

THE TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE OF TOURISM IN SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, CHIAPAS, MEXICO

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The aim of this paper is to reveal the spatial structure of tourism in the city of San Cristobal de Las Casas (SCLC), Chiapas, Mexico, a tourist destination whose image, unlike other places in the country, has not been affected by problems associated with insecurity, violence or drug-trafficking, thus securing a sustained flow of visitors in the last decade.

The concept of territorial structure derives from the theory of the territorial organization of the economy, originally from the Soviet school of geographical thought in the 1920's. It is useful in the following investigative directions: economic regionalization, evaluation of the use of natural resources and assessment of environmental problems (Propin and Sanchez, 2001).

Kostrowicki (1986) used this approach to carry out research on Agricultural Geography, and developed a comprehensive concept that guides the study of space from the perspective of the Economy, both in general and sector terms. According to this author, the idea of the territorial organization is an essential contribution of Economic Geography to Regional Planning, whose approaches are applicable to any economic activity; it is made up of two components: the *territorial processes*, which include the historical evolution of the site where the economic activity takes place, and the *territorial structures* that encompass the entire set of physical, static and dynamic elements, that make it possible (Ibid.)

Regarding the study of tourism, the territorial structure is useful to identify a series of physical components that define the growing of this particular sector of the economy in a given territory. They include the recognition of tourist resources that give way to patterns of land-use, infrastructure or the net of services aimed at meeting visitors' needs and, ultimately, the flow of individuals, information and services that stimulate tourism at both national and international levels.

In this context, and in order to identify in SCLC each of the elements mentioned above, seven field-works were done between 2008 and 2014. The aim of those visits was to accomplish research activities such as the observation of land-use, particularly associated with tourism, along the major thoroughfares in the city. Every tourism resource within and nearby SCLC was visited in order to double-check the information previously gathered

regarding the state of the resource and the accessibility to each place. We also collected information from brochures, local newspapers and magazines regarding the promotion of tourism in the city. Semi-structured interviews were completed among key informants involved in the tourism sector such as municipal and state authorities, hotel owners, restaurant and travel agency managers, indigenous traders and crafters as well as tourists. The relevant results drawn from this research strategy are given below.

Today the dynamics of tourism in the study area is quite different from that existing during the years after the Zapatista uprising. According to the tourism propaganda examined, SCLC changed from being the operational centre of the so-called *zapatours* to a “cultural destination *par excellence*”, a “cosmopolitan city”, a “romantic destination”, a “place where ancient traditions live side by side with modern luxuries” or the “most magical town in the Pueblos Magicos list in Mexico”. This is due to the growth and diversification of resources, infrastructure and services for tourism in SCLC, occurred in the last twenty years that have transformed its built-up area.

For instance, the analysis of contemporary tourist resources in SCLC revealed an extraordinary potential, based on the existence of natural and cultural assets which began to be intensively used in the last ten years. This is strikingly different from the role of the city had the 1990's, when it only functioned as a transfer node in Central Chiapas. There are ten natural areas having significant resources for tourism, located in public and privately owned reserves, with singular natural features: rock formations, caves, climbing walls, lakes and rivers, and endemic fauna; these are promoted by travel agencies offering walking excursions, horse riding and biking. In spite of this richness, it is the cultural component that clearly defines SCLC as a tourist destination within Mexico. It is in this direction that both public and private investments are geared at. Therefore, the number of cultural resources has increased rapidly in this century, particularly temples, museums and artistic and traditional events, reinforcing the motto of the city: the *Cultural Capital of Chiapas*.

Even though the ethnic component of SCLC is a very important resource for tourism, this segment of the local population is regarded as an annoying element in the city, as attested by local residents, hotel owners, restaurant managers and municipal authorities who blame the indigenous people for the dirtiness in the streets and plazas, for the expansion of the informal economy and even for the incidence of thefts. Nonetheless, some travel brochures promoting tourism in SCLC say that this city is “a site surrounded by multi-colored indigenous villages that make possible ethno-tourism”

While the existence of natural and cultural resources for tourism in SCLC is a mighty reason to visit this place, the availability of services catering to tourists plays a central role in the attraction of visitors, Mexican or otherwise, willing to travel to SCLC. The presence of varied lodging facilities, car rental companies, banks, automat tellers, internet cafes, international telephone booths and even laundries, on top of the accessibility of transfers to other parts of Mexico make SCLC very attractive to travelers, as inferred by the information provided by visitors during field-work. As one of the tourists interviewed said: “SCLC has the serene life of a small town and all the comforts of a city”.

