

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF TOURISM. A CRITICAL APPROACH TO PERCEPTION OF TOURISM AND ITS SPATIAL REPRESENTATION

Alfonso Fernández-Arroyo López-Manzanares

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

Alfonso.FArroyo@uclm.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8004-0878>

INTRODUCTION

The space-tourism dialectic is the basis of the theoretical essay we present when integrating a geographical and sociological approach, focusing on the dimension of tourism representations to analyse and understand from a temporal perspective the influence of ideas and platforms in recent research. Currently, we are going through a turning point that allows us to question the strong defence of tourism and the limits and limitations of the disciplinary frameworks, facing the challenge of overcoming a long workout that involves learning and understanding what we have already learned, starting by questioning our perception and application of the specialized language.

In the teaching-learning-research process that we use in tourism, the situation is as follows: we can justify the existing order hiding conflicts that are perceptible in the practice or analyse the intent of that cover-up and contemplate the possibilities of a social change. From a sociological perspective, rather than social, we will talk about the obvious tension between two opposite ways of producing knowledge: a “knowledge-regulation” consistent of historically legitimated principles and values; and a “knowledge-emancipation” on the depth of the problems caused by the rationality threaded by the influence of capitalism (De Sousa, 2003: 260-261; 2006: 44). One or another form of knowledge will reveal conflicting beliefs, conditioned by “transtheoretical” aspects that exceed the margins of the epistemological.

By itself, Geography has long since abandoned deep reflection on its object of study, allowing space, instrumentalized and strongly influenced by “cognitive capitalism,” with its neoliberal pedagogy, to be the object of multiple representations that come from political and economic interests from a social elite (Santos, 1990: 95; Benko, 2000: 6; Morales, 2007: 125; Malpas, 2015: 205). That is why, in heavily “touristized” countries, such as Spain, the field of tourism studies is extremely conditioned by “uncritical and legitimizing approaches to this industry” (Blázquez and Cañada, 2011: 7; Murray, 2015: 397).

At the moment, in the field of geographical studies of tourism, two ways of addressing the phenomenon have been imposed: a “Touristic Geography” and a “Tourism Geography” whose results are politically and economically validated by the interest “descriptor and

locator of the tourist attractions and resources” (Calabuig and Ministrál, 1999: 18; Vera *et al.*, 1997: 44). And it is that, the theorization about the social nature of tourism has been described as controversial, full of mistakes, destined to withdrawal because it has been being ignored or attacked from the epistemologies of the north.

Advancing in the opposite direction would involve exploring the integration of the geographical and sociological approach, a form of “Sociography” (Luis Gómez, 1983) which leads us to use a new term: *Tourism Sociography* or *Social Geography of Tourism* as a way to overcome the limitations of spatial rationality or cartographic reason whose problem is more ontological than epistemological, given its difficulty in incorporating the social into the theoretical scheme of space (Bailey, 2014: 92-93). This is the critical crossing of ideas that should bring us closer to the representation of a *social space of tourism* opposed to the empty definition of “touristic destination”.

And, then, to what purpose does a geographical approach to the *social space of tourism* respond? On one hand, to generate the consciousness necessary to recover the unity of the elements dissociated by a rationality and fragmented knowledge, identifying problems and contradictions sometimes hidden and indiscernible. If we are looking for the intellectual origin of this “knowledge-emancipation” we must refer to “*La production de l’espace*” proclaimed in the seventies by Henri Lefebvre, the work that has most vigorously and successfully triggered the social theory of space: a useful and analytical framework to understand how socialization processes in certain spaces generate social groups, and how they transform places and transform themselves through their practices and representations.

At the bottom of that *social space of tourism*, that comes from a *Social Geography of Tourism* result of alternative theories to those called liberal or “bourgeois”, underlies one idea, maybe we are capable to change only one of the constitutive dimensions of the rationality of the space —perceived, conceived and lived—, fundamentally the way of conceiving and representing it, if we can change that, we will be driving changes in the social practice of tourism, transforming, therefore, the sense of its spatial production. It is not simply a creative will, but the proposition of an alternative space, counter-plans and counter-projects that frustrate the strategies, plans and programs imposed from above (Lefebvre, 2013: 413-414).

