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10 Tourism and economic geography redux

Evolutionary economic geography’s role in scholarship bridge construction

Dimitri Ioannides and Patrick Brouder

Tourism’s marginal status

Almost two decades ago, Ioannides and Debbage (1998) passionately made the argument for bridging the considerable theoretical gap which at the time they perceived to exist between tourism research and one of the geographic discipline’s key branches, namely economic geography. Their edited volume was inspired by their own backgrounds in economic geography, regional development and planning studies but also, to a major extent, by the work in tourism of several influential geographers such as Pearce (1989), Britton (1991), Shaw and Williams (1994) and Smith (1998), to name but a few. Happily, over the years since The Economic Geography of the Tourist Industry (Ioannides and Debbage 1998) made its appearance, a growing number of authors have offered their own valuable contributions relating to the interlinkages of tourism to economic geography (e.g. Milne and Antelijevic 2001; Papathedorou 2004; Shaw and Williams 2004; d’Hauteserre 2006; Mosedale 2006; Bianchi 2009; Hjalager 2010; Brouder and Eriksson 2013). These insights, in turn, have led Ioannides and Debbage (2014) to reflect that we must no longer talk about a singular economic geography of tourism. Rather, just as we now must perceive the pluralistic nature of research relating to tourism’s overall spatial characteristics (Hall and Page 2009), we must also recognize the existence of the ‘economic geographies of tourism’ (Ioannides and Debbage 2014: 115).

Hall and Page (2009: 3) argue that overall ‘the geography of tourism appears at first glance to be reasonably healthy’. They back up their statement by arguing that, in general terms, geographers have made several important contributions to the study of tourism, pointing out that more than a third of the 25 most cited authors in tourism geography (Hall and Page 2009: 3) have appeared in recent years (e.g. Wilson 2012; Lew et al. 2014), including one on the non-Anglophone contributions to tourism geographies.
notice the topic reinforces its marginality within the overall subject of human geography, constituting a mainstream economic geography (EEG) (Boschma and Martin 2010), constitutes a fundamental step forward in allowing not only tourism scholars but also so-called mainstream economic geographers and regional development specialists to gain a superior understanding of tourism’s relationship to the overall development of localities and entire regions. While plenty of other contributors such as the ones we have already referred to have each in their own right been instrumental in terms of knowledge accumulation in the economic geography of tourism, we firmly believe that EEG constitutes the ideal pathway forward towards embedding tourism research within mainstream economic geography. Arguably it can help convince some of the more sceptical representatives of this academic branch of the need to take tourism seriously in the manner advocated by Britton (1991) and Ioannides and Debbage (1998). In part, this is because EEG provides the ability \textit{inter alia} to view tourism in the context of a region’s development not in isolation but in terms of how this sector co-evolves with the — often competing — development paths of several other sectors; if tourism is viewed as one component of a destination’s entire, complex economic structure, then it becomes clearer to comprehend its evolutionary track over time and pinpoint the forces that determine its pathway.

In the rest of this concluding chapter we briefly remind the reader why the synergies of EEG and the study of tourism are an endeavour worth pursuing, while identifying an agenda for further research. We also provide a cautionary note by reminding the reader that we should go beyond a mechanistic interpretation of a destination’s evolution and recognize the implications of this approach in the context of matters of uneven development, social inequalities and capital accumulation (MacKinnon et al. 2009; Bianchi 2012).

Tourism’s evolution through time and space

As several contributors to this volume have persuasively argued, examining the manner in which tourism evolves over time and also spatially within destinations of varying sizes has long been a subject of preoccupation of tourism geographers, regional scientists and other scholars (Wolfe 1952; Christaller 1964; Plog 1973; Miossec 1977; Stansfield 1978; Butler 1980, 2006; Gormsen 1981). Undoubtedly the most famous of these contributions is Butler’s extremely well cited, though oft-criticized, Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC), which despite (or because of) its apparent simplicity has been utilized in several guises by numerous researchers over the last 35 years to explain the manner in which destinations shift through time and the key forces behind their evolution. Hall and Page (2009: 5) contend that the TALC ‘remains a clear indicator of the importance of theory in tourism research’ and they go on to say that the model is ideal in terms of highlighting the need for theory in tourism studies.

