notes
internacionals
CIDOB

116
MAY
2015

CERTAINTIES AND UNCERTAINTIES IN TOURISM: Mobility and Encounter

Yolanda Onghena, Senior Research Fellow, Intercultural Dynamics, CIDOB
Claudio Milano, PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology,
Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB)

One in every seven people in the world travelled for tourism in 2014. Midway through the 20th century a small number of countries received 25 million tourists, a figure that grew from 528 million in 1995 to 1.14 billion in 2014. That is to say, we are undoubtedly faced with a phenomenon that has experienced continuous evolution and become one of the sectors of greatest economic growth at a global level, as much for advanced economies as for emerging ones. But beyond the statistics, which are subject to constant changes, this phenomenon also shows profound diversification due to its current global magnitude. Is it tourism itself that is changing or should we place tourism within the current changes taking place at global level?

To go beyond a partial understanding, the complexity of the tourist phenomenon requires a wider relational perspective of the multitude of actors and forces involved in tourism as a transnational phenomenon. We propose a flexible vision based on the conditions and specificities that make tour-

ism possible. This vision places the evolution and ramifications that frame the tourist experience in an interdependent relationship with the trends and changes of global reach.

Some events on the world scene, for example, the end of the Soviet Union, the transformation of China and Vietnam into market economies and the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 in the United States have greatly affected the tourist phenomenon as much inside as outside the West. The first of these meant these vast regions "were subsequently opened to inbound, mostly Western, tourism, whereas their flourishing liberalized economies engendered a growing flow of outbound tourism into their neighboring countries and to the West"; the second was "followed by terrorist attacks on tourist facilities elsewhere, highlighted the interface between tourism and terrorism, aggravated the sense of risk in travel, and led to ever more stringent security procedures in global tourism" (Cohen and Cohen, 2012).

> **T**he complexity of the tourist phenomenon requires a wider relational perspective of the multitude of actors and forces involved in tourism as a transnational phenomenon.
>
> **T**ourism is the product of a confluence of multiple material and imaginary elements that are both subjective and collective and must be placed in specific political, economic, cultural and social contexts.
>
> **T**ourism is a field of negotiation between the sociopolitical, financial, ecological and cultural relations of a globalisation that is understood as a process, not as a final phase.
>
> **T**ourist mobility, as it is at the start of this millennium, charts multiple mobilities and directionalities, including new inbound and outbound countries, that is to say, new tourists and new destinations.
> The emergence of the Asian tourist class and, in particular the increase in Chinese tourist flows at international level, has grown from 10 million in 2000 and 83 million in 2012 to 109 million Chinese tourists travelling the world in 2014.
>
> **T**he concept of touristification refers to the process by which a historical, social and cultural phenomenon becomes of value to the tourism market.
>
> **F**or tourism and its field of activity to exist there is one necessary condition: security.
>
> **T**hrough human mobility the uses and customs of otherness have grown closer and more recognisable.
>
> **T**he change that has had a decisive influence is the emergence of new mobility technologies, real and virtual, that have converted tourism into a movement of greater reach and new global interconnections.

Tourism is the product of a confluence of multiple material and imaginary elements that are both subjective and collective and must be placed in specific political, economic, cultural and social contexts. Any transformation in one of the factors that make up the tourism processes and/or system directly or indirectly modifies the very nature of tourism. Beginning with these transformations, we should ask how they bring about change in the demand for and experience, success or abandonment of a tourist destination as well as how to problematise the way the tourism system takes responsibility for the changes in the constant search for supply diversification.

Without tourists there is no tourism and without destinations there are no travellers. In the tourism setting a multiplication of real and imaginary references converge and in this context the relations, interactions and flows act through trajectories, repertoires and performativities. The changes cannot only be considered a passing from one state to another but as a process in which ways of seeing, doing and being are transformed. To best approach the change in the tourist phenomenon we should begin with mobility, which is an essential element of tourism, and security which is its necessary condition. The question posed here is whether tourism favours or trivialises and depersonalises the cultural aspect of the tourist experience.

Tourist mobility: displacement and connections

These days, being "tourist class" is no longer solely a Western privilege.

Mobility these days refers not only to a physical movement but also to the mobility of ideas and images, which have undergone great change with the new technologies that broaden and accelerate interconnections that are physical as well as imaginary and virtual. In other words, to paraphrase Kevin Hannam, the concept of mobilities encompasses large-scale movements of people, objects, capital and information as well as local processes such as daily transport, movement through public spaces and the routes material things take in day-to-day life (Hannam *et al.*, 2006).