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

The critical essay that concerns us is dedicated to study the epistemological evolution of tourism to offer a rigorous explanation about why we perceive it that way, subject to the idea of cultural industry and services. In this process, some “platforms”, established by the dominant nature of the research in each of the established “stages” of the current tourism epistemology (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004; Jafari, 2005). As a result of this association between “platforms” and “stages” we can distinguish common aspects and divergent interpretations according to the perception and intellectual origin of their representations.

With the objective of deliberate about the difficult conformation of a “knowledge-emancipation” denied by others, object of regulation, we assume as a temporary framework, the period from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. With this we seek the systematized understanding of the relationship between rationality and tourism

representation, since this constitutes the ontological and epistemological basis from which a moment of changes has emerged of which we feel participants (Tribe, 2005: 5).

The first stage described as “modernist” (1947-1960) has as reference the “apologetic platform” in the field of tourism studies, headed by “interest groups” that promoted the idea of tourism as a beneficial industry for the creation of employment and currencies without any prejudice to the natural or human environment, revitalizing cultural and folkloric traditions and even facilitating world peace (Jafari, 2005: 41; Cooper *et al.*, 2007: 41). The North American hospitality and tourism schools promoted a notable influence on the emergence of this positivist idea whose members shared a preference for the quantitative part (Hall and Page, 2006: 11).

The second stage of “imprecise genres” (1960-1980) was characterized by the rise of the critical vision above tourism with the emergence of a “precautionary” or also called “social-anthropological” platform, contrary to the apologetic speech of tourism. This recovered the concern for the tourism-colonization relationship to redesign the concept of “periphery”, highlighting the work of L. Turner and J. Ash (1975) —“The golden ordes: International tourism and the pleasure periphery”— for identifying the reasons why that tourism increases the unequal distribution of power within an economy and a society where the nucleus dominates and the periphery is dependent. While in the Anglo-Saxon case, concern for post-colonial South Asia increased, in Spain the “franquistas” overturned creativity by silencing criticism (Correyero, 2003; Hall, 2009: 293).

The third stage of “crisis in representation” (1980-2000) is related to the changes generated with postmodernism, resulting in the apologetic and precautionary currents of tourism being eliminated by the “adaptive platform”, apparently neutral. This brought together the defence of a shift in research priorities, assuming comfortably schemes, theories and pre-elaborated methodologies, critical capacity inhibitors in research. In a generalized manner, the North American influence about the market was imposed, increasing the professionalism of tourism-related agents in marketing and management of tourism companies (Williams, 1994: 42; Castillo, 2007: 83 -84; 2011: 518).

The fourth stage has meant the rupture of the great dominant narratives, being possible to talk about *scientific eclecticism* in tourism research (2001-). This way, while facing the emergence of a “scientific-centric platform”, with an apologetic root, a new generation of authors emerges whose perception and conception of tourism, after “*una década de cambios*”, raises in the form of an unexpected cultural turn that we could define as *scientific-critical platform*. In parallel to these two opposing forces, another platform emerges, in this case associated with a political-ideological background institutionalized by the pressure of public interest and intergovernmental organizations. Its goal is to place tourism in its “legitimate” place, together with the rest of industries and disciplines (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004: 17; Jafari, 2005: 43-44; Hiernaux, 2008a; 2008b).

The neoliberal logic, moved with the triumph of the comforting postmodernity has acted as support for current scientific thinking, conceiving tourism as a factor of transformation and a structural component of our society, facilitating the proper functioning of the capitalist system and the social structures that support it (Vera *et al.*, 1997: 21; Shaw and Williams, 1998: 61). Hence, opinions that add nothing new but are persistent should be noted in postmodern studies, warning of the coexistence of two irreconcilable ways of

producing knowledge according to antagonistic world views, positions and interests: “The business of Tourism” vs. “Tourism Social Science” (Castillo, 2011: 524 and 528; Espeso and Pastor, 2015: 16). Both, according to one way or another to represent tourism and its spatiality, are related here to the idea of “scientific-centric platform” and *scientific-critical platform*, respectively.

