



The unbearable lightness of tourism ... as violence: an afterword

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ABSTRACT

This Afterword reviews the special issue of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism on Critical Geographies*, which focuses on the intricate relationships between tourism and various forms of tourism related violence. It notes the slippery and complex concept of violence in tourism, and that it is typically seen from the viewpoint of the tourist, with researchers working from the anthropological host and guests relationship model as a way of negotiating kinship and friendship between societies, with broader aspects of tourism's power play with socio-cultural change perhaps conveniently forgotten. Tourism and tourists are seen as hiding their corporate and personal violence behind destination branding, tourism imaginaries and saleable commodification. While the innovative approaches adopted by papers in the special issue are commended, two key and still outstanding issues are highlighted. Tourism researchers must find ways to share their work more effectively across all stakeholders, as well as publishing in academic journals. And researchers should become more self reflexive and critical of themselves, seeking to address the complex practical challenges for sustainable tourism thinkers and doers of creating better links between the visitors and businesses of developed societies, and the culture and communities of developing societies.

KEYWORDS

Tourism studies; violence; critique; theory; anthropology

In the acclaimed novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, writer Milan Kundera (1984) reflects on the insignificance of a single lifetime, thus the title, the “lightness” of being. Tourists, too, are usually imagined and portrayed as light-hearted figures, visiting peoples and places across the globe without caring much about the systemic inequalities that make their travels possible, and having, for the unaware casual observer, a light impact on their destinations. Consequently, tourism was, for a long time, not considered as a topic worthy of serious scientific inquiry. Nobody within academia wanted researchers to be confused with tourists (although I met dozens of scholar-tourists while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on tourism). Times have changed. The special issue of which this Afterword forms a part is far from being “light”. On the contrary, some may even feel that the mass of frivolous tourists is not given enough voice. The focus of this special issue is on the intricate relationship between tourism and various forms of violence.

Violence is a slippery concept (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2003; Whitehead, 2004). When queried about the links between tourism and violence, most people spontaneously mention overt physical manifestations that involve (international) tourists: different types of personal crimes (including assault, battery, false imprisonment, kidnapping, homicide, and rape), or terrorist attacks (in countries such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Tunisia or Turkey). These are also the typical things that are

reported by news and social media and that put destinations in a negative light (until we forget about it). In a second instance, people may think of violence as a “special interest”, as evidenced in dark tourism, war tourism (including active conflict zones) or disaster tourism. These different examples of violence-in-tourism and violence-as-tourism have in common that they are tourist-centric. In other words, they are thought of from the perspective of tourists, who are either confronted with violence – mostly in the role of innocent victims – or as conscious consumers of it.¹ In both instances, violence is conceived as a force external to rather than inherent to tourism, “tourism-as-violence”.

The scientific study of tourism, too, has long been dominated by conceptual frameworks and explanatory models that favour the perspective of the tourist. This was partially countered by the “host–guest model”, which gained fame through the volume *Hosts and Guests* (Smith, 1977). This framework takes the pre-modern covenant of hospitality as paradigm for tourism exchanges, with local people as (willing) hosts and tourists as (temporary) guests.² To some extent, the host–guest relation is what anthropologists traditionally documented in their ethnographic studies. In many descriptive accounts of cultures and societies across the globe, there is strong emphasis on the importance of hospitality to negotiate kinship and friendship. Hospitality, as a cultural form, extends to visitors too. Anthropologists projected these observations on to contemporary tourism, particularly on the relationship between (usually upscale) tourists from Western countries and fragile communities in what was known as the “Third World”. This approach shifted the attention of tourism studies away from the tourist towards the broader relational aspects of tourism and socio-cultural change.

Zooming in on hosts and guests revealed how the relationship between tourists and destination residents is severely asymmetrical in terms of power, for it is the latter that have to bear the burden of adjustment economically, socially and culturally (Nash, 1977). In addition, the host–guest encounter was typically situated in a more general framework that considered tourism in terms of commodification. In most case studies, there was a concentration on the type and extent of socio-cultural effects, as opposed to the follow-up reactions to these impacts by local communities. In line with this tradition, the various articles in this special issue pay attention to what tourism does to (local) people. The socio-cultural dimensions of violence are what give it its force and meaning. Alongside similar recent publications (e.g. Andrews, 2014), the authors employ a critical geographies approach to focus on the social structures and symbolic landscapes of violence that underpin tourism development. As such, they inscribe themselves in the “critical turn” in tourism studies (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007) and the implications of this turn for sustainable tourism research (Bramwell & Lane, 2014).³