In this sense, it is no surprise that at the Internationale Tourismus-Börse (ITB) held in Berlin on March 3rd 2015, Taleb Rifai, the secretary-general of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), underlined "how the travel and the technological revolutions are shaping our society and how technology is changing the tourism sector". These two "revolutions" are strongly linked: tourism and new mobility technologies mutually benefit from both the conditions for the trip and the time needed for the journey. The transformations of the tourism phenomenon are related to the availability of new types of mobility/transport technologies that make travelling relatively more comfortable. The human species has always moved; mobility – complex, multiple and varied – is part of standard human practice and, despite the possibilities of virtual mobility, people move, cohabit and participate together in what we may call societies in movement.

In the period when a pre-industrial tourism evolved (the 1970s) tourist mobility, absorbed by the capitalist system, became a services industry, articulated and controlled by corporate interests that organised both the supply and demand of tourism. The modernisation of transport along with better social, economic and working conditions put travel within the reach of what, little by little, is being called the "tourist class". From then on, the boom in international tourism has triggered the movement of masses of tourists towards the remotest corners of the planet. No one has been left behind: directly and/or indirectly nearly all societies have first-hand experience of what we call tourism today.

Tourism is a field of negotiation between the sociopolitical, financial, ecological and cultural relations of a globalisation that is understood as a process, not as a final phase. Framing the tourism phenomenon in a new paradigm of global mobilities blurs the binary approaches that, until recently, have represented the conceptualisation of tourism and its symbolic representations: outbound and inbound, being at home and being away, work and pleasure, routine and entertainment, daily life and holidays, hosts and guests, local and international. By themselves these dualities do not have intrinsic cause and effect relationships, rather they complement each other.

New tourists, new destinations?

Often tourism has been written off as a product of imperialism and neocolonialism, as Western industrialised countries were the main sources of international tourists. These days, being "tourist class" is no longer solely a Western privilege. Tourist mobility, as it is at the start of this millennium, traces multiple mobilities and directionalities, including new inbound and outbound countries, that is to say, new tourists and new destinations.

Countries that until a couple of decades ago were exclusively hosts have begun to participate more actively in the outbound tourism market. In this framework, the tourism industry is moving towards Asia, or, better said, Asia has become a thriving economic motor at the centre of the global tourism market. The emergence of the Asian tourist class, in particular the increase in Chinese tourist flows at international level, has grown from 10 million in 2000 to 83 million in 2012 and up to 109 million Chinese tourists travelling the world in 2014. Since 2012, China has been the world's largest outbound market. Arlt Wolfgang Georg, director of the China Outbound Tourism Research Institute, says that Chinese tourists will continue to fill the majority of the tourist destinations, with growing expectations in terms of the provision of services adapted to their preferences and needs.

Tourist mobility is multipolar and multidirectional. New markets emerge and new tourism practices adapt to the fluctuations of the market and to the sociopolitical and cultural tendencies that characterise supply and demand. The tourism phenomenon is a field of negotiations, arrangements and tensions in which the interests at stake relate to its very existence and survival.

Security: a basic condition

For tourism and its field of activity to exist there is one necessary condition: security. "In fact, tourism today is guarantee, certainty, security and a sacrosanct warding off of the unforeseen, so that tourist expeditions increasingly resemble military expeditions" (Canestrini, 2009). Security is one of the main criteria in the evaluation and choice of a tourist's destination, a space that is exempt from real and potential risks. The OMT proposes the drafting of a list of tourist security indices in fields such as health, crime, natural disasters and terrorism with the aim of measuring the real risks of each tourist destination. However, can we speak of tourist security as separate from national security? It is no coincidence that governments and foreign ministries provide recommendations on where to go and where not to go according to political, social and environmental stability.

In some cases, government initiatives exist to solve the specific problems of tourist security. For example, the Chinese government decided to perform a governmental intervention in May 2014 by sending Chinese police officers to Paris with the job of patrolling the main tourist attractions to act as a deterrent to pickpockets. The flow of Chinese tourists to the French capital reached 900,000 in 2013.

Events related to natural disasters, public security, international terrorism and health risks can weaken human mobility, temporarily slow the advance *in crescendo* of tourist mobility and put the tourism market at risk. Insecurity and a degree of political instability can begin the desertion of a tourist destination. Statistics on countries affected by insecurity show how the social unrest in Tunisia, for example, promoted millions of tourists to seek different shores in 2011. The attack at the Bardo museum in Tunis (March 2015) was a heavy additional blow to the Tunisian economy and prompted a drastic fall in tourist flows, bringing tourist activity across the country to a standstill. Recovery depends in part on how replaceable the supply is. If a destination is mainly sun and beach – like Tunis – the supply is redirected to other countries in the Mediterranean, while a "cultural" destination such as Egypt is more difficult to replace with another. In these cases the paralysis may be brief and once the country returns to a degree of political stability the tourists will return.