Both the “scientific-centric platform” and the “public interest platform” find in the systemic representation of tourism a way to defend the interests of those who promote the perception of a “global institution” and business transformed in “mega-industries” (Jafari, 2005: 35). From the university level, the usefulness of systems theory is reaffirmed to recognize complex processes where societies, territories or economies articulate parts that together form a functional totality, something not exempt from conditions such as decisions and behaviours promoted by focusing attention on some aspects, making it impossible to develop others (Vera *et al.* 1997: 38; Lazzarotti, 2007: 266).

Specifically, the geographical representation of the tourism system in charge of the “scientific-centric platform” has been known because of increasing the economic function in the intermediation of two large subsystems — sectoral and territorial— where the territory and even the local society acquires the status of “resource” (Vera *et al.*, 1997: 60; 2011: 319; Barrado, 2004: 66; Cooper *et al.*, 2007: 726). The interdependencies between the “territory system” and the “destination system” are represented by market laws without questioning the fact that the benefits derived from tourism have an impact on the destination system at the expense of the territory.

Behind this model of representation there is a clear purpose or intentionality: to continue conserving order and current “progress” by removing the critical reflection whose objective is reveal and discover a world where injustice, poverty, inequality and problems, both human and environmental, are part of a functional and structural order that has not been reconverted and that directly affects tourism and the knowledge produced from it (Castillo, 2011: 517-518).

According to our framework, we will say that both “Touristic Geography” and “Tourism Geography” have been representing a *world-economy space of tourism* on the perception of a society without any alternative values to those given by the logic of capitalism. The fake look of this representation ignores the ideology that contains by itself, obviating that the social is not only another component of the tourist system, but the constant that surrounds it all and gives meaning.

From an opposite perspective, the one revealed with the representations conceived from the *scientific-critical platform*, Geography acquires a role as important as it is limited, because those who have supported the idea of a counter-knowledge towards the production of space induced by this industry they have soon been discredited and silenced (Muñoz, 1992: 20; Bianchi, 2009: 496). The *social space of tourism* implies ceasing to conceive the society as the part of a productive chain, accessing it through its various “social representations”, questioning or excluding themselves, merging into each other or splitting, to question the representation of society as an analogue of the given tourism system and come to be conceived as the creator of its own structures and self-referential or “differentiation” senses.

This type of representation not yet settled in the geographical research of tourism expands the space of perception of the “scientific-centric platform” that states the focus on the market and statistical parts to work in the tourism-society relationship, beyond market limits (Lazzarotti, 2007: 266). In other words, if we remove the functions and activities related to the tourism economy on the perception of this practice, what would we have left? Those assigned to the current “business of tourism” would say: nothing. On the contrary, those interested in adopting a critical look of a sociological nature would respond: a part of the social space, desires, aspirations and possibilities of each community to develop new ways of relating socially and spatially.

CONCLUSION

Discovering the deep structure that hides the system of signs and symbols of the *world-economy space of tourism* represented by the “Geography of Tourism” as the basis for the conception of a *social space of tourism*, in the same constructive process of a *Social Geography of Tourism*, should serve to transform the social and spatial practice of tourism while transforming ourselves. With this utopian approach, which is not impossible to make, we are aware that neither the representation of this space of hope nor any other can exhaust its ontological irreducibility (Pierce and Martin, 2015: 1289).

Geography that has adapted its analytical frameworks to business and marketing techniques actively and voluntarily participates in the deepening of dystopia to which the pragmatism of a “knowledge-regulation” is reduced: the rural, from the perspective of the urban, or the peripheral, from the logic of the nucleus becomes “fashion” to be conceived as a “resource” regardless of its sense of place, hiding its miseries to integrate into its reality the story that makes it attractive for its “consumption”. To show the functions that tourism provides to capitalism based on the principles and values of current neoliberalism, is designed to recover the discussion and epistemological debate about the aspirations of geographers to be “socially useful”.

To propose this idea or reflection in an academic context where studies with a market perspective predominate are still as subversive as problematic. However, without criticism and self-criticism based on what has been investigated, it is difficult to advance in the generation of knowledge, at least of a “knowledge-emancipation”. This conclusion is not intended to be final, but aims to serve as a dialogic support for the *scientific-critical platform* for the debate on the existence or necessary construction of a *Social Geography of Tourism* whose object is a *social space of tourism* open to radically alternative practices, putting in crisis the perception and conception of current tourism questioning its own social and spatial rationality.

