

**TOURISM AFLOAT:
THE HIDDEN DISCOURSE OF RELATIONS ABOARD A
CROSS-CHANNEL FERRY**

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Introduction

MUCH of the literature on tourism to date can be seen as presenting a particular view of host-guest relations, one in which the guests are in positions of power *vis-à-vis* the hosts who entertain them (Shamir 1984, Sutton 1967). 'As a tourist, a person is at leisure...others must serve while the tourist plays' (Nash 1989: 45). Such literature reveals certain assumptions about the notions of hospitality and the power of money which entitles the spender to particular services (Adams 1972, Brewer 1984). The tourist, as a paying guest, is presented as somehow powerful as a result of his or her ability to control money and initiate transactions. The purchasing power of tourists, be it in terms of commodities or leisure time itself, is central to the tourism industry.

This paper is an ethnographic account of 'ferry tourism', which, despite its prominent place within the tourism industry, has been much neglected in the literature on it. This study attempts to fill this gap by concentrating on the specific environment of one ferry operating between England and France. Unlike much of the literature on tourism, the focus will include the perspectives of both passengers

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and crew, or hosts and guests. To this extent it is as much an ethnography of the workplace as of the world of leisure. It will also examine relations between passengers and crew, in particular the relations of authority and power that operate to maintain such divisions. Despite outward appearances, and contrary to much of the tourism literature, the paying guest does not occupy the position of ultimate power. In light of work by Turner (1978), Graburn (1989), Lett (1983), Foster (1986) etc., this paper will show that within the context of the ferry, 'tourists' cannot be characterized as solely sharing some sort of 'communitas' or as existing within a vacuum of egalitarian relations. This concept, with certain provisos, is more applicable to the grouping of crew. A more accurate picture is one in which power relations are viewed as a constant process of negotiation between all parties.

Power

As Barnes says (1988: 165), 'wherever human beings are found, whatever the situation in which they are found, social order and social power are also found.' Power is a concept central to any understanding of society, and as such it has featured prominently in analyses in sociology and other disciplines for many years (Blau 1967, Lukes 1974, Clegg 1989), including literary and textual criticism. While there seems to be no agreed, fully comprehensive definition of power, Barnes suggests certain characteristics as common to most (1988: 1-4). First, power is treated as an entity or attribute which things may have. Secondly, it is a theoretical concept referring to capacity or potential. Thirdly, it is manifest in behaviour, although actions cannot be used to define power itself. Fourthly, it is evident through its effects. This last assertion may go some way towards explaining the difficulty of defining what is meant by power. If its existence becomes apparent through effects, it is easier to describe its consequences than its nature or basis. Most analyses have thus concerned themselves with the location of power in society over and above any definition of power itself.

If one follows this line, the issue becomes a dispute over the way an initial definition of power should inform subsequent empirical study. The danger of operating with a rigid framework where power is necessarily explicative, operational or simply descriptive is that a large sector of knowledge relating to power relations in a particular context may be excluded. This is particularly relevant in analysing the complex web of interrelations between different groups aboard the ferry environment. Increasingly, it seems that any successful definition of power or subsequent analysis of power relations needs to operate with a flexible notion of what power is.

This is not to say that a definition of power should embrace all positions, thus rendering it useless. One needs a starting-point from which to initiate any investigation. In this way, Clegg is able to talk of all contributions establishing

a framework of power as worthy, no matter if subsequent critiques lead to their downfall (1989: xvii). Nevertheless, this position does allow a certain advantage in recognizing the benefits of one theory over another. It is from this standpoint that I make a case for adopting Foucault's analysis of power as an initial framework for this study. Before I do so, there is another perspective worth examining briefly within the context of tourism. Parsons' (1967) approach relies on an economic model to understand political power because 'power exists in the political system like money exists in the economic system' (cited in Barnes 1988: 14). This is an interesting analogy, particularly as much of the tourism literature contains the often implicit assumption that tourists, as paying guests, are in a position of power because of their purchasing ability.