A key strength of Butler’s model has been, according to Pearce (1989), its portrayal of the key local as well as exogenous actors who determine the manner in which a destination evolves through time; though several other observers have argued that the model suffers from shortcomings, such as its inability to easily account for seasonality, its lack of prescriptive powers and the fact that within one major destination there might be a number of sub-destinations, each of which might be at a varying stages of its own respective resort cycle (Ioannides, 1994; Hall and Page 2009). Added to these criticisms is the not-so-insignificant point that, in almost all examinations that apply the TALC lens, the emphasis has been on tourism’s pattern of growth and decline largely in isolation from the evolution behaviour of other key sectors within the destination and, indeed, the evolution of the place itself as part of a socioecological as well as a socioeconomic system.

The embrace of an EEG lens within the study of tourism enables us to begin to understand the manner in which tourism behaves in a complex economic system where it is not necessarily the only or indeed the major sector (Brouder 2014). A prime approach that has been reinforced in several of this volume’s contributions (e.g., Chapters 2, 3, 6, 8) has to do with examinations of path dependence and associated issues such as regional lock-in, as well as path creation and path plasticity (Brouder 2014). It quickly becomes obvious, as Niewiadomski (Chapter 7) argues, that for a region to escape its historical legacy is far from easy, as it oftentimes may be shaped by a particular rigid political system and/or a region’s inherited sociocultural traits. Consider, for instance, the near impossibility that several destinations worldwide face when seeking to effectively react to calls to make their tourism product evolve in a more sustainable manner than in the past. Ioannides and Patrick Brouder
and Holcomb (2003) have noted, in the context of various rapidly evolving coastal mass-tourism destinations (e.g. Cyprus, Malta), that despite strong recognition that rapid and uncontrolled development undoubtedly leads to long-term adverse negative environmental and sociocultural impacts, the common suggested solution is one reinforcing a ‘tourism-first’ mind-set. This ‘failure to learn from failure’ is not uncommon in tourism and is so entrenched it consistently proves difficult to overcome (Hall, 2011).

Elsewhere, natural disasters from South-East Asia to Mexico tend to result in updated forms of capital-intensive investment (e.g. from time-shares to all-inclusive resorts) rather than leading to a more sustainable form of local tourism development (e.g. small-scale community-based tourism). Thus, natural disasters are seen as a clean slate to modernize the stock rather than to rethink the nature of tourism development. This is despite the fact that the sector might have actually outlived its value for the destination and might indeed have to be replaced by another economic strategy. Thus, we regularly see calls for luxury-based tourism under the pretext that such an approach should serve to attract smaller numbers of high spenders, supposedly enabling the destination to improve its environmental health without compromising economic gains. This narrow view of sustainable development that emphasizes economic gains through the constant growth of tourism receipts whilst relegating environmental goals to the utility they have in serving the aforementioned economic priorities reflects the strong path-dependence of tourism’s evolution in these destinations that is constantly shaped by a powerful pro-business lobby. Meanwhile, in other regions tourism struggles to gain recognition as a real economic sector as institutional legacies are tied to ‘real’ industries such as manufacturing (Brouder and Fullerton 2015).

Escaping such path dependency is far from easy, but when it does occur, this happens following what Sanz Ibáñez et al. (see Chapter 5) describe as ‘moments’ or key points of inflection when certain circumstances combine, forcing a shift in the destination’s evolutionary trajectory. Gill and Williams (see Chapter 3) point out that a new path occurs to a major extent as a result of human agency, embodied in actions such as entrepreneurship and innovation (see also Chapters 4 and 7), which might also coincide with certain key events (e.g. the announcement that a destination has been selected for a major sporting event). Halfker and James (see Chapter 6) indicate that such moments occur following a crisis that necessitates a new course of action. They use the concept of resilience and specifically a complex adaptive systems (CAS) approach to examine how two Danish destinations adapted to the impacts of both long-term economic downturn and the more sudden financial crisis. CAS has also been used by Meekes et al. (see Chapter 9) in combination with EEG to examine what they see as non-linear forms of regional development associated with leisure. They conclude that their approach is valuable, since it aims to account for the unpredictability of the future while also appreciating that the evolution of leisure within a destination is strongly inter-related to many other parts of the regional system, including private companies, natural areas and the local population.

Though several chapters in this book (see, for instance, Chapters 3 and 8) implicitly account for the role of institutions and indeed some contributors adopt a relational economic geography approach in their examination of EEG (see Chapter 5), Carson and Carson (see Chapter 6) are the only authors who explicitly call for an approach in EEG that clearly demonstrates the link between ‘evolutionary concepts to political economy approaches, arguing that the evolution of the economic landscape must be related to processes of capital accumulation and uneven development’ (MacKinnon et al. 2009: 129). In this way, they seek a move away from an EEG approach that borrows concepts from evolutionary economics (Nelson and Winter 1982), since this tends to focus heavily on micro-level firm dynamics as key in explaining regional path-dependence, while it sees the role of institutions as secondary and deriving from industrial dynamics.

