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Resisting socioeconomic apartheid through tourism microentrepreneurship in Bahía de Banderas — Puerto Vallarta

1. Introduction

Tourism-induced social and economic inequality is a topic widely studied by tourism scholars, who have been prolific in documenting the causes of a phenomenon for which they have largely failed to produce a cure. At the epicenter of this discussion is the model of enclave tourism, designed from the get go to reduce interactions between guests and the community (Freitag, 1994). While this model has received harsh criticisms from academia, the mounting scholarship on the topic has not precluded transnational conglomerates from continuing to build and operate enclave resorts for the despair of the most vulnerable individuals at the destinations. However, although enclave mass tourism development may create apparent socioeconomic apartheid at destinations by removing locals from tourist spaces where host-guest exchanges are most likely to occur, there is growing evidence that ingenious informal tourism microentrepreneurs are surprisingly able to glean bits of income through offering experiences and products to tourists. Hence, the purpose of this study is threefold: 1) understand the level of conscientization of subaltern microentrepreneurs about the oppressive practices of the formal tourism industry in Puerto Vallarta; 2) explore the nuances of their microentrepreneurial activity in terms of business strategies, experiences and products offered, and narratives employed; and, 3) examine the applicability of the Permatourism conceptual framework to explain the mechanisms through which the local tourism development model enables or hinders microentrepreneurial opportunities in Puerto Vallarta.

2. Literature review

Tourism grew rapidly in the developing world but, for the vast majority, did not take into account local perspectives and failed to deliver on the promise of engendering equitable prosperity (Shaw & Shaw, 1999; Gmelch, 2012; Morais, Ferreira, Nazariadli, & Ghahramani, 2017; Thomas-Francois, von Massow, & Joppe, 2017). Moreover, tourism has often worsened developing countries' dependency on former colonizing powers and reinforced domestic socioeconomic inequalities (Brohman, 1996). According to Sharpley (2010), the reason why tourism is still chosen as the default route to development is because often there are no other viable alternatives in countries with a limited industrial sector and with scarce natural resources. Nonetheless, tourism microentrepreneurship is increasingly being regarded as a viable, locally-led, meaningful alternative to classic tourism development that stands to change the face of tourism in many destinations (Morais, Ferreira, Nazariadli, & Ghahramani, 2017; Sigala & Dolnicar, 2018).

a. Socioeconomic inequality

Economic sociologists contend that inequality is a phenomenon sustained primarily through relational dynamics (Granovetter, 2017; Lin, 2002; Tomaskovic-Devey, Hällsten, & Avent-Holt, 2015), that is through the dynamic, unfolding processes that take place in a system wherein power emerges not as a static substance but rather as a consequence of asymmetric transactions between actors (Emirbayer, 1997). For example, elite capture occurs when local elites, better equipped and more influential, are able to unabashedly usurp resources designated for the benefit of the larger population (Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). In tourism studies, elite capture can be observed in the context of ecotourism, pro-poor tourism or community-based

tourism, when privileged groups in the host community appropriate themselves of the most profitable, prestigious and desirable roles and occupations in NGO-led community-based projects, causing resentment and resistance among subordinate groups, which ultimately compromises the economic performance and viability of the ventures (Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Sene-Harper, 2016).

A distinct but related concept is opportunity hoarding, described by Tomaskovic-Devey, Hällsten, and Avent-Holt (2015) as the mechanism through which economic actors monopolize valuable resources for themselves and similar others. Emirbayer (1997) explains that members of a categorically bounded network usually start by acquiring control over a valuable resource, hoard their access to it, and develop practices that perpetuate this restricted access. Of course, a power differential between groups is a necessary condition because one group will be more effective in making claims and imposing its own agenda (Granovetter, 2017). For example, unscrupulous profit-seeking tourism corporations largely control distribution systems, relegating the subaltern to the “sidelines of the tourism economy” (Morais, Ferreira, Nazariadli, & Ghahramani, 2017, p.74). One such example is the model of enclave tourism, intendedly designed to minimize interactions between tourists and ancillary formal and informal businesses, in order to increase resort profits (Freitag, 1994).

