



# Geographies of tourism: critical research on capitalism and local livelihoods

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## I Introduction

In my previous report, I alluded to the contradictory situation where tourism appears marginal to debates about ‘criticality’ and ‘relevance’ in human geography, while simultaneously tourism geographers have been doing precisely the kinds of research that commentators have claimed are needed. Accordingly, in my second and third progress reports, I aim to draw attention to critical tourism geographies.

At the outset I wish to obviate protracted discussion about what constitutes ‘critical’ geography (see instead Castree, 2000; Blomley, 2006). For me, research is critical because of its opposition to systems of domination, orthodoxies, injustices and oppressions. Critical research therefore usually stems from Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, queer, environmentalist or poststructuralist theories. Here, I do not prioritize research self-badged as ‘critical’. Rather I report on recent research organized via critical ‘threads’ – which are admittedly neither complete nor perfectly linear. The first – constituting this report – starts with research critiquing tourism capitalism, and then

discusses labour, livelihoods and ‘pro-poor tourism’. The subsequent report will follow a parallel thread – on spaces of encounter, embodiment and ethics.

## II Critiques of tourism capitalism

In a classic essay, Steve Britton (1991) sought to highlight the scale and import of tourism as a capitalist industry. There had been three decades of growth, yet economic geographers (particularly of Marxist persuasion) had not taken tourism particularly seriously. For Britton (1991: 451), tourism had become ‘a major internationalized component of Western capitalist economies; it is one of the quintessential features of mass consumer culture and modern life’.

Critical of descriptively ‘thin’ studies, Britton also sought to properly theorize tourism as a capitalist industry. Marxian frameworks had not been adequately applied to tourism. Yet tourism was also different; simple transference of old theoretical concepts onto tourism would not suffice (Agarwal *et al.*, 2000; Debbage and Ioannides, 2004). Tourism reconfigured trust (consumers being distant and therefore unable to sample before

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purchase); brought consumers to faraway places (mutating understandings of distance and markets); relied on commodifying culture (complicating use and exchange value) and created destinations as products that were spatially fixed (thus altering capacity for transnational capital mobility). Tourism required interrogation by critical economic geographers; but, too, critical geographers seeking to wrestle with capitalism needed to seriously consider tourism's new economic formations.

### *1 Tourism as 'slippery capitalism'*

What research has emerged since on tourism and its economic forms? Much tourism research has been tilted towards social and cultural dimensions, rather than political economy, industrial structure or relations of production (Agarwal *et al.*, 2000; Judd, 2006). That does not mean that Britton's original manifesto remained unread; a consistent critical literature has examined the character and politics of tourism capitalism.

Britton (1991: 455) originally theorized a 'tourism production system' – less a single industry than an amalgam of sectors, each with their own geographies, divisions of labour and competitive dynamics (Roehl, 1998). Some still use the idea of a tourism production system (see Yamamoto and Gill, 2002; Cornelissen, 2005; Mosedale, 2007; Lazzeretti and Capone, 2008). Others are now less convinced that a 'system' can be so neatly defined, reflecting disciplinary suspicion with all-encompassing explanations, and further recognition that 'production' and 'consumption' are unnecessarily divisive analytical categories in the context of tourism (d'Hauterterre, 2006). To paraphrase Markusen (1996), tourism has become a particularly 'slippery' economic form to theorize.

In the 1980s, tourism had gone through phases of corporate concentration and expansion, with airlines privatized, internationalization of hotel chains, and ever-more sophisticated systems for travel and

accommodation booking. Since then, further privatization, concentration and sophistication in market competition and control has unfurled – and been subject to geographical analysis (Papatheodorou, 2006; Hjalager, 2007; Coles and Hall, 2008; Weaver, 2008). Mass tourism is increasingly controlled by large conglomerates with interests in real estate (eg, US-based Cendant Corp.), finance (Thomas Cook) and telecommunications (Virgin) (Endo, 2006). Airlines, hotel chains and, increasingly, internet companies consolidate powerful positions (O'Connell, 2006). Diversification, market risk and the complexity of tourism's supply-side encourage further commodification, horizontal and vertical integration and strategic alliances (Meethan, 2004; Mosedale, 2006; Duval, 2008), trends exacerbated by financial crises such as that being experienced at the time of writing (see Prideaux, 1999, for earlier comparison).