This presentation is necessarily misleading, since it ignores a multiplicity of other factors often associated with economics which may affect the balance of power in such contexts. Parsons' theory is thus as unsuitable for the ferry context as it is in others (Barnes 1988: 14), because its scope is too restricted. There is also a tendency to talk of power as existing solely within a vacuum. This criticism can be levelled at many theorists, not only Parsons (see Barnes *ibid.*) but also Lukes (1974, 1992). It is one reason why Foucault's reconceptualization of power (1972, 1977, 1980) is particularly attractive. Not only does Foucault's analytic take this disjuncture of post-modernism into account, it also presents a suitably ambiguous and decentred notion of power. Thus the concern is not with the location of power so much as how it is exercised and its consequential effects. It thus allows an escape from the web of causality that has constrained many other theorists.

Foucault's analysis of power is particularly useful in addressing the dynamic relationship between hosts and guests aboard the ferry. These relations are fluid, being subject to many varying factors such as age, expectations and travel experience. It is in this sense that the relationship of power is better regarded as a dynamic and shifting process than a static balance in favour of one group rather than another.

Methodology

This study is based on fieldwork undertaken over two consecutive summers (1993 and 1994) aboard the *Stena Londoner*. As an employee of Stena Sealink and an active crew member aboard the ferry in the Passenger Services Department, I was able to gather data while immersed in the working and social environment of the ferry. In addition, I undertook over twenty journeys solely as a passenger. This participant observation was supplemented by numerous informal interviews with over thirty crew members. Conversations with passengers were largely undertaken in the capacity of crew member, although these were supplemented with over

1,500 passenger comment cards, often submitted anonymously. On-board records and documentation relating to the *Stena Londoner* were also utilized.

Terminology

At this point some clarification is necessary. While this paper examines what is essentially a tourist environment,¹ not all passengers view themselves as tourists within this space. To follow Graburn's distinction, not all were voluntarily outside the world of work and indulging in play (1989). The obvious case is that of the freight drivers, for whom the ferry forms part of the work environment. Within this category are also business travellers, and school parties on exchange visits, who are ostensibly there for educational purposes.

The term 'passenger' is less restrictive and is used here to describe all those, whether 'tourists' or otherwise, who travel on the ferry. It also allows a distinction to be made from crew members who are not voluntary in the same sense and are not fare-payers. However, while rejecting the term 'tourist' I think it is still valid to use other terms common to tourist literature, namely hosts and guests (see Smith 1989). There is no conflict here, in the sense that all passengers are guests of the *Londoner*, the crew and Stena Sealink. Indeed, management crew referred to passengers in these terms. By definition, the *Londoner* and her crew can be seen as hosts to the fare-paying passengers, catering to their needs and providing the context in which they expect a service.

The MV Stena Londoner

On a full sailing, the *Londoner* has a carrying capacity of 1,800 passengers and operates with a crew of between 65 and 68. It provides a distinctly British environment. Her crew are recruited from British shores, and English is the predominant language. Announcements and directions are given in English first, followed by a French translation. While over fifteen currencies are accepted on board, change is given only in British currency. The Britishness of this environment is mirrored by the nationality of the passengers, most of whom are from Britain. The reverse is true of her sister ship, the *Parisien*, which on the whole

1. That is, one set up essentially to cater for those people travelling outside the parameters of normal structures of everyday life, or, to use Graburn's (1989) distinction, the profane world.

caters for French passengers. However, both British and French passengers are found on both vessels.

In this respect, The *Londoner* can be said to cater to the masses, with a quick turnround being the *modus operandi*. In the words of one senior manager, 'we operate a bus service'. The on-board facilities, such as the fast-food cafeteria operating throughout the voyage, reflect this. Seating is functional rather than luxurious, the exception being the Eurolounge, available to those willing to pay an additional charge. The rest is free seating. Because official seating capacity includes on-deck lounges, bad weather often means that there is not enough seating for all passengers.