A consequence of that approach is high economic leakage to western countries and limited economic opportunities for locals who are recruited mostly as cheap, unskilled labor for menial tasks at the resorts (Mbaiwa, 2005). In Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, Wilson (2008) contends that tourism development marginalizes great numbers of local residents by way of self-contained, all-inclusive resorts, which led to segregation between locals and tourists and limit tourist spending outside the complex, creating a *de facto* socioeconomic apartheid. Despite scarce opportunities for economic exchange Morais, Ferreira, Nazariadli, and Ghahramani (2017) posit that locals, in such contexts, have been able to informally glean income from some opportunities unexploited by the formal industry because the size of the opportunity is not worthwhile to be pursued by the formal sector.

b. The informal economy

The informal economy is a major component of the world’s economy. Godfrey (2011) notes that in the developing world it may actually be greater in size and importance than the formal economy. Even in the developed world, the informal economy is believed to be an important part of the economy and can be visible for example in the form of early stage startups, family-owned businesses, farmers markets, and second-home vacation rentals. Informal arrangements can also play an important role in companies operating in the formal sector, because informality often brings nimbleness, speed, and adaptability to conditions of change. Moreover, the informal and formal sectors are believed to be part of a mutually supporting system, which can energize local economies in a variety of ways (Boanada-Fuchs & Boanada Fuchs, 2018). For example, microentrepreneurs in the informal tourism sector offer authentic off-the-beaten path experiences that enhance their local destinations’ richness and competitiveness (Morais et al., 2012)

Despite the importance of the informal sector, there is a generalized idea that it is an expression of business activity that has mostly a negative impact on the economy. For example, the “black market” is a term that is often heard in mainstream media, and even in academia it is not unusual to find pejorative terms like the “shadow economy” (Apressyan, 1997). At the

forefront of this perspective are neoclassical economists whose philosophical assumptions (e.g. utility maximization, accumulation of capital) may preclude them to understand that utility for a local artisan may have more to do with pride stemming from the opportunity to showcase to visitors some ancient technique learned from his or her parents than with the extra income made through this workshop. Finally, growth can attract unwanted attention to one's business by regulatory bodies, and therefore microentrepreneurs often prefer to operate under the radar and/or in unregulated spaces.

c. Tourism microentrepreneurship

Many authors have called for an increase in the stimulation and support of tourism microentrepreneurship by small business development authorities (Kc, Morais, Seekamp, Smith, & Peterson, 2018; LaPan, Morais, Wallace, & Barbieri, 2016; Mao, 2014; Nyaupane, Morais, & Dowler, 2006; Peroff, 2015). Consequently, the *Manifesto of the People-First Tourism Movement* (Morais, 2017), endorsed by tourism scholars worldwide, advocates that microentrepreneurship stands to make tourism a force for equitable community development by engaging previously alienated segments of society in tourism economics and in the planning of tourism development. Likewise, McGehee and Kline (2008) contend that entrepreneurship is well suited to the context of rural tourism development, because it “harmonizes with the philosophy that problems are best solved by solutions generated from inside the community, and that external consultants are not needed to propose successful strategies for economic redemption” (p. 123).

Tourism microenterprises typically employ five or fewer employees and tend to operate in under-regulated business environments characterized by low entry barriers (Ferreira, Morais, & Lorscheider, 2015). Ateljevic and Doorne (2000) contend that tourism microentrepreneurs are people driven by non-economic motives, who prefer “staying within the fence” (p. 378) rather than pursuing unbridled growth. Similarly, Peters and Schuckert (2014) found that they tend to prioritize quality of life in lieu of enterprise growth. These individuals may simply intend to strive for some extra income to enhance, and sometimes secure, their livelihoods—they typically avoid highly competitive market environments in order to preserve their quality of life and, accordingly, they rely mostly on niche markets (Morais, Wallace, Rodrigues, España, & Wang, 2014). Usually they are not affiliated with formal professional networks nor are their services available through traditional distribution systems (Kc et al., 2018).