Carson and Carson’s (Chapter 6) argument is that political systems and institutional structures, among others, can have a significant bearing on the manner in which companies behave at the micro-level and that this in turn influences the development trajectory of a particular sector. Their case study of tourism development in Central Australia demonstrates that in this situation, despite the existence of a crisis reflected in a decade-long downturn in arrivals, inertia on the part of major stakeholders meant that this situation has been hard to reverse. In other words, the key argument of Carson and Carson is that, although a sudden event or crisis may act as an instigator for a new path creation, that new pathway will always be mediated by the destination’s past (political system, historical contingency, cultural traits, etc.; see also Chapter 7).

In the final analysis, Carson and Carson’s principal argument is that the development of tourism at a destination cannot be understood simply by focusing narrowly on the sector itself and the stakeholders directly associated with this. Their emphasis on the institutional environment and by extension the overall political economy coincides with earlier calls to develop a ‘theorisation that explicitly recognises, and unveils, tourism as a predominantly capitalistically organised activity driven by the inherent and defining social dynamics of that system, with its attendant production, social, and ideological relations’ (Britton 1991). This call matches earlier calls specific to EEG (Essettzbichler 2012) and EEG in the context of tourism (Brouder and Ioannides 2014), with Essettzbichler, in particular, arguing for a strong role for political-economy approaches within EEG research.

Setting an agenda for future directions in research

We began this chapter by reminding the reader that, despite the fact that many positive steps have been made over the last two decades or so in terms of bringing the gap between tourism and economic geography, to a large extent much of this scholarship has gone unnoticed by academics who are not directly interested in the study of this sector. This situation perpetuates misunderstandings that, in turn, lead a number of scholars to trivialize the importance of tourism and its relationship to the rest of the economy. This downgrading of tourism has serious
implications — from research-grant applications to government planning — with tourism being poorly funded or isolated as a special interest rather than as an important part of a diverse economy. As tourism scholars, we are often told that if we are to be successful in gaining access to research funding we must carefully and creatively camouflage the topic and avoid using terms such as ‘tourism’ and ‘travel industry’ directly. That said, we believe that the embrace of EEG in tourism studies presents a new framework for tourism studies by shifting it from being a case on the margins of economic geography to an important part of an integrated economic framework.

For this to happen it is our contention to be mindful of the critique of MacKinnon et al. (2009), who maintain that it is important not to simply adopt a somewhat mechanistic approach to EEG without taking into account the broader institutional context and especially the political economy. As Bianchi (2009, 2012) has argued, we are sometimes guilty in tourism scholarship, which had gone through several so-called turns (e.g. critical turn, cultural turn, relational turn, evolutionary turn), of neglecting or at least underplaying the political economy context despite the calls of Britton (1991), Ioannides and Debbage (1998) and more recently Gibson (2008). At the end of the day we believe that ‘the evolution of the economic landscape [within which tourism may be a part] needs to be related to processes of capital accumulation and uneven development’ (MacKinnon et al. 2009: 131).

To a greater or a lesser extent, the contributions in this volume have implicitly already done this. The next step is to argue for future research that embraces an evolutionary approach to the study of tourism through a political economy lens and specifically ties to ‘dynamics of capital accumulation, underpinned by the creation and realization of value through spatial circuits of production, circulation, consumption, and regulation’ (MacKinnon et al. 2009: 137). Here, we provide a short list of possible research directions, which are not mutually exclusive, that could significantly strengthen the ties of economic geography to tourism by embracing an EEG approach.

Tourism work and workers: an EEG approach

The geography of tourism work and workers is a subject that hitherto has not received the attention it deserves despite the fact that employment in the sector is plagued by an image of long-standing inequities (Zampoukos and Ioannides 2011; see also Tufts 2004). Gibson (2009) has already argued that, as part of an agenda for tourism geographers to actively embrace a political economy approach in their studies, it is important to consider the dimensions of work and workers in this sector. His argument follows Herod’s (1997) view that we must include workers in broad discussions relating to uneven development patterns, since these individuals have their own say in influencing geographic contingencies ‘as authors of their own historical geographies under capitalism’ (Herod 1997: 16).

In other words, all workers within a region are actively agents who either directly or indirectly influence how their geography is shaped and evolves. Following the argument of MacKinnon et al. (2009) to take into account the role of work and workers in moulding innovation (e.g. through transfer of knowledge), within the context of EEG research we argue that the time is ripe to utilize a longitudinal lens in examinations of the manner in which workers in the various branches that constitute the tourism sector and the tasks they perform over time combine with other factors such as institutional practices in shaping the destination’s evolutionary trajectory.