Critiquing tourism-as-violence

Counterintuitively, diverse expressions of violence seem to be “central to the production and maintenance of tourism destinations and practices” (Devine & Ojeda, 2017). Because tourism-as-violence covers many different issues, the editors of this special issue zoom in on three key areas. First, they highlight the workings of violence in everyday tourism practices – “terror as usual” (rather than over-covered extraordinary events). Dispossession is one prominent expression of this, the loss of land, community or language. The “structural violence” inherent in many forms of tourism development negatively affects the livelihoods of people living in and around destination areas, the second point of attention.⁴ Third, the material and/or physical aspects of violence are always accompanied by representational and ideological processes that need to be critically disentangled.

In their conceptual paper, Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher argue that the process through which tourism becomes capital (or value-in-motion) “not only provokes various forms of material violence but can become a form of (structural) violence in its own right” (2017, p. 1). They describe how the twin dynamics of commodification and violence are intimately related in tourism. The key form of violence identified is that of “destructive creation”; what is destructive for destination residents can be creatively enjoyed (and consumed) by tourists. Büscher and Fletcher discuss three prominent forms of structural violence, namely the systematic production of inequalities, waste and “spaces of exception”. Destination branding is trying to hide these at all costs, although it is important to keep

in mind that tourism has no total control over the image of a place and its people (Salazar & Graburn, 2014). I would also be cautious of equating inequality with difference. Tourism imaginaries often shrewdly exaggerate the power of difference and neglect and obfuscate the power of commonality. However, not all processes of differentiation necessarily rely on inequality (although, in practice, many do).

While tourism-related waste has long been recognized as a huge problem in terms of sustainability, it is innovative to frame it as a form of structural violence. This is a line of analysis that is well worth developing further, particularly in documenting who is affected by tourism waste and what can be done about it. Regarding the “spaces of exception” produced by tourism, it is important to distinguish between themed tourism environments (e.g. theme parks) and tourism activities in otherwise lived environments (Salazar, 2010). Physical tourism bubbles, particularly resorts, have been rightly criticized for being unsustainable. However, tourists freely roaming outside such contained areas also cause environmental or cultural damage. Applied to the example that Büscher and Fletcher (2017) use, simulating a slum for tourist consumption is definitely a bad idea, but visiting a “real” slum may be equally (if not more) problematic (Frenzel, Steinbrink, & Koens, 2012). Finally, the idea of de-growth in tourism may sound nice but is unattainable, for one because it is largely Western-centric, not considering the dynamics of tourist markets in emerging economies.

Analyzing the development of tourism in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Christopher Loperena (2017) recognizes many of the violent features of extractive industries such as mining and agribusiness. His article points to the importance of timing. The implementation of neoliberal tourism policies in Honduras, heavily drawing on discourses of “sustainability”, was facilitated by the 1998 disaster, which weakened people’s abilities to defend themselves against extractivism, particularly black and Indigenous communities. The artificially created economic instability in many parts of the world only strengthens Loperena’s argument that disasters are crucial for the maintenance of contemporary configurations of neoliberal capitalism.

Jennifer Devine (2017) ponders the question why tourism is such a powerful and pervasive site of contentious socio-spatial politics. Her answer draws upon research on what she terms “non-traditional forms of tourism” (mostly eco-tourism) in Guatemala, particularly in the Maya Biosphere villages. Eco-tourism is defined here as “a capitalist industry defined by tourists’ travel and leisure practices that integrates people, places and resources into the global economy” (Devine, 2017, p. 2). With such a definition, one is left to wonder what actually sets eco-tourism apart from other forms of tourism. In any case, in the Guatemalan context, tourism, like nature conservation, is cleverly (mis)used by the authorities to “recover governability” in a region populated by Indigenous people. This strategy of spatial colonization goes hand in hand with the commodification of Maya culture and landscapes.