There are also several areas that cater more to individual needs, such as a restaurant with individual settings and menu. Freight drivers are catered to the most in this respect. They have a separate dining area, are able to book the limited cabins available for the crossing and are provided with shower facilities. Thus, to a great extent, they are able to escape the masses. It is difficult to determine to what extent freight drivers perceive themselves as being different from those travelling for leisure. Comments seemed to indicate that a distinction was made. To a limited extent, Stena supported the exclusivity of such passengers, with discounts applicable only to freight drivers.

In marketing terms, Stena Sealink projects an image of cruise-liner luxury. Its brochures emphasize the relaxed mode of travel, the luxury goods available on board at duty-free prices, the provision of entertainment and the service of a skilled crew. Such imagery supports the notion of the paying guest as occupying a position of power.

Passengers

The grouping 'passengers' proves to be paradoxical in that it is a homogeneous concept simultaneously containing many divisions and appearing very fragmented. This contrasts with Foster's account of the equality experienced by cruise passengers as members of 'a privileged class' (1986: 228). As the antithesis to 'crew', 'passengers' can be seen as one group with an identity of its own. All members share a common experience and are subject to the same structures of an unfamiliar environment. They begin their journey by adhering to special embarkation procedures which refer to them as one group. While it is certainly true that the perspective of passengers existing as a homogeneous group is set up by the hosts, it is also true that they learn to identify themselves as such and to conform to this classification.² It is not unusual to hear passengers identify

2. See Brewer 1984 for an account of guests' conforming to hosts' stereotypes and adapting their behaviour accordingly.

themselves to crew members in this way, as demonstrated by one man who delared, 'I am a foot passenger. Where do I go?'

Embarkation is a time when passengers share a sense of commonality and identify with one another, despite being strangers. The layout of the ship can be confusing to passengers on first sight. Crew members are positioned to help with directions and queries at the main entrances, but typical comments from passengers concern the maze of corridors and which deck they left their cars on.

This pattern is repeated whenever confusion abounds and serves to unify passengers. The system of boarding cards used to regulate duty-free sales is another example. Here the reasoning behind the system is not known or understood by most passengers, while it is by crew members. This results in an identification with other passengers who are equally unsure of the system. A familiar response to crew members' requests to see boarding cards was: 'I wouldn't be on board if I didn't have one', backed up by laughter from other passengers. Occasionally, reactions are very hostile. One passenger even threatened violence and to report the crew member to the European Court. The eagerness of passengers to stick with things familiar can be seen as an attempt to overcome the confusion caused by the unknown. The availability of English newspapers on board is one example, as is the typically English food served in the cafeteria. British passengers returning after several weeks' holiday in France may refer to French money as 'funny money' and often express relief that they can speak English again.

However, these brief moments during which passengers identify with one another and exist as a homogeneous group mask underlying divisions. Passengers also exist in antithesis to each other according to nationality and mode of travel. For example, one English lady complained vociferously about another passenger who pushed into the queue, saying, 'these French people just have no manners'. Similarly, divisions exist between types of passenger. Car passengers complained of missing out on seating to foot passengers who had paid less, and many freight drivers were openly impatient and regarded new passengers who were unsure of the system with some derision. The divisions passengers made among themselves were most visible in terms of seating arrangements. Family groups sat together, often putting belongings on empty seats to separate their space from other passengers. Even in the bar, where free-standing seating allowed flexibility in seating arrangements, divisions between groups were made very clear.

Crew

Paradoxically, the crew, while maintaining outward divisions of rank, appear to have more internal unity than passengers. The rank structure of the crew follows

the uniform structure of maritime life, with the captain at the top of the pyramid. His authority is recognized by crew members, not least through practices such as standing whenever he enters. Privileged status is recognized through the provision of separate dining areas for higher ranking crew, as well as better cabin accommodation in a separate part of the ship. However, in some respects the intimate nature of the ferry environment results in very informal relations between the captain and other ranks, to the extent that such divisions are largely superficial. Indeed, it was not unusual for the captain to join off-duty crew on the sundeck.

