

THE RESIDENTIAL TOURISM DOES NOT EXIST. A CONCEPT REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF ITS IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION

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The confluence of tourists housed in private homes and leisure-related (as opposed to work-related) migration has resulted in new forms of mobility and residential strategies involving citizens from an increasing number of regions. The large number of publications that have come to light in recent years makes it difficult to extract precise lines of argument, however, the profusion of terminology signals a certain polarization in proximity to the objective of study, and while far from possible to group all of the literature, it does permit the recognition of certain characteristics.

On one hand a path can be observed, transited principally by Anglo-Saxon academics, who above all from a qualitative approach, have analyzed the discourses developed by their co-nationals related to their experiences in the new location. For these researchers the understanding and definition of social reality has tended to be built upon coherence with the interpretations that the new residents (that is to say, the interviewees) produce based on their particular perception of the reality in which they find themselves. Often this leads to confusion of the analysis of reality with its subjective discourse. On the other hand, a path stands out that is followed by experts that share the distinctive characteristic of formulating critical analysis on the effects generated by host societies as a consequence of the processes of change that take place. Here we explore in-depth the development of this line of argument, focusing attention on the use of the term “residential tourism”. The following pages contain a discussion related to this expression as it is used to represent a concept that is used as a tool to support interests that are external to the analysis of the social reality.

A reading of the most significant contributions on the topic suggests a possible differentiation between:

- a) Those studies that have explained residential tourism from the conception of a typology or model of tourism that is more or less precise, whose most evident defining characteristic is probably the fact that it is necessarily associated with the offer of accommodation/ residence in private housing.

- b) The research investigations that, instead of speaking of the modality or specific type of tourism, approach the question by agreement that it alludes to a framework of processes in which multiple forms of residential mobility and strategies of the transformation of space are integrated into a political-economic logic that consists of the construction of housing in places of touristic interest (or placed publicized as such) and of the expansion of the real estate sector.
- c) The research that, in the analysis of the reality faced by the majority of studies of residential tourism, normally avoid the use of the expression “residential tourism”.

The common denominator of the three options is the development of analysis from primarily critical perspectives; in reality they have all inherited a single line of investigation that, from its origins, has oriented the applied studies with the purpose of putting into evidence the inherent contradictions of so called “residential tourism”. In the following paragraphs, we propose a reflection related to the way in which, beginning in the 1990’s, the expression “residential tourism” has been used as an instrument by social actors interested in the promotion of the real estate business.

At the end of the 1990’s, and especially in the first years of the current century, the term “residential tourism” began to be used in a way that disputed and transcended the limits of academic discussion. Specifically, its identification with an analytical tool was clouded by its use as a publicity tool for real estate marketing. The publicity-related use of the concept by the “cement bourgeoisie” is understood within the framework of new business strategies adopted by both corporations from the real estate sector and the tourism sector.

The process of political and administrative decentralization that began in Spain in the decade of the 1980’s brought with it, among other things, the recognition of the fundamental functions of city governments in urbanism. In this way, the future of urbanism in the territory should be rooted among local powers. In the nineties, and in the framework of the expansion of the real estate economy, encouraged by legislative changes that promote the liberalization of the uses of terrain, real estate businesses and local political elites did not delay in the promotion of all types of collaboration strategies in order to facilitate the expansion of the real estate industry. Special emphasis was put on municipalities in the Mediterranean region, initially the most attractive for products with the potential to be commercialized in the Spanish market and in the European real estate fairs. The local cement bourgeoisie presented this logic of action as the development of “residential tourism”, with the knowledge that it is easier to obtain citizen support necessary to reorient municipal economic activities towards specialization in intensive activities of the real estate sector if they can be presented to public opinion as being of predominantly touristic nature. The speculative processes, excesses and corrupt behavior generated by the amplification of these dynamics are today well known, as is the reduction in the alternatives for local development experienced by so many communities caused by the degradation of the natural and socioeconomic environment.

