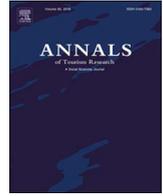


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The political economy of tourism development: A critical review

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews varying theoretical approaches in political economy and their application to the analysis of tourism development. It examines the shifting focus of enquiry and traces the evolution of the political economy of tourism from an earlier generation of predominantly technical, empirically-driven analyses of tourism's contribution to economic development through to the various strands of development theory that have influenced and which continue to shape critical scholarship in the political economy of tourism. Particular emphasis is given to recent theoretical advances in which the application of cultural political economy and Marxian thinking herald a promising future for the political economy of tourism.

Introduction

The study of tourism development has been characterised by a troubled dialectic between applied studies of tourism's contribution to economic development and theoretically-informed political economy analyses. While there are signs of an emerging sub-discipline in the political economy of tourism (Bianchi, 2015; Clancy, 1999; Hazbun, 2008; Mosedale, 2011; Steiner, 2006; Williams, 2004) the level of theoretical engagement remains weak. The deficit notwithstanding, recent years have witnessed the steady growth of critical political economy approaches to tourism development underpinned by increasingly diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives (Mosedale, 2011, 2016). This paper will not however endeavour to provide a comprehensive account of the theoretical foundations and diverse applications of each of these perspectives. Rather, it commences with a brief reflection on the meaning of political economy and considers the reasons for its weak and inconsistent application in the study of tourism development. The remainder of the paper will appraise the major theoretical developments in the political economy of tourism and their shifting foci as well as identifying significant areas for future intellectual enquiry and research.

Political economy

Political economy comprises the study of the socio-economic forces and power relations that are constituted in the process of the production of commodities for the market and the divisions, conflicts and inequalities that arise from this. The roots of classical political economy are closely bound up with the tumultuous changes associated with the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism in Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The founding thinkers of classical political economy such as Adam Smith (1723–1790), David Ricardo (1772–1823) and J. S. Mill (1806–1873) highlighted the profound impact of capitalism on the social organisation of industrial societies. Their works transformed our understanding of the source of value in industrialising capitalist societies and how it could be enhanced through the extension of private property and productive labour rather than the accumulation of land (Mosco, 1996: 40–42). Later, Marx (1818–1883) and Engels (1820–1895) reconfigured the focus of political

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economy, challenging the view that capitalism is part of the ‘natural order of things’ by exposing the class relations of power and exploitation that were intrinsic to the processes of capitalist commodity production.

From the outset, political economists have endeavoured to take account of the complex and variable economic, political, social, technological and cultural forces which shape the organisation and dynamics of domestic and international economies (Gilpin, 2001: 40). Often however, political economy and economics can appear barely indistinguishable. The obfuscation of the economy’s inherently political nature is in large part the legacy of neoclassical theory and its influence in shaping the ‘science’ of modern economics. Neo-classical political economy was inspired by the work of ‘marginalists’ such as Leon Walras (1834–1910) and William Stanley Jevons (1835–1882), whose ideas reshaped what was then understood as classical political economy for which the source of value was to be found in productive labour, into an abstract science based on methodological individualism and rigorous mathematical principles (Dunn, 2009: 15). Alfred Marshall (1842–1924) later consolidated the new science of economics into the study of individuals and firms pursuing their rational ‘self-interest’ in free functioning markets (Larrain, 1989: 7).

The allegedly ‘value-neutral’ stance of neoclassical theory obscures the political nature of markets and is a presupposition that remains integral to the ideology of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism. The idea that the market is merely a rational instrument for allocating resources through price signals is in itself a deeply ideological approach. It is one that isolates markets and human beings from their social and political context and is thus blind to the manner in which production and