The practice whereby non-Indigenous tourism workers dress in Indigenous clothes for cultural performances is one that I recognize from my own research among Maasai people in Eastern Africa (Salazar, 2017) and, closer to home, from my hometown, Bruges. The sheer force of enacted tourism imaginaries can quickly dispossess people of their history, identity and culture. At the same time, it is important to recognize that affected communities usually do not speak in one voice.⁵ People’s position partially depends on their personal involvement in tourism and whether they gain anything at all in benefit. The same can also be said about the “grassroots initiatives using tourism as a political platform to pursue socio-spatial justice, as well as find alternatives to neoliberal development and solutions to environmental and social crises” (Devine, 2017, p. 13). Even in these contexts, one can encounter mechanisms of domination and oppression.

In the context of the first editions of the World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, I did some research on “MSTur”, a solidarity tourism product developed by the Brazilian “Landless Rural Workers Movement” or “Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra” (MST). In contrast to organized visits to MST projects for schools and other local groups, MSTur was aimed at attracting an international public of so-called “solidarity tourists”. However, to do so, MST had to invest a lot of resources and energy, “adapting” rural settlements so that they could receive foreign tourists.

Paradoxically, by creating more comfort for the international tourist, MST was showing a “better” version of reality. Besides, MST had little or no control over the way in which Western partner organizations (NGOs and trade unions) were promoting their MSTur. This, linked to the fact that there were virtually no Brazilian funds for small community-based tourism projects, made inevitable that foreigners were increasingly taking control of rural tourism, “solidarity tourism” projects such as MSTur not being an exception. The MSTur project led to internal disagreements within MST and it was stopped.

Liza Keānuenueokalani Williams and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez (2017) present a historical study of dispossession on the island of O’ahu, Hawai’i. They draw on the work of Jacques Derrida on hospitality to argue that tourism is incompatible with Indigenous sovereignty (particularly in a context with a colonial legacy). Their case nicely illustrates how problematic it is to take hospitality as a paradigm for tourism exchanges (see above). Williams and Gonzalez (2017) describe the development of an alter-native tour (*Mai Poina*) at ‘Iolani Palace, the former seat of the Hawaiian monarchy, as a critique to the official narrative. However, with only a tiny fraction of Hawai’i’s tourists attending, the impact of such initiatives remains small. As the authors themselves state, “tourism, in the end, offers highly limited modes of offering paths to restorative justice for Indigenous populations” (Williams & Gonzalez, 2017, p. 14).

The article also contains an interesting discussion about the traditional Hawaiian value of *aloha* (love, empathy, compassion, mercy and respect) and its incorporation by tourism actors. The authors shows how, by going back to the cultural roots of the concept, “radically departing from idealized images of aloha in paradise (friendly natives, climate and universal access)” (Williams & Gonzalez, 2017, p. 8), we arrive at a wisdom shared by Indigenous peoples around the globe: a reciprocal relationship in which people care for the land as it cares for them. What if sustainable tourism initiatives were to be assessed through this age-old principle? A similar lesson can be learned about hospitality (if that is what tourism wants to mimic); it only works when it is mutual, rather than forcing it to be unconditional (Candea & da Col, 2012).

Finally, Linda Boukhris (2017) describes *Le Paris Noir* (the Black Paris) project, a counter-hegemonic tour of France’s capital. This initiative is a reaction against the symbolic violence that occurs through the assimilated “invisibilization” of Black geographies in the dominant (tourism) imaginaries of Paris.⁶ There are many similarities with the alternative tour in Hawai’i discussed above. One would like to hear more about the intended audience of such tours. From the article, they appear mostly to be preaching to the already converted, which is characteristic of many alternative forms of tourism. Which kind of impact do such initiatives have on (mainstream) tourism? And what do they tell us about sustainability?

Giving tourism studies more “weight”

Despite claims by lobby groups such as the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and ongoing economic integrations, there is no fully integrated tourism industry.⁷ On the contrary, tourism is highly fragmented and diverse, and the power held by different branches varies with size and scale. In other words, tourism is as messy as almost everything else in life. There never is full control, thus there is always room for agency (Scott, 1990). While tourism is much more than merely an industry and an economic activity, we need to keep in mind that most tourism activities are driven by commercial desires. This is also an important given in the never-ending quest for sustainable development. After all, the most widespread model of sustainability stresses three interdependent pillars: environmental protection, social development and, not to be forgotten, economic development. The authors of this special issue rightly point out that the links between sustainable tourism development and issues of justice and equity remain rather weak (Devine & Ojeda, 2017).