The expression “residential tourism” is an oxymoron, that is, a concept made up of two terms that allude to contradictory realities: the noun “tourism” implies mobility and provisionality, while the adjective “residential” suggests settling and permanence in location. While it is true that the use of this expression in academic tradition has never

ceased to provoke controversy, it is precisely the fact that the term contains and expresses a contradictory character that leads to the pretense of making reference to a group of activities that generate complex and ambivalent repercussions. However, the term presents itself as a perfectly coherent label that points to a touristic typology that generates wealth and employment diluting both the contradictory aspects and the problematic elements that question the nature of the realities alluded to by the concept. Thus, the semi-permanent or even permanent residential establishment is accepted as a dimension of the tourism process (also by some academics that study the topic) and, in consequence, residential tourism acquires a new identity that corresponds to new economic activity generated by the tourism industry. The new meaning of the expression cancels the original critical function-linked to the uses habitually made in the academic arena- and substitutes it with a publicity function- in tune with the commercial interests of the cement bourgeoisie. From this moment forward, those most interested in the promotion of residential tourism dynamics redefine any criticism of residential tourism as a criticism of the alternatives to progress created by the tourism industry. The continued repetition of residential tourism as being of touristic character need not be made explicit since the concept itself includes the noun "tourism". All that is needed is to produce harmony between two initially discordant terms through publicity strategies destined to eliminate any glimpse of conflict or contradiction.

The constant association of "residential tourism" with a certain type of image imposes a fixed meaning in the mind of the receptor that ends up converting the term into a "hypnotic formula", along the lines of Marcuse. The expression ceases to be identified with a determined reality, in order to become identified with a specific part of itself: the contradictory and problematic whole is filtered and prepared so that it is perceived by the public in a certain way. In this way, the "hypnotic" character is strengthened in such a way as to eliminate all that would permit the connection of the concept with the political-economic context in which it is inserted.

But, could it be that residential tourism lacks the constitutive elements of the nature of tourism? Evidently, the response is negative. What is argued is that the cement bourgeoisie blows these elements out of proportion, while concealing- if not obviously- those of non-tourist nature. Thus, is it possible to somehow quantify the weight of the touristic component of residential tourism? Yes, in reality it has been done. As far as the supply of accommodation is concerned, the estimates of researchers calculate that regulated tourism is much less than that which escapes the regulations in place, becoming as a consequence an economic activity situated outside of the law and promoted by businesses and individuals that have little to do with the tourism business. As far as demand is concerned, the analysis of data collected through surveys has allowed appreciation of the way in which, taking into consideration the administrative links established with Spain, the majority of those people that can be categorized as "international residential tourists" can be more easily designated as residents than tourists, as only 10.9% of those surveyed clearly showed tourist status.

When a term with a certain tradition in the academic arena is appropriated by a sector that, in using the term, aims to explain nothing but rather to define a determined part of reality with the objective that private interests are benefitted, this is ideology. The prior paragraphs posit a reflection based on evidence obtained through accumulated research

experience related to the way in which the term “residential tourism” gradually abandons its quality as a polemic concept restricted principally to academic discussion in order to become more exposed to ideological use on behalf of social actors interested in disguising what is –in essence– real estate business as the development of tourism.

Upon arrival at this point, the academic community is invited to question the limits and validity of the expression as a useful tool for research on tourism, above all taking into account the politicization that the term is being exposed to. Here we do not propose abandoning research on residential tourism, rather redefining the objective of such study, related to both significance and meaning. With respect to the former, it could be suitable to restrict the use of this expression to refer only to that which it is becoming: a label integrated in a publicity strategy at the service of political and business interests linked directly to the real estate economy. Otherwise, we run the risk of playing the game of said interests. With respect to the term’s meaning, it would be suitable to refer to the realities that are the object of study, making use of expressions less contaminated by ideological discourses.