



Research Paper

Conscious travel and critical social theory meets destination marketing and management studies: Lessons learned from Croatia



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 May 2014

Accepted 19 December 2014

Available online 3 February 2015

Keywords:

Critical social theory

Place imag(in)ing

Destination marketing and branding

Conscious travelers

Croatia

ABSTRACT

When one dives into the questions of imag(in)ing place and reputation, destination marketing, management and branding, two key clear trajectories of the relevant literature appear to prevail. One is underpinned by critical social theory in order to deconstruct political processes of power behind the formation of place identities, while the other sits on the (post)positivist platform to discuss business issues of destination competitiveness. And the two rarely meet, existing in their respective paradigmatic and ideological bubbles, each expressed in separate vocabularies. Moreover, their scientific division extends beyond academic outlets of journals and education programs. The former hardly ever speaks to the business community for the reasons of its often abstract and/or radical criticality while the latter is rarely aware of its deep “enchantment” within the apparent “neutrality” of discursive market philosophy. In the current context of the alarming state of the world affairs that screams for change in our business practices, this paper will discuss the urgency of the need to bring these two views together. We do this by providing three forms of disclosure: (1) an overview of the two literature camps through a juxtaposition of their specific lexicon and concerns; (2) an insight into the emerging notion of transformative and conscious tourism that demands a “revolution” in our destination marketing and management thinking; and (3) a cumulative, ethnographic, and multi-authored account of authors' field experiences with destination marketing and management practice in Croatia.

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1. Introduction

To speak today about destination marketing, management and branding the most immediate starting point has to be the current disquieting state of the world system. It is becoming increasingly obvious that our current world practices are not sustainable, nor healthy, nor just. As Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011, p. 3) clearly capture: ‘we live in sharply transitional times which may well prove to be one of generational economic and social change during which people, communities and places will need to find alternative ways of living and working’. Indeed, considering the facts and scientific warnings a logical question emerges: where are we going and what are we doing as a single humanity? Let the facts speak for themselves.

The structure of the world's ecosystems has transformed more rapidly in the second half of the 20th century than at any time in recorded human history (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). The world population is growing rapidly, putting more pressure on the earth's resources, there are many oil spilling disasters, we produce

huge amounts of waste and also plastic, causing, for example, “plastic-soup” in the oceans, there is loss of habitat and thanks to our economical growth and development (words suggesting we are going in the right direction) CO₂ levels are increasing and causing global warming (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). When all other life-threatening practices are added in terms of pesticides, poisons and other poisons in our waters and food chains, acidification, etc., it is not surprising that some prestigious scientists are warning us that the face of humanity and Gaia (the Greek name for the Earth) as we know it is quickly disappearing (Lovelock, 2010). In fact, scientists claim that humanity has pushed the earth's biosphere into a new geological era known as the Anthropocene (Crutzen, Steffen, & McNeil, 2007). These detrimental impacts on the body of the earth are inevitably reflected in the state of our social and individual human bodies. For example, according to the OECD (2013) edition Health at a Glance the human consumption of anti-depressants is rising in developed countries (OECD, 2013). The organization's annual report on world health trends found that antidepressant consumption has been on continuous rise in the last few decades. Furthermore, since 2000 it has increased significantly in most (Western) countries with Iceland reporting the highest prescription rates in 2011, followed by Australia, Canada, Denmark and Sweden. While depression as well as cancer have been claimed to be the primary cause behind the steady increase in the global suicide rate since 1950 (World Health Organization,

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2002). Coincidentally, this period also coincides with the global consumption boom which seems also to produce continuous gap between the rich and the poor as Thomas Piketty has shown in his latest groundbreaking study, we live in a world of continuously growing inequality (Piketty, 2014). While the poorest 40% of the world's population account for 5% of global income, the richest 20% account for three-quarters of world income. Yet, longitudinal studies in rich countries of the West show that increasing income (beyond basic needs) does not increase the happiness (Layard, 2005), which clearly explains the increasing consumption of antidepressants. Furthermore, while 1 in 5 of the world's population (800 million) go hungry everyday and round 27–28% of all children in developing countries are estimated to be underweight or starving, more than 300 million people are obese with the estimate to become an epidemic and doubling its figure by 2015 (World Health Organization, 2008).