However, tourist capitalism has remained loose enough to enable others to enter markets and fuel further cycles of destination production (Papatheodorou, 2004; Butler, 2006; Lloyd, 2006). Tourism's thirst for 'the new', reliance on local knowledge and low entry barriers have triggered further fragmentation, specialization and diversification. Space continually emerges for small operators, itinerant stallholders, artisans, sex-workers, drug-dealers and musicians to seek livelihoods (Shaw, 2004; Gibson, 2007; Turner, 2007), a function of slippages across capitalist and non-capitalist and formal and informal sectors.

Tourism consequently shapes material spaces: spatial fixity encourages market domination as strong players outmuscle small firms for space and control in iconic destinations. Simultaneously, new destinations characterized by small operators and the informal sector are 'discovered' by intrepid travellers and reviewers sick of mass tourism, and in turn these places experience inward-investment, property development and corporate encroachment. The result is the production of tightly controlled, privatized,

'enclavic' spaces aimed at complete revenue capture (like theme parks, resorts and cruise ships), and the noisy, heterogeneous spaces of the informal sector (Edensor, 2000; Weaver, 2005; Lloyd, 2006). Always contradictory, tourism capitalism tends towards corporate oligopoly and becomes more fragmented and complex, blending with other economic forms at its edges.

Accordingly, tourism has diversified into a multitude of niches. Although sometimes focusing solely on consumption, and at risk of becoming a mere list of 'instances, case studies and variations' (Franklin and Crang, 2001), the proliferation of niche tourism studies attest to the kaleidoscopic character of tourism capitalism. Niches include heritage (Li *et al.*, 2008); 'dark tourism' (focusing on sites of death, including war and genocide locations – Stone and Sharpley, 2008), ecotourism (diversified from birdwatching to hiking and even 'carnivore tourism' – Ednarsson, 2006); 'alcotourism' (around drinking cultures – Bell, 2008); spa tourism (Brenner, 2006); slum tourism (Tourism Concern, 2008); medical tourism (whether for essential or cosmetic surgery – Connell, 2006) and sex tourism (Ryan and Hall, 2001; Taylor, 2006). Across each of these are variform rationales for travel, internal market structures, divisions of labour and methods of destination construction.

## 2 *On the boundaries of 'tourism'*

Related debate initiated a decade ago (Rojek and Urry, 1997) persists regarding the boundaries of tourism, given that tourism is 'polyglot' (Ioannides and Debbage, 1997: 229) aggregating industries and activities. Tourism relies on embodied consumption of 'experiences' and 'encounters', gatekeepers such as travel writers and booking agents, transport infrastructures, 'natural' attractions such as national parks, as well as material production such as souvenirs, luggage, hiking boots, guide books, airplanes and hotel beds. Some overlapping industries are wholly dedicated to serving tourists;

others less so. Tourism can also catalyze industrial reorganizations elsewhere: tourism aggravated offshore outsourcing and privatization in medical services as people increasingly travelled to combine surgery and holidays (York, 2008). Such entanglements have spurred contestation over the very category of 'the tourism industry'. For Leiper (2008: 237), the singular 'tourism industry' is now redundant: 'the contention that tourism is supported by one giant industry has no robust theoretical foundation'. Categorizing tendencies in the social sciences exhibit an inbuilt 'sedentarism' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 209) that cannot capture tourism's fluidity or promiscuity.

Analytically, then, tourism is less a 'production system' and more a hybrid economic formation blending different industries, the state, 'nature', the informal sector, the capitalist and non-capitalist economies, and all manner of technologies, commodities and infrastructures (d'Hautesserre, 2006). The 'trick' of tourism capitalism is its ability to commodify entire places and all they contain; to spill outwards from the edges of organized capital to saturate all other elements of place (Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994; Crouch, 2000). You and everything in your town are part of its commodification potential as a tourist destination.

