the skulls provide clear evidence of the physical (racial) difference of ‘the aboriginal population’. This is not unlike anthropometry, the measurement of the size and shape of crania to find racial characteristics, the kind of ‘research’ that was central to the discredited work of people like Samuel Morton and other nineteenth and twentieth century scientists of race (Gould, 1992). Standing in the room is a strange experience: where are they all from? Who were these people? Why did some Spanish racial scientist feel the need to gather so many skulls in one place? The rest of the museum, with its concern to represent los canarios in a more sympathetic manner, is clearly an attempt to counterbalance this reminder of colonialism, racism and genocide.

In the Turbo Rock Pub, the German bikers don’t seem to care much for the story of colonialism, racism and genocide. Some of them look like they are about to fall over from the day’s drinking. Some of them are looking out of the open window of the Turbo Rock Pub at the English girls standing outside the Lineker’s Bar across the Arabesque courtyard.