Policy entrepreneurship as agency in path formation

Some of the chapters in this volume (e.g. Chapters 2 and 3) have already shown how governance can emerge as an active ingredient in shaping new paths at destinations. What is not perhaps always very lucid is whether a particular individual can emerge as the key player at particular points who has an active role in allowing a place to escape its path dependency. Such an individual can be termed a ‘policy’ or even a ‘political entrepreneur’, a construct that has increasingly become a focal point of discussion in other social sciences such as political science and planning studies (Narbutaite Aflaki et al. 2015). Generally speaking, policy entrepreneurs are those ‘entrepreneurs’ who can either be elected officials or bureaucrats, as well as private citizen-activists who take certain risks in order to influence certain (sometimes important) shifts in policy. What drives these individuals as opposed to regular entrepreneurs in the private sector is not pure economic objectives, but rather ambitions such as to remain in or gain access to political office or even more altruistic motives such as to serve the public interest through lofty ambitions to eradicate homelessness, or reduce poverty and unemployment (Ioannides 2015).

Thus, the question emerges as to whether EEG can be used as a way to peel away the institutional layers and narrow down on the identity of the key movers and how they act within a destination that have a major say from time to time in causing path divergence. Such an approach dovetails with calls to more readily embrace the ‘role of power and politics in structuring economic adaptation’ (MacKinnon et al. 2009: 139), which in the final analysis is an important aspect of the political economy perspective. There is certainly ample empirical scope for such investigations. For example, Rogerson and Rogerson (2014) show how tourism path divergence is partly explained by institutional and entrepreneurial conditions both internal to and external of the tourism sector in eight South African metropolitan regions.

Tourism and contingent neoliberalism through an EEG lens

Mosedale (2014: 58) maintains ‘institutional regimes are not static but adapt to internal and external changes. Of particular interest . . . are the temporal variations in relationships between the institutional environment and the institutional arrangements and their effects on tourism’. Despite this argument, there has not been thus far a clear discussion within EEG linking the manner in which the overall
dominant neoliberal paradigm that has been around since the early 1980s has served
to condition the manner in which tourism has evolved in particular places. Specifi-
cally, even though there is strong evidence that the neoliberal project is not a 'one-
size-fits-all global approach', but instead is mediated by local contingencies, there
has not been a concerted effort to incorporate these discussions within an EEG
lens of tourism's evolutionary trajectory. Thus, for instance, despite recognizing
that one of the generic aspects of urban redevelopment efforts in the neoliberal era
worldwide has tended to be the adoption of mega projects and events as well as
signature cultural-tourism solutions (see Richards and Wilson 2007), the question
remains: How do certain destinations manage to break the mould and create their
own new paths? What role, if any, do certain non-traditional stakeholders such as
members of the informal economy play in determining new directions in a desti-
nation's tourism product? Emerging evidence from South Africa shows that this is
an important aspect of tourism-economy research, with further scope for empirical
work globally (Rogerson and Letsie 2013).

Closer examinations of intersectoral knowledge transfer
Larsson and Lindström (2013: 1551) have provided a rare examination from an
evolutionary perspective of how knowledge transfer between two unrelated eco-
nomic sectors, namely boat building and tourism, can 'spur innovation in expe-
rience production'. They show that, despite the apparent disconnect between the
two sectors (at first glance, what does building boats have to do with tourist visits
after all?), there are, in fact, several interlinkages that are worth fleshing out.
Though their study took place in a relatively small scale rural place, it provides
food for thought in extending such an approach to far more complex settings (e.g.
metropolitan regions), where tourism is often hard to disaggregate from a number
of other sectors.

Closing thoughts: the future is looking bright for the economic
geography of tourism
We began this book with the paraphrased quote 'why is tourism not an evolution-
ary science', originally derived from Veblen's (1898) famous question relating to
economics. The contributions within this volume have, we hope, demonstrated
that indeed one can view tourism in an evolutionary sense and the conceptual lens
for doing this is through EEG. Ambitiously, we believe that such an approach goes
a long way towards scholarship bridge construction, as it truly strengthens the ties
between tourism and economic geography (Ioannides and Debabbage 1998). It does
so by offering researchers the ability to comprehend the evolution of tourism as
part of a complex system of multiple co-evolving sectors as they are mediated
by various forces. Having said that, we also realize we have only just now begun
to scratch the surface of this intellectual approach and sincerely hope that more
researchers immerse themselves in this line of inquiry.

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