A key to the effectiveness of tourism microentrepreneurship is its support by public agencies and its integration with the formal private sector. Accordingly, Permatourism is centered in this crux of integrating formal and informal tourism enterprises.

d. Permatourism

Brothers, Morais, and Wallace (2017) and Ferreira (2018) define Permatourism as a tourism planning and management process that pursues the complementarity between formal private and public actors and local microentrepreneurs and grassroots community social structures. Permatourism expects the formal tourism sector to embrace the socio-cultural characteristics of the host community to make the local tourism experience more unique and competitive while at the same time ensuring that locals are better equipped to become involved in tourism. Additionally, Permatourism, requires the creation of a grassroots business development strategy that aligns local entrepreneurs with expected business opportunities generated by existing or upcoming big tourism investments in the region or large scope social

movements and trends with high impact at the macroeconomic level. The model can be best understood as an abstraction of the range of fluid and ever changing symbiotic relationships between different actors in the tourism business ecosystem, stemming primarily from the destination's pull-factor(s) and ramifying towards the fringes where one will find intervening government structures, formal and informal industry and residents, in this order (Figure1). Importantly, inwards it is apparent a hierarchy of power of influence whereas the number of players tends to increase outwards.



Figure 1

Permatourism is the application of the concept of Permaculture, developed in Australia by the hand of Bill Mollison and David Holmgren (Holmgren, 2017), to the tourism business ecosystem. Moreover, Permatourism subscribes to the three Permaculture ethics: 1) Care for the Earth, 2) Fair-share, and 3) Care for People. This core of ethics is similar to the triple bottom line of sustainability, that is, respectively, the environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Permatourism is also guided by 12 principles, which delineate the conceptual foundation of this development approach: 1) Observe and interact; 2) Catch and store energy; 3) Obtain a yield; 4) Apply self-regulation & accept feedback; 5) Use & value renewable resources & services; 6) Produce no waste; 7) Design from patterns to details; 8) Integrate rather than segregate; 9) Use small and slow solutions; 10) Use and value diversity; 11) Use edges & value the marginal, and; 12) Creatively use and respond to change.

3. Methodology

a. Research setting

This study is being conducted in two communities along the Bahía de Banderas, on the Mexican west Coast, which encompasses the states of Jalisco and Nayarit. The first site is the

ejido Playa Grande, located in the outskirts of the world famous sea, sun, sand and sex beach resort city of Puerto Vallarta. An *ejido* is an area of communal land used for agriculture, in which community members individually farm designated parcels and collectively maintain communal holdings. *Ejidatarios* do not actually own the land, but are allowed to use their allotted parcels indefinitely as long as they do not fail to use the land for more than two years (Jones & Ward, 1998). In the case of Playa Grande, the land is not arable nor is it suitable for animal husbandry. And, given that logging has been prohibited for environmental conservation reasons, some members of the *ejido* created a small tourism company that they hope will generate revenue to continue stewarding the land while sustaining their livelihoods. This community-led ecopark offers canopy tours, horseback-riding, bird watching, local food and glamping.

The second site, Bucerias, is a quaint, cobblestone-paved tourism town located 25 km to the north, in the southwest part of the state of Nayarit. Outside the tourist center, there is an agglomeration of relatively poor dwellings, which are home to a majority of people who migrated primarily from southern states like Chiapas, Guerrero or Oaxaca. Some of these individuals are skilled crafters who sell their art to tourists at markets and plazas and receive visitors at their homes through a local non-profit focused on responsible tourism. Their goal is to empower local communities while fostering conversations that shift visitors' perspectives and increase cross-cultural understanding.

Tourism is one of the main drivers of the Mexican economy and its largest service sector, and the Bahía de Banderas is no exception. For example, it is estimated that over 25% of the total labor force in Puerto Vallarta works in the restaurant and hospitality sectors (Wilson, 2008). However, in the interest of profit making, salaries are usually very low and opportunities for career advancement are limited. In addition, the consolidation of a great number of tour retailers has monopolized the market in a handful of big players, allowing them to abuse their power and exploit those who chose the microentrepreneurial route, who are often unable to reach tourists directly.

b. Data collection

This study subscribes to a transformative worldview (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), wherein the research team and study participants are equals in the research process and pursue a shared horizon in which tourism is an enabler of socioeconomic prosperity in the community. Accordingly, between March 2017 and May 2018 the research team engaged with members of the *ejido* and staff at the NGO through e-mail and virtual meetings, seeking to evaluate the relevance and interest for a participatory action-research project in these sites, culminating in discussions about potential research questions. During the same period, the research team also consulted regularly with researchers from an American University who had been engaged in the region with the *ejido*. In May 2018, one research team member did a one-week long familiarization trip to the research setting. This researcher was hosted by one of the *ejidatarios*, which enabled him to visit extensively with other *ejidatarios* and observe interactions with tourists in the eco-park. Likewise, he also visited the NGO and 4 microentrepreneurs in Bucerias, and did observations of interactions with tourists in their homes. In addition to observations and impromptu conversations, three formal interviews were conducted with *ejidatarios*, utilizing the People-First Tourism Lab (P1tLab) longitudinal monitoring protocol. As a result, it was jointly proposed that the three parties should collaborate to organize an alternative service break (ASB) for American undergraduate students, which would take place at the two locations, as means to diversify the portfolio of both organizations. The ASB proposal was submitted to an American

University in August 2018, being tentatively approved in October 2018, pending positive evaluation of a pilot trip during Summer 2019.