For other critics, 'tourism' has become overly fetishized, 'as a thing, a product, a behaviour' (Franklin and Crang, 2001), belying its inseparability from other forms of mobility (Hall, 2005; Sheller and Urry, 2006). Boundaries between mobilities have blurred with the rise of medium-term business travel, working holidays, overseas volunteering, 'return home' trips within diasporic communities, seasonal work in ski resorts, 'snowbirding' and 'grey nomadism' (Allon *et al.*, 2008; see also Clarke, 2004; Coles and Timothy, 2004; Duncan, 2007; 2008). Tourism's very premise – travel – is much older than industrial capitalism; but travel is now more commonplace and complex as capitalism and society become more

sophisticated and interconnected – and yet ever more fractured and contradictory.

### III Labour and livelihoods

Irrespective of bold proposals to dispense with tourism as a meaningful category within a ‘new paradigm in mobilities research’ (Sheller and Urry, 2006), the reality is that for millions of people working lives are spent serving, cleaning, performing or producing goods and services for those who travel (Aguar and Herod, 2006). Travel continues to structure people’s lifeworlds and livelihoods (Connell and Rugendyke, 2008).

It is uncomplicated – and yet still vitally important – to stress as Britton did that much work created by travel is poorly paid, deskilled and insecure – if not dangerous. Recent reports by UK-based NGO Tourism Concern document the worst cases, including belittling treatment of trekking porters undertaking dangerous work in Tanzania, Peru and Nepal; forced labour camps on tourism projects in Myanmar; and the complete absence of minimum wage or hours of work laws in the Maldives (Beddoe, 2004; Tourism Concern, 2008). Cruise ships fly ‘flags of convenience’ to circumvent national industrial relations laws (Lee-Ross, 2006). Unsurprisingly, conditions are generally worse in the Majority/poor world, where trade union activities are scarce or suppressed (Riley, 2004). In the Dominican Republic, tourism ‘deskills and devalues workers, marginalizing them from tourist development and sexualizing their labor. The majority of people are relegated, at best, to positions of servitude in low-paid jobs in the formal sector’ (Cabezas, 2008: 21). Awful cases of trafficking children for work in sex tourism have been documented in Thailand, Mexico, the Philippines and Brazil (ECPAT International, 2008).

Gender relations intersect divisions of labour, rates of pay and career opportunities, and can worsen in periods of crisis (Skalpe, 2007; Thrane, 2007). After Indonesia’s

2000 riots, casualized female staff from certain ethnic groups were laid off first, in a labour market already dominated by men because of religious and educational exclusion (Fallon, 2008). Yet some in the poor world may still prefer tourism to the drudgery and dirt of agricultural labour (Connell and Rugendyke, 2008). Tourism’s hybrid and contradictory economic formations are matched by intricate mosaics of terrible and less exploitative circumstances.

Because tourism brings customers directly and visibly in contact with workers, complex and sometimes confronting collisions are generated: when corporate business travellers and low-paid cleaners pass by in corridors of downtown hotels (McNeill, 2008); or when African-American tourists visit Brazil, reconfiguring power relationships within a diasporic community sharing supposedly ‘common’ roots (Pinho, 2008). In the Caribbean, the travelling super-rich have created new playgrounds and exacerbated existing class and racial divides (Smelch, 2003). Wilson (2008: 37) has even labelled this ‘de facto social and economic apartheid’. Relational spaces of class, linguistic and industrial tensions materialize.

Tourism both catalyses labour mobility (attracting workers to destinations) and mobilizes workers to travel to other places on holiday, where local workers may in turn have limited capacity to be mobile (Riley, 2004). In Thailand, villagers excluded from traditional forest resources by new legislation migrated to Bangkok to find incomes to survive (Wong, 2008). In the Cook Islands workers were needed from Fiji because Cook Islanders had themselves migrated to New Zealand (Connell and Rugendyke, 2008). In New Orleans, in-migrating tourism workers spurred gentrification in districts neighbouring the French Quarter (Gladstone and Préau, 2008). How tourism catalyses entanglements of class, social relations, mobilities and working and recreating lives – and in particular material, architectural

spaces – is increasingly an agenda for geographical research.

### *1 Performing tourism work/er*

Again ahead of his time, Britton explored how workers such as flight attendants and hotel cleaners both provided services and were commodified bodies – gazed upon, sexualized, or simply judged against yardsticks of ‘good service’: ‘the behaviour and qualities of the waiter, room service person, tour guide, or steward are as important as the physical labour service they undertake’ (Britton, 1991: 459).