Rather than attacking “the tourism industry” or “the authorities” for everything that goes wrong, we need fine-grained empirical analyses that disentangle who exactly is doing what, how it is being done, for what reason, and what can be done about it. More attention is needed to help understand how various forms of tourism-as-violence affects people differently depending on their gender, race,

social class and religion. Conducting research on this topic, however, is only one part of the exercise. Making sure that the insights gained are shared with as many stakeholders as possible is equally important. When our scholarly work does reach wider audiences, we also need to face the fact that it may be understood and used in ways that were not intended (Salazar, 2013). In this context, the lack of dialogue between tourism studies, which analyze tourism (and are, almost by definition, critical), and hospitality and tourism management approaches, which mostly develop strategies to make tourism work, is worrying. Tourism bubbles are (re)created and reinforced when future tourism service providers are not confronted with critical analyses of their business during their training.⁸ Equally problematic are tourism studies conferences, held in nice destinations, that neglect the challenges, including violence, that the local tourism sector confronts – not to mention the ecological costs. Much work remains to be done here.

Moreover, tourism scholars should be more reflexive and open to self-criticism. The disproportionate attention given to alternative forms of tourism or the critique against mainly “Western” dominance, also in this special issue, often tells us more about the subject-position of the authors than giving us handles to make tourism (as a whole) more sustainable. Alternative forms of tourism may solve certain issues, albeit at a small scale, but they also create new problems, as I have reported in this journal (Salazar, 2012). The colonial legacy and its continuing impact on contemporary tourism remain important but should not make us lose sight of newer developments, emerging tourist-sending countries and novel forms of dominance and violence. When I attended the Baliem Valley Cultural Festival in West Papua, for example, not the Western tourists but the Indonesian visitors from the capital were treating the local people in neo-colonial fashion. We urgently need an updated version of the iconic quasi-documentary *Cannibal Tours* (O'Rourke, 1988).

Most of the articles in this special issue rely on the so-called host–guest paradigm, explicitly or rather implicitly. However, this model has long been criticized for not meeting the challenges of explaining all forms of tourism, and for not fully addressing the complex interactions between “developed” societies and “developing” communities (Aramberri, 2001; Sherlock, 2001). The critics argue that the commercialized encounters common in tourism disregard the old covenant of hospitality and that the relationship forged between tourists and “hosts” in the economic marketplace looks more like a Marxist relation of consumers and producers. At the same time, the tourism encounter is mostly dictated by a dominant discourse that seeks to sweep away the basic commercial nature of the interaction (Dann, 1996). Laying bare this form of everyday violence in tourism, alongside the many other forms discussed in this special issue, may be a first step towards envisioning more sustainable forms of tourism development.

Notes

1. It is often forgotten that tourists can be offenders too (see Botterill & Jones, 2010).
2. Tom Selwyn (2000) has examined the material modifications which are involved in the scaling up of domestic hospitality into the international displays of the “hospitality industry”. Interestingly, the concept of hospitality does not figure prominently in the various editions of Valene Smith's *Hosts and Guests*.
3. It is interesting to note here that the theme of violence in tourism is not really discussed in the volume that set “critical tourism studies” on the scholarly map (Ateljevic et al., 2007). This seems remarkable for scholars who “share a vision of producing and promoting social change in and through tourism practice, research and education” (see <https://www.criticaltourismstudies.info/cts>).
4. The concept of structural violence comes out of Marxism and liberation theology (Farmer, 2004). It refers to the poverty, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation that people suffer due to injustice and socio-political inequalities.
5. Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport (2012) have critically examined community as a methodological, theoretical, phenomenological, political and legal construct. Their analysis reveals that community can be a site of violence, political struggle or multiple hierarchies.
6. Symbolic violence is Pierre Bourdieu's term describing the mechanism whereby socially dominated groups naturalize (mentally accept) the status quo and blame themselves for their domination, thereby rendering it legitimate. It is stronger than physical violence because it is often not recognized as violence.

7. Tourism is composed of many branches: tour operators; travel agents; accommodation providers; carriers; tourism associations (both NGOs and market-oriented associations); destination organizations (including tourism chambers of commerce); and consultancies.
8. I recently saw a book proposal passing by for a tourism management handbook focusing on the Mediterranean region. While the proposal was very complete in terms of covering the various professional aspects of tourism, it failed to embed this within the current geopolitical context (including the ongoing “refugee crisis”) and its huge impact on Mediterranean tourism.

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Notes on contributor

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