Chapter 12

Understanding the Indiscipline of Tourism: A Radical Critique to the Current State of Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Over last years, the current growth of tourism flourished in a wealth of courses, Ph.D.s., Masters and academic offerings that positioned tourism as a good perspective for students. Jafar Jafari signaled to the term “scientifization of tourism” to explain the ever-increasing attention given to this new field (Jafari & Aeser, 1988; Jafari, 1990, 2005). At a first stage, the great volume of bibliographic production offered an encouraging prospect in the pathways towards the maturation of this discipline. However, some epistemologists have recently alerted that not only tourism-research failed to develop a unified consensus of what tourism is, but also lack of a coherent epistemology that helps organizing the produced material. In this respect, tourism is subject now to an atmosphere of “indiscipline” where the produced knowledge leads to scattered (limited) conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Over last years, the growth of tourism studies has been duplicated and crystalized in Ph. Doctorates, Master degrees, books, journals and academic courses (Leiper, 1981; Jafari, 1990; Sheldon 1991; Hall, Howey et al 1999; Williams & Lew 2004). As Jafar Jafari put it, the scientifization of tourism was based on the increasing attention given by scholars to tourism as their primary object of study (Jafari & Aeser, 1988; DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0201-2.ch012
Jafari, 1990; 2005). Though this volume of prolific production accelerated the disciplinary maturation of tourism, some epistemologists have alerted that applied research failed to reach a unified consensus (epistemology) about what tourism means, but the production evolved on a fragmentary platform which was dubbed by John Tribe as “the indiscipline of tourism”. (Tribe 1997; 2005; 2010; Korstanje & Thirkettle, 2013; Korstanje & Skoll 2014; Escalona & Thirkettle, 2011). In this context, the present chapter is aimed at discussing critically the main opportunities and limitations that epistemology faces today in tourism fields, as well as the problems quantitative-oriented paradigms show. For some reasons, which remains obscure, researchers are prone to employ quantitative over qualitative instruments (Walle 1997; Decrop 1999). Though this chapter does not represent an attack to any scholar or position, no less true is that the current state of the art is experiencing an epistemological fragmentation which prevents a clear diagnosis of what tourism is. A fragmentation of this caliber leads to serious difficulties in order for the discipline to be seriously taken as a maturated academic option. The aims of this text are twofold; on one hand we debate on the needs of achieving a scientific definition of tourism. On another, we depart towards a theory that triggers a review of John Tribe’s contributions to the epistemology of tourism. The first section explores preliminary the problem of transdisciplinarity and the intervention of different social sciences to take tourism as the main object of their approaches but leaving behind a shared definition. As a second option, an in-depth insight is done over the prone of fieldworkers to opt for quantitative research, ignoring the benefits other types of instruments offer. In this vein, it is important to review the criticism posed by John Tribe respecting not only to the “indiscipline of tourism”, but the pervasive role played by Academy in allowing a conceptual chaos in the produced bibliography. However, Tribe’s diagnosis does not present the reasons why the bibliographic production is scattered. To fulfill this gap, an alternative explanation on the indiscipline of tourism is given in fourth section.

Towards a Theory of Tourism

It is unfortunate that tourism-researchers not only have developed a sentiment of admiration for social sciences, but also borrowed their main epistemologies for their own field-works (Ryan 1991). It resulted in the proliferation of multi-disciplinary approaches which leaves further doubts than answers. Some voices have proposed to embrace a new post-disciplinary method combining the best of many disciplines towards the transdisciplinarity of tourism (Coles, Hall & Duval, 2006).

As an object of study, tourism has been examined by diverse social sciences, as anthropology (Graburn, 1983), Sociology (Maccannell 1976; Cohen 1984), Geographies (Mitchel & Murphy, 1991; Britton 1991; Williams & Lew, 2014), Psychology (Pearce 1982), Politics (Richter 1983; 1989), economy (Krippendorf, 1984), mobilities (Urry, 2007; Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006), history (Towner, 1985) and so forth. Beyond the great divergence of all these studies, two main waves emerged. Both will attempt to respond the following question, though from diverse angles: Is tourism an productive activity resulted from industrial revolution?, or is it a social institution inherited to sedentary tribes?.

Doubtless American and European perspectives discussed to what extent tourism is a modern phenomenon or an ancient practices other ancient civilizations. In this respect, Jost Krippendorf ignited a much deeper discussion to explain the logic of leisure not only traverses cultures and times, but also it is enrooted in the psychology of our mind. No matter than the time, tourism is not previously determined by the capital as American sociology precludes, but by the needs of “escapement” which is common to many human sedentary organizations. A great variety of cultures in the globe has historically performed similar practices of recreational leisure and travels which suggests that tourism is an all-encompassing
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