In other respects, departmental distinctions can be seen to exist between the Passenger Services Department (PSD) and the ship maintenance crew or 'deckies'. As these names suggest, the PSD are front-line crew responsible for providing services to passengers. The 'deckies' are responsible for the maintenance and running of the vessel itself. However, these distinctions are not as obvious as vertical ones involving rank. This is due largely to the frequency of interaction between both departments as a result of regular boat drills, as well as the existence of a common mess area. The seating arrangements at meals reflect this interaction, with department members mixing easily, whereas higher ranking members of crew dine elsewhere and are excluded from the mess area. Here, there exists a unity between such crew members in opposition to the higher ranks. This was apparent with the decision to prohibit crew from drinking alcohol on any private crossing made immediately after the turn of duty. This was seen as another unreasonable measure by 'management' and prompted identification among the non-ranking crew members who had to comply with it.

Further distinctions exist within the PSD itself between working areas. The cafeteria is acknowledged to be a frenetic work area, while utility members are seen as having an 'easier ride'. However, these divisions are not hard-and-fast ones, as most crew members work in more than one department. Thus other department crew often ask, 'Are you busy?' in an empathetic way, recognizing the difficulties that arise in providing a service to passengers.

Departmental distinctions are more real for members of management who have to compete for finances and have reason to put the needs of their departments first. For example, the cafeteria was the first department to increase the hours of temporary staff after they were reduced over the summer, which prompted other department managers to complain that they were just as busy and short-staffed.

Employment status differences, which might be said to be a source of fragmentation among crew members themselves, seem to have the opposite effect. A minimal number of crew are employed as corps crew, benefiting from higher hourly rates and travel perks as well as job security and sick-pay benefits. Crew employed on temporary contracts, which in some cases have been in force for over two years, are paid less, despite working under the same conditions, and they do not enjoy any benefits. Rather than causing divisions between crew members, a unity is created in opposition to Stena, the company, which is seen as pursuing an unreasonable policy. This attitude appeared in the comment often made among crew members: 'that's Stena for you!'

Thus, the nature of the ferry environment as a work and living place for crew members serves to create a sense of unity over and above any outward divisions. Living together for seven days at a time and working in the same environment creates close bonds between crew members and a close-knit atmosphere. This is reflected in the cabin parties often held below deck, meaning that the relationship between crew members is both a social and a working one. However, it is one that is largely confined to life on the ferry, and in this sense crew members can be seen as living two lives, one on board ship and one on shore. The boundary between them can be seen in the on-board relationships that are often created between crew members who have a wife or husband on shore. There is an unspoken acceptance of this departure from the normal moral structures that exist on shore, and in this sense the ferry can be seen as a liminal environment for crew members (see Lett 1983).

In short, crew identify themselves with one another by virtue of this common experience on board the ferry and exist in opposition to passengers who spend only four hours on board at a time. While the uniform immediately distinguishes crew from passengers, it also signals a common experience between crew members, making it possible to greet other crew members even if one knows them only vaguely.

Passenger-Crew Relations

With the ferry environment existing as a living and working place for crew members, passengers can often seem superfluous. In general, crew attitudes towards passengers reflect the nature of the environment, an almost paternalistic language being adopted to deal with passengers who are confused about the environment and its structures. The same repetitive questions such as 'What time do we arrive?' from every new wave of passengers are given standard answers by crew members, who have dealt with them hundreds of times before. The cycle is broken only when circumstances allow a conversation beyond repetitive questions to start between a crew member and a passenger, at which point he or she becomes more than just another anonymous passenger passing through. This is also true for regular passengers who travel on the *Londoner*. One passenger in particular was known to all the crew as Eddie and was referred to as such, rather than as 'a passenger'.

Although they are in the position of providing a service to passengers, crew members have ways of dealing with passengers who were unnecessarily rude or abusive, such as a slower service or stricter observance of duty-free restrictions.³

3. Ong (1991) details similar strategies of resistance within the workplace, albeit outside a tourism environment.

While passengers paying for their service are ostensibly in a position of power, this is countered by the structures that operate on board. The example of seating demonstrates this. Many passengers express dissatisfaction at the inadequate seating facilities, but although they are able to make a written complaint internally to Stena customer services, immediate redress is impossible. Similarly, many passengers see the many safety rules, such as the forbidden access to car deck during the voyage, as restricting them unfairly. In a much broader sense, passengers are subjected to the 'normalizing' processes imposed upon them by the structures of the ferry environment and in turn by crew. The embarkation procedures and issuing of boarding cards and tickets all serve to eradicate the individuality of passengers.