Recent research has revealed how tourism workers negotiate expected codes of behaviour and appearance. In Toronto, a hotel workers’ union tried to transform images of lowly ‘service providers’ into valued ‘cultural workers’ (Tufts, 2006). On cruise ships poor pay and conditions led to distinct organizational cultures among otherwise heterogeneous workers (Lee-Ross, 2006). In Fiji, capitalist place marketing combined with colonial legacies to create expectations that hotel workers appear and behave ‘as willing subordinates, eagerly smiling and anxious to please’ (Kanemasu, 2008: 116). Options for resistance were limited, yet diverse tactics emerged, including retaining some autonomy over bodily appearance, ‘switching off’ performed behaviours and lampooning employers away from the tourist gaze. Malam (2008: 135) emphasized compromise: for young male workers in Thai beachside bungalows and bars, pay was poor (or non-existent); yet migrating to work in tourism remained attractive, because it ‘opens up possibilities for the performance of masculine subjectivities which would otherwise be subject to surveillance and censure’. Tourism facilitated sexual encounters with wealthy tourist women that ‘enable[d] the men to re-negotiate their positioning in wider Thai society, and thereby challenge the marginalized identity labels that are ascribed to them’. Amid continued exploitation are stories of the negotiation of manifold identities.

### *2 Pro-poor tourism: alleviating poverty, sustaining livelihoods?*

Because of its global reach, low entry barriers and reliance on local attractions and knowledges, tourism is perennially considered an option for creating livelihoods in poor places (Hall, 2007). Yet there are enormous differences in the theorization and evaluation of pro-poor tourism, reflecting variations in actual circumstances, policy cycles in foreign aid, and philosophical persuasions of researchers. Pro-poor objectives are difficult to meet, especially because of corruption, divisions of labour and competition (Chok *et al.*, 2007; Turner, 2007). Although private-sector activities sometimes alleviate poverty (Harrison and Schipani, 2007), and wider associations and knowledge flows helpfully emerge (van der Duim and Caalders, 2008), insecure working conditions often prevail (Hill *et al.*, 2006). In many cases the poor benefit less than the wealthy and powerful (Hall, 2007; Spenceley and Goodwin, 2007). Existing power structures remain unchallenged (Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008), with benefits spatially confined (Wong, 2008) and communities ideologically divided.

For other critics, pro-poor tourism projects merely reorganize actors in an increasingly neoliberalized industry (Chok *et al.*, 2007), shifting responsibility for poverty onto the poor themselves (Schilcher, 2007; Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008). Proponents of market-orientated tourism often ignore alternatives; Binns and Nel (2003) and Torres and Momsen (2004) documented cases where cooperation and new partnerships reaped most benefit for indigenous peoples. In other cases, critical issues were meaningful community participation (Scheyvens, 2002), relationship building (Wright *et al.*, 2007) and ethical decision-making (Smith and Duffy, 2003). For Schilcher (2007) mechanisms were necessary to skew benefits in favour of the poorest; for Bartolo *et al.* (2008) opposition to state-promoted mass tourism and strict principles of community ownership, equality



and environmentalism were essential. In Cuc Phuong National Park in Vietnam, tourism had limited economic benefit and exacerbated pressures on the biophysical environment (Rugendyke and Nguyen, 2008). However, villagers described tourists as 'friendly and easy to talk to', and wished further growth, so long as they were incorporated into planning and profit-sharing, because visitors made everyday life more lively and 'joyful'. The economic character of tourism thus clearly matters, as does the embodiment of political values, the quality of relationships built and ethical decisions made.

#### IV Conclusion

What has come of Britton's call for geographers of critical persuasion to take tourism more seriously? Despite repeated echoes of his argument (Agarwal *et al.*, 2000; Debbage and Ioannides, 2004; Ioannides, 2006; Hall and Page, 2006), nearly two decades on, it seems that the wider discipline, and particularly economic geography, has failed to fully acknowledge tourism. Franklin and Crang (2001) argued that tourism studies 'has been dominated by policy led and industry sponsored work so the analysis tends to internalize industry led priorities and perspectives'. I have sought to show here that such comments are far from universally true. Critical tourism research has theorized tourism's slippery economic forms, explored the complexity of its networks and power relations, and grappled with urgent questions of poverty and precarious livelihoods.

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