

Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision

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Edited by

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The real scissors crisis in tourism research

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

2 The real scissors crisis in tourism research

Julio Aramberri

Why and how to

When it comes to discussing tourism the prevailing mood is celebratory. Usually, one provides statistics that show how this modern social phenomenon has become the biggest population movement in history barring times of war. This success narrative has proven correct until recently. Since the turn of the 21st century we have witnessed, among other things, global terrorist attacks (September 11, Bali, and many others), two main international wars (Afghanistan and Iraq), pandemic scares (SARS or the outbreak of the porcine flu), the big tsunami of 2004 and some other minor events that created a less favourable environment for the development of travel and tourism. However, even such a rocky turn of the century only deterred tourism for short periods of time or otherwise redirected flows from some areas of the planet to others. Indeed the current economic crisis presents unexpected and untried challenges that may change this successful course. However, until we know more about its development, we can still expect that the social habit of tourism as well as the industries that cater for it will still be quite resilient (Aramberri and Butler, 2005).

When it comes to theoretical explanations and diagnoses, though, we leave Mardi Gras and enter Ash Wednesday. The present state of theory in tourism research is dismaying. Broadly speaking, academic production comes in two main shapes – *why* and *how to* research. At face value one might think that this distribution overlaps the now classic post-Kuhnian division between basic and everyday science (Lakatos, 1970). The first provides paradigms or solid theoretical constructions that shape a given field of knowledge for a long period of time – epoch-making discoveries that provide a general problematic and sharpen research hypotheses. Everyday science, on its side, gladly accepts the paradigm, works within its framework and solves tiny or sizable problems, following a methodology of research programs (Lakatos, 1978) that strengthens the accepted theoretical framework. It formulates research goals and designs experiments. Everyday science is not a *why* type of knowledge, but it is not *how to* either. Genuine *how to* or applied science is better known under the name of engineering or technology.

My contention is that, on one hand, contemporary tourism research contains plenty of engineering geared, in the tradition of business administration, to tinker with the travel industry (including transportation, hospitality, food and beverage, entertainment, shopping, and other aspects of the offer) and to improve its effectiveness, as well as much social engineering, following the tradition of international bureaucracies, in search of best practices to make the former friendlier and fairer to local providers. These two ways of approaching tourism usually work within the paradigm of modernity, that is, that of the present global capitalist economy (and its social and political formulas) stressing different ways to organize it better, either through more proficient technological or marketing mechanisms or through increased regulation of its workings.

On the other side, a significant amount of literature prefers to address *why* issues. Countless case studies and a few openly theoretical works are designed in such a way that things such as tour packages, airports, beaches, and sundry other attractions fade away from the horizon. They prefer to concentrate on a Husserlian eidetic unity of essences and claim that the paradigm of modernity should be cast aside by reason of its many theoretical shortcomings and its allegedly unpalatable practical consequences. Usually, one notices a stubborn reiteration that economics only offers a biased view of tourism and that it should be replaced by other social sciences, mostly anthropology, that offer a more wholesome view of human intercourse. Economic views of tourism are but another instance of the twisted arrangements created by a societal model that produces, reproduces and sanctions the inequalities that lie at modernity's core between haves and have-nots in the national and international arenas, between genders, between races, between ethnic groups, between cultures. This post-modern or 'pomo' matrix contends that another world is possible or, at least, that consistent evidence shows that the paradigm of modernity does not live up to standard and should be discarded. Whether aware of it or not, tourists and the travel industry play a not minor role in the extended reproduction of domination of the South by the North, or of the powerful over the disempowered. In this way, most *why* approaches in tourism research reflect only one of the possible ways of theorizing about modernity – its radical critique. The *why* mainstream believes that modernity, defined as the conjunction of science/technology, markets and open societies, should be exposed.

In fact, this is nothing new. Similar viewpoints were at the core of the romantic critique of modernity in the 19th century (Berlin, 1999) and pervaded most social sciences. However, the conflict between modernity and its radical critics has become sharper since industrialized societies took a new bend in the road to emerge as mass societies at the end of World War I and to undergo increasing globalization since the end of World War II. In the social sciences, this time has seen a greening of post-romanticism.

It is not surprising that tourism research should reproduce this conflict, as it is a branch of the social sciences. The vexing part, though, is that in our field the pro-modernity tradition has vacated the field. While the *how tos* devote their energies to

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