When do we speak of touristification?

The concept of touristification refers to the process by which a historical, social and cultural phenomenon becomes of value to the tourism market and it is assumed that to achieve this the phenomenon in question must acquire certain characteristics that allow for its commercialisation. These characteristics are negotiated by the actors involved and evolve as the market and sociopolitical and cultural environments impose new tourism practices. As Agustín Santana Talavera (2010) points out "as tourism is a business, the extent to which the effects produced are more or less favourable to the actors on the scene depends on their management". The actors and forces involved in a destination's conversion for tourists leads to talk of touristification processes. In this case the dynamics or, rather, the negotiations, convert functions and values – both social and aesthetic – into speculation products and/or products in the tourism market. For this reason, the concept of touristification – a neologism that is still under debate – is for some a synonym for commodification, while others prefer to speak of aestheticisation.

Tourism is characterised by its fragmented supply and demand and a diversity of actors are involved. The characteristics of the demand adapt to the motivations of the tourists/consumers to whom the tourist supply has to give constant responses, starting with the conversion for tourists of cultural spaces, environments and practices. Currently, in touristification, commodification and culturalisation overlap to satisfy the tourist in their search for experience, authenticity and exoticism. In fact, the tourist never ceases to be a consumer and touristification is the price placed on a desire, it is supply that becomes exotic, an attraction that becomes demand.

To the repertoire of historical, social and cultural touristified phenomena new dimensions are added such as the personalisation of the tourist experience: cities that become places associated with "someone" and lose their geographical reference. Destinations become thematic and "celebrities" –

Touristification is the price placed on a desire, it is supply that becomes exotic, an attraction that becomes demand.

from Gaudí and Einstein to Christian Dior – star on a tourist circuit where they lived, worked and are memorised. Various commemorations shape tourism calendars: for some it is the year of their death, for others of birth. As an example, the place where in 1963 Martin Luther King gave his historic "I have a dream" speech has been turned into a tourist attraction in Washington, D.C. The tourist supply results in a trail of fingerprints that, in turn, needs guides who, more than just informing, must infect the tourist with their excitement and stimulate their admiration. The personalisation and individualisation of the supply puts forward seductive products tailored to the most outlandish motivations so that the experience of travel can be lived, remembered and, above all, recounted.

There is some debate about the various critical visions of the concept of touristification. Is it a falsification and use of resources? Or is it a simplistic argument attempting to place the commercialisation of a consumable attraction for tourism purposes in a mercantile setting? The notion of touristification exchanges a static vision of a historical, social and/or cultural fact for a process that places the tourism phenomenon in a context of continual evolution. If to touristify refers to the configuration of a social process to adapt it to the values of the tourism market, the changes in both this social process and market values must be borne in mind.

Encounter, co-presence or reciprocal anonymity?

The new tourist mobilities reduce distances, revise and redefine the relationship between the near and the far and alter the ways of perceiving "otherness". To what extent is tourism a meeting of people? Or does it, perhaps, remain a depersonalised drawing nearer? Is it solely a fiction that turns countries into destinations, cities into theme parks and people into shows? Is tourism just an experience to be consumed? For John Urry (2002) it is an "intermittent co-presence" in which "[o]ne should investigate not only physical and immediate presence, but also the socialities involved in occasional co-presence, imagined co-presence and virtual co-presence" to understand the combinations and interconnections of proximity and distance.

Defining the tourist is a difficult task. Tourists come from various places with different cultural repertoires and from diverse social classes, not to mention the different expectations they project onto their tourist experience. The points in common are the desire for the differentiation of a status, the freedom to temporarily choose a different life and the availability of a surplus of leisure activities. If we place the encounter between people in this perspective, tourism, as one of the various typologies of human mobility - multiple migrations, diasporas and tourism, among others - allows us to get closer to and analyse what the cultural dimension of the tourism experience means. Through human mobility the uses and customs of otherness have grown closer and more recognisable and the cultural impact of tourist

hosting infrastructures range from Couchsurfing to Airbnb and the renting of tourist apartments. These initiatives provide new areas of opportunity to the markets and tensions to the host communities.