A second trip, planned for April 2019, will enable further data collection efforts. Hence, using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, it is estimated that 20 additional semi-structured interviews will be conducted; however, we will continue interviewing until data saturation is reached and will then conduct an additional 5 interviews to ensure that saturation was achieved. The interview protocol was adapted from the P1tLab's instrument, and covers five main themes: livelihood, voice, social capital, self-efficacy, and success. Leadership at the ejido and the NGO have invited their members to participate in the study and those interested have been contacted and selected on the basis of availability for interview during the fieldwork in April. Interviews will be conducted in Spanish, given that two researchers in the team are fluent in this language and all participants are either native or fluent speakers. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis, using open coding, is to be performed on the content (Flick, 2014). To reduce bias and ensure trustworthiness, regular peer-debriefing sessions have been conducted. In addition, there is a third trip planned for August 2019 to the research setting to conduct member-checks.

4. Results

Preliminary results from thematic analysis on the interviews already conducted as well as on descriptive and reflective field notes suggest that there are substantial structural barriers to entrepreneurial success imposed by monopolistic tour operators, all-inclusive hospitality units and local spheres of government.

In regard to the first research question, looking at participants' conscientization of structures that undermine their agency and livelihoods (Freire, 1970), they seem to be well aware and also highly critical of the status quo. In terms of the private sector, they explain that meals and recreation opportunities are available in the hotels and are included in vacation packages, which hinders tourists from trying local foods and local experiences. In terms of public sector, they complain that most funds are used in the beautification of the tourist spaces with neglect for public infrastructure in areas outside the tourist enclaves.

Concerning the second research question, regarding business strategies, participants appear to see value in offering authentic, unique products and experiences reflective of their culture and identity, but they often resort to offering mainstream services and products that are less risky and easier to price for fear of being left with unsold stock and haggling. Accordingly, one participant said that *"if he crafts something different he will have to carry it in his backpack back and forth for two weeks before he's able to sell it"*. Also, in the specific case of adventure tours, the ecopark does not have access to tourists, being dependent on and unable to vet tourists sent by the tourism operators, many of them looking for *turismo de borrachera* (Jiménez & Prats, 2006), causing serious safety issues for the enterprise when they show up inebriated.

Finally, so far the tourism development model present in Bahía de Banderas departs from many Permatourism guidelines. Preliminary results suggest that the destination does not meet the "integrate rather than segregate" principle, which states that diversity provides alternative pathways for essential business ecosystems functions in the face of changing conditions (Ferreira, 2018). Accordingly, the relationship between the tour operators and entrepreneurs appears to be not based on true partnership among equals, like the symbiotic relationships advocated by Permatourism, but rather a relationship wherein the bigger partner leverages the

existing power asymmetry to their advantage. In spite of generating short term returns, such behavior is certainly not desirable in the long run for it will potentially drive the microentrepreneurs out of business, harming the richness of the destination with serious consequences for the business ecosystem as a whole.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

While much scholarship has critiqued enclave tourism, this study adopted a participatory action approach to examine how the local residents of the Bahía de Banderas employ tourism microentrepreneurship to advance their livelihood goals in face of the socio-economic apartheid created by formal sector tourism companies and government. Preliminary data suggests that despite adverse conditions microentrepreneurs are still able to glean some economic opportunities, provided that they are extremely judicious in how they choose to exploit those same opportunities for there seems to be a thin line between moderate success on the one hand and total failure on the other, with immediate repercussions in their livelihoods. Overall the study stands to provide novel insight into the enclave tourism business ecosystem, departing from a rather unavailing critique to the model that has proven to be resilient despite academic censure, to emphasizing the ingenuity and resourcefulness of microentrepreneurs, which allows them to escape employment in the hospitality service sector or even alienation in some cases.

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