Power in these instances thus remains with crew members, who are insiders. They know how the system works and are legitimated in enforcing it. They know more about individual passengers through ticket information. The authority of a uniform means being seen as one who knows the system and overrides any deference of age that might exist in normal relations. In this respect, passengers are subject to a more overt form of power/knowledge. Although the uniform in itself is not productive of anything, the accepted meaning of authority it conveys imbues the wearer with power over others.

Whether crew choose to take advantage of this power/knowledge seems to depend greatly on the specific situation and is tied to the whole notion of expectations. Although Nash posits money as motivating certain 'understandings about how the parties involved will treat each other' (1989: 45), many factors are involved, not least the interpretation of such understandings by individuals in specific contexts. Passengers' expectations are more powerful. Dissatisfaction is often expressed in terms of failed expectations, such as perceived standards of cleanliness or provisions for changing babies. In these circumstances, knowledge about rival ferry companies fuels such expectations and is used as a threat, the implication being that the passenger will take his or her custom elsewhere.

Expectations by passengers as to what they, as fare-paying passengers, ought to receive in services can be seen from comment cards provided by Stena Sealink for them to fill out. Any disappointment was directed at crew members as visible front-line members. In this sense, passengers often see crew members as deceiving them. One passenger, not believing the duty-free regulations as explained to him by a crew member, demanded to speak to the manager. When the manager confirmed the regulations, he demanded to speak to the captain, accusing the manager of lying.

Undoubtedly power/knowledge contributes to strengthening the relations of crew and passengers alike, but it is not always productive in terms of end-results. This applies to passengers who utilize their knowledge of consumer rights and complain through official channels. All comments are referred to the head office and solicit a response, but in many cases action is prevented by considerations of financial viability and the desire for increased profit margins by Stena as a company.

This notion of expectations can be seen to extend to crew also, for example the way passengers should express dissatisfaction. A positive response was given to 'civilized' grievances. Indeed, much of the discourse between passengers and crew can be seen to involve a whole series of expectations, whose successful meeting depends a great deal on subtle processes of exchange between the two parties, which are not always overtly acknowledged by the players involved. In the same way that the passenger is empowered by the consumer ethos, the crew are limited by the notion of hospitality and doctrines of the customer as always being right (see Sheldon 1988, Rakadijijyska 1990). There are perceived limits to which crew members can impose power/knowledge *vis-à-vis* that of the passenger, no matter how uninformed the latter might be. It is understood that the crew are not deliberately rude to passengers and that they should attempt to facilitate their needs. Deviation runs the risk of being disciplined by Stena management.

Analysis and Conclusions

The purchasing power of guests and the hold this power exerts over facilitating hosts is what Nash refers to when he talks about the imperialism of the pound (1989: 37–8).⁴ In this respect much tourism literature gives a somewhat distorted picture of host–guest relations. Within this general presentation of the 'guest as king', there is little mention of authority being brought to bear on the tourist, who is shown to be unshackled from the constraints of profane life and empowered to take advantage of freedoms within the sacred. Lett (1983) shows the liminal world of the tourist to be one where individuals are able to invert or suspend the customary regulations of everyday life. From pilgrimage to package tour, the mention of authority is noticeably absent.⁵

This study shows that while host–guest relations aboard the ferry demonstrate many parallels with this overall picture, it is only a surface reality. Undoubtedly passengers command power in many of the ways suggested, particularly from their position as paying guests. They are able to assert themselves through knowledge of their rights as consumers and through a range of expectations formed through knowledge of other contexts. The pervasive ethos of consumer society means that most passengers are aware of 'their right to complain', even if mechanisms of exclusion and censorship come into play, resulting in only a knowledgeable few

4. According to Nash, transactions between hosts and guests are marked by a disparity of power, in which metropolitan centres generate tourist needs and tourist areas satisfy them (1989: 37–8).