Considering the actual urban land-use and the geographical distribution of resources and services catering to tourism, we propose a core-area for this economic activity in

SCLC. It is contained in the historic centre of the city and expands over a very small section, if we consider the total built-up area. This allows tourists to easily move around from one place to another; however, resources located in other areas of the city are rarely reached by tourists. Thus, the heavily visited part of SCLC is restricted to a handful of blocks within the historic centre beyond which the reality of everyday life is apparent through the ominous presence of poverty, deficient infrastructure and a deteriorating urban image.

This situation creates a strong pressure on the tourist space of SCLC, where many social actors converge (foreign and local entrepreneurs, mestizos and indigenous residents, formal and informal traders) who try to take advantage from the tourism economy. Three negative effects of this process were detected. Firstly, high speculation regarding the value and use of urban land in the city centre is rampant; only those who have enough capital can invest in the opening of new hotels, restaurants, shops catering to tourist or travel agencies. Second, many historical buildings in the centre of SCLC have been destroyed or converted into shops, supermarkets, bookstores, banks, internet cafes and other businesses whose main clients are tourists. Finally, informal commerce has been increasing in the last decade, particularly because indigenous population, as a result of lack of local jobs, started to sell crafts, clothes and food in an informal manner.

Transports and communications in SCLC associated with the tourism economy have been notoriously improving after the Zapatista conflict ended in 1994. Large State-sponsored investments in roads were made in Chiapas that indirectly favored the flow the tourists within the state and, particularly, to SCLC. More than 5000 kilometers of new roads were constructed by the Mexican government with the intention to control unstable areas by promoting economic development in them, especially in Los Altos (where SCLC is located) and the Lacandon jungle, regions considered by the Mexican authorities as remote and isolated from the rest of the national territory (Michel and Escarzaga, 2001). From 2006 on, the arrival of tourists to SCLC grew steadily. Two events are closely associated with this trend; one is the construction of a new highway connecting this city with Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital, which has reduced the travel journey from two to one hour only. The other situation is the upgrading of the international airport located in Chiapa de Corzo. At present, this facility is been served by five national airlines reaching several major cities within Mexico. In 2010, Continental Airlines opened two weekly flights to Houston, which widens the possibilities of international tourists wanting to visit SCLC.

Once urban land-use features and transport and communications associated with tourism were examined, we proceed to examine two attributes of tourist flows: their geographical origin and the displacement routes to arrive at SCLC. This was done in order to explain the importance of this tourist destination in the national and international markets. Two information sources were used to achieve this; one is derived from a questionnaire survey applied to one hundred tourists that visited the city in different seasons of the year; the other consisted of four weekly summaries of tourism activity provided by local authorities, in which the origin of 2400 people was registered (65% Mexicans, 35% foreigners).

There are two major research findings in this respect. First, the origin of travelers visiting this city is diverse, mainly from different parts of Mexico and from several European countries. This is a situation that differs with other colonial towns in Mexico where the

proportion of international visitors is larger than in SCLC. The second result reveals that this destination is part of a larger itinerary that includes other sites in Chiapas, with rich natural and cultural resources, and other states in South-East and East Mexico, including the Yucatan Peninsula (and Cancun for that matter). This was true for 95 percent of the international visitors and for 65 percent of Mexican tourists. If we consider that this larger itinerary may include Central American countries (from Panama to Guatemala and Belize), the proportion of foreign tourists that were traveling along the Mesoamerican trail was a little bit over 50 percent, and only 14 percent for Mexican tourists.

The last section of this paper presents, by means of some examples, the major contradictions arising from the growth of tourism in SCLC, particularly those related to its effects on spatial dynamics and socio-economic development. One convincing example is the appropriation of the main streets and avenues, including some of the most important cultural resources, in SCLC by foreign investors. As a result, there has been a displacement of local actors involved in the tourism economy in the last decade. We also argue that internal and social disputes over the management and administration of areas with significant natural and cultural resources in nearby places are also a result of the expansion of the interests of non-local actors willing to take advantage of the growth of tourism in the hinterland of SCLC. Female prostitution and child labor based activities are widespread problems present in the urban tissue of this city.

In conclusion, this research provides enough evidence to support the idea that the territorial structure of tourism in SCLC is strongly dissociated from the local and regional economy. Its major relationships are drawn to foreign actors and places. This circumstance contributes to increase the economic imbalances in the study area, creating patterns of social and territorial exclusion. Furthermore, it creates a weak scenario for the development of tourism because SCLC is located in one of the poorest regions in Mexico, with a high demographic growth rate and political instability.