Consequently, these processes have raised a whole range of futurist scenarios from the “softer” questions of environmental sustainability to the radical argument that humanity is in danger of a collective death (e.g. Brown, 2006; Rooney, Hearn, & Ninan, 2005). The questions of (the earth's) sustainability that have penetrated public discourse only recently are speeding ahead faster than we can comprehend. The problem is that we still frame it within the existing economic and political framework which continues to use rationality, money, and technology as the most dominant measurements of progress and human development. Reflectively, social scientists, economists, political activists, writers, spiritual leaders and many successful entrepreneurs argue that humanity needs (and is actually going through) a major global mind change and a paradigm shift of new values that go beyond materialistic ways of being and doing. Many indicators in all spheres of economy, politics and society point to this direction, yet go beyond this paper to be overall discussed (see Ateljevic, 2009). Yet, one particular trend that is relevant for our discussion here – is the evidence of more conscious consumers and travelers. We will describe and articulate what this potentially may mean for theory and practice of destination branding.

We begin the paper with an overview of two key theoretical trajectories that have informed our discourses on place identities and destination marketing and branding for the last few decades, since those topics have emerged as concerns of tourism and social science scholars. The overview is designed not to dwell into the details of the relevant literature but rather to expose their different terminologies and ideologies that clearly demonstrate their either business studies approaches or critical social science perspectives. Notable exceptions of a few studies that try to bridge the gap between the two are also cited. This overview is followed by a more detailed discussion of the conscious consumers/travelers' emergence that urgently invites the reconciliation between the two camps. Finally, we give an insight into our own work in tourism as consultants, practitioners, and scientific researchers in Croatia.

2. Literature review: we either compete, manage and market, or endlessly deconstruct and criticize?

Theories of place/destination promotion, their imag(in)ing, branding and formation of their identities can be broadly divided into two key schools of thought that have formed our dominant tourism conceptualizations. The first one stands within a (post)positivistic camp that has been primarily concerned with the effectiveness of destination marketing and management practices and chiefly originates from a strand of interdisciplinary business studies within tourism. The second one, on the other hand, comes from multi-disciplinary perspectives of socio-cultural geography, sociology, urban studies, political sciences, cultural studies, post-colonial studies (to name a few), who stand for more critical views of deconstructing

the cultural discourses of tourist destinations in the wider context of social and political processes. Essentially, these two camps represent the historical divide between business and non-business studies in tourism research in general (Tribe, 2006)

2.1. Destination marketing and management trajectory

The first camp had begun to be developed in the late 1970s and 1980s when primary concerns of tourism promotional imagery were focused on the economic interests and advertising (for example, Goodrich, 1978; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) or the social psychology of consumption (for example, Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). What had at the time began to be a more multidisciplinary perspective (from either economics or psychology disciplines) this trajectory slowly grew more into an interdisciplinary marketing and management view which fully boomed in the 1990s, parallel to the growing work in the general field of marketing. Tourism scholars who have been mostly situated within business schools of marketing and management departments naturally focused on what has been their dominant ideology and training (for more detailed discussion on academic entanglements see Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005). In order to serve the dominant system of the market economy, their job has been to assist business studies students and marketing practitioners in their (prospective) jobs of managing tourism business and destinations. Reflectively, as the marketing field has evolved from the concerns of promotion, advertising, and consumer understanding into the evolving field of more complex processes of branding, business studies of tourism have followed in the same vein.

To review such a burgeoning literature goes beyond the objectives of this paper yet one of the most cited works of Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005), serves the point here. Building on the definition of Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), they set the following comprehensive definition of brand marketing activity that (1) supports the creation of a name, symbol, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates a destination; (2) conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; and (3) serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience, all with the purpose of creating an image that influences consumers' decisions to visit the destination in question, as opposed to an alternative one. This explains why the concept of branding is often associated with the term “competitive identity”. To create such an identity, destinations need something special that truly represents them and that is relevant and attractive to tourists.

Obviously, branding has built on the earlier research of tourism imagery, thus it is often concerned with the relationship between the image and the brand in terms of their approach and conceptual differences with an ultimate aim to attract and retain consumers. Thus, for example Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal (2006) investigate the relationship between the brand of destination image and the brand of destination personality. For the purpose of exploring the brand of personality, the study adapted the scale of the product and reduced it to three elements: sincerity, excitement, and companionship while the scale of destination image was observed through emotionality and accessibility. The authors emphasize that their research has shown that these two concepts are closely linked, which confirmed previous studies of Plummer (1985) and Patterson (1999). They also stress that the brand of image is a more comprehensive concept while the brand of personality has more emotional components. Studies that look at the relations and differences between the concepts of image and brand (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Konecnik Ruzzier, 2010; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Nikolova & Hassan, 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011) often start from the perspective of tourists. Observing the personality of the brand, and which dimensions help to create it, it is believed that consumers tend to choose destinations that reflect their personal characteristics. Thus Ekinci

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