5. Turner's (1978) and Graburn's (1989) notion of *communitas* belies the fact that authority structures must be present for the movement of vast numbers of people to occur.

being aware of exactly what their rights are in this particular environment. This is in contrast to the crew, who are informed of the relevant legislation.

The question then arises whether tourist hospitality is necessarily about economics and making a profit. Certainly this would seem to be a large part of it, and notions of good customer relations are constantly being impressed on the crew by management. Incentives to make higher sales and achieve profit targets are much in evidence. Similarly, the notion of passengers being entitled to a level of hospitality in return for their money is again related to the idea of expectations. However, this is not the whole picture, and it ignores the context of specific situations. As already mentioned, once conversations are initiated between hosts and guests the anonymity of the relationship is broken, and hospitality becomes a personal response rather than a professional one motivated ultimately by economic forces.

Deeper analysis reveals that the hosts, in this case the crew, are in a strong position when it comes to power relations with passengers and are able to utilize this power to exert authority over them. While it is possible to suggest that hosts ultimately have power over guests, contrary to much of the present literature this is misleading. In viewing social groups aboard the ferry as internally divided, it is possible to suggest a multiplicity of relations in which, depending on context, individuals and groups exist on unequal terms. It is no longer plausible to view social categories as homogeneous and egalitarian, a disparity that exists both between groups and within them.

This paper has suggested that in many respects the crew set themselves up as legitimate holders of power and authority in relations with passengers and can ultimately be seen as more powerful. How is this achieved? If one follows Foucault's argument, the answer would be found in knowledge. While this is undoubtedly an over-simplification of his reasoning, there is no mistaking the essential relationship he makes between knowledge and power (1977: 27).

However, if, as this study suggests, knowledge alone does not account sufficiently for the authority and power exhibited between groups at this micro-level, the question must be raised to what extent Foucault's ascending analysis of power relations is itself a mechanism of exclusion.⁶ In rejecting totalitarian macro-perspectives, Foucault's analysis fails to consider the wider spheres of legitimation that influence power relations. While the crew are restricted by the notion of hospitality and a certain amount of deference towards the guest, they are ultimately legitimated in their position by wider regulations formulated by the government. Duty-free limits are fixed from above, as are many rules regarding safety. Such legislation is imposed on Stena as a company, and the crew, as final links in this chain, enact it. It could be said, therefore, that depending on the context, crew are restricted as much as empowered by such legislation.

6. Nash (1989: 37) and Adams (1972) have written of the need for reference to larger contexts in order to comprehend fully direct contact between hosts and guests.

Within the ferry context, this fails to appreciate the agency of individuals and the complexities of given contexts, which demonstrate that such discipline and power do not operate on everyone in the same way. Reactions and resistances differ, as is demonstrated by disembarkation. The structured timetable operates on all passengers, yet some resist this by returning to their cars before they are called to the car decks. Thus the context in which power is manifested is of significance, particularly when it comes to the question of individual agency. Indeed, the ability of passengers to make choices between compliance or resistance in reaction to alternative power structures is stronger in many cases when acting alone or truly as an individual. Thus crowd control is easier with large numbers than with smaller groups, where individuals feel more empowered to assert their authority and challenge that of crew members.

While not denying the significance of knowledge within this equation, this paper has shown that there are many ways in which people get a handle on power and manipulate it to their advantage. In determining where the clearest balance of power lies, it must be remembered that the crew are also subject to internal power relations, so that the matter becomes one of context rather than ultimate power. For example, dynamic and simultaneous relations of power operate between crew members, who might simultaneously be subject to the authority of higher ranking members while exercising power over passengers during crowd control and embarkation procedures.

A successful analysis of power relations within the ferry context must be a dynamic one which regards power as a constant process of negotiation between all agents, rather than a static one in which one group is seen as firmly holding the balance of power over others. Any monopoly of power should be seen as a temporary position in the on-going negotiation between and within positions, depending on context, and necessarily accounting for human agency.

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