The interpretative models change and it is necessary to manufacture new dreams and new desires if the previous ones have been demystified or have lost their exclusivity, their capacity for differentiation and their power of attraction. Tourist consumption needs new icons of attraction at a time when the distant has become close, and where remote landscapes have lost their exotic exclusivity. Nevertheless, despite greater fragmentation of the tourist supply, alternative tourist demands – exclusive ones – are only valid for a minority. Even if you have chosen your accommodation on Airbnb.com (which on the internet invites you to "join the community") the "other" in the majority of cases is only the person who is present in the landscape or place that the tourist visits. Co-presence could be an environment that for some is exotic, authentic, picturesque and typical while for others it is the site of their daily routine; this is an anonymous reciprocal space where one does not exist for the other. What is more, in contexts of a surplus of anonymity, other things arise – phobias, reactions, conflicts and fears of an "other" who "without the prestige of exoticism is simply a foreigner who is often feared less for being different than for being too close" (Augé, 1998).

> Security is one of the main criteria in the evaluation and choice of a tourist's destination, a space that is exempt from real and potential risks.

mobility stands out for its "capacity to consolidate or confront stereotypes, to favour processes of change in social norms and values and to reevaluate or damage heritage" (Gascón y Cañada, 2005). The tourist experience is neither static nor homogenous, it is part of a performance phenomenon between places and people that blurs co-presence.

The cultural dimension of tourism offers an unlimited catalogue of elements that, apart from attracting, being rejected or shared, are non-transferable: the tourist, Zygmunt Bauman (2003) reminds us "moves on purpose (or so he thinks)...The purpose is new experience; the tourist is a conscious and systematic seeker of experience, of a new and different experience, of the experience of difference and novelty – as the joys of the familiar wear off and cease to allure". We speak of new experiences, even of new tourists in contrast to conventional tourists and those defined as mass tourists. Authenticity, difference and the exotic are still present in the variety of alternative tourist experiences offered: from a destination guaranteeing first-hand experiences of conflict or live drama (*reality tourism*) to a disused oil platform in the North Sea and a prison converted into a luxury hotel.

Where is the hospitality that, in some sense, the encounter with the other involves? Tourist disintermediation and new technologies have encouraged direct contact between visitors and local tourist agents. The possibilities offered by new

Tourism means the free circulation of people and to question it means questioning human mobility itself in all its aspects. This is not to demonise or praise tourism, but to approach the global responsibility of all those involved without allowing ourselves to be seduced by a "tourism monoculture" that is unstable and even vulnerable to multiple external constraints. Nearly all the people and societies in the world are involved directly or indirectly in the changing nature of the tourism phenomenon. Tourism does not only belong to tourists: from the public administrations of the large contemporary metropolises and their urban peripheries via private and corporate interests, to the (dis)advantages experienced by host communties, many of us find ourselves in one way or another face-to-face with the tourism phenomenon.

In this sense, the change that has had a decisive influence is the emergence of new mobility technologies, real and virtual, that have converted tourism into a movement of greater reach and new global interconnections. Beginning with this change, new settings for tourism will receive new passers-by, tourists and visitors. For this reason, it is necessary to problematise the tourism phenomenon not to draw borders, but to offer and share tools that make us responsible first as people and second as tourists.

References

Augé, Marc. *Hacia una antropología de los mundos contemporáneos*. Barcelona: Gedisa. 1998.

Bauman, Zygmunt. "De peregrino a turista, o una breve historia de la identidad" in: Hall, S. and Du Gay, P., *Cuestiones de identidad cultural*. Buenos Aires-Madrid: Amorrortu Editores. 2003.

Canestrini, Duccio. *No disparen contra el turista: Un análisis del turismo como colonización*. Edicions Bellaterra. 2009.

Cohen, E., and Cohen, S. A. "Current sociological theories and issues in tourism". *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(4), 2177-2202. 2012.

Gascón, Jordi and Cañada, Ernest. *Viajar a todo tren: Turismo, desarrollo y sostenibilidad*. Barcelona: Icaria. 2005.

Hannam, Kevin, Sheller, Mimi and Urry, John. "Editorial: Mobilities, immobilities and moorings." *Mobilities* 1.1: 1-22. 2006.

Santana Talavera, Agustín. "Patrimonio cultural: ¿entre diferenciación y cohesión identitaria?" in: Bataillou, C. (ed.) *Tourismes, Patrimoines, Identités, Territoires*. Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, pp. 23-33. 2010.

Urry, John. "Mobility and proximity". *Sociology* 36(2): 255-274. London: Sage Journals. 2002.

The new tourist mobilities reduce distances, revise and redefine the relationship between the near and the far and alter the ways of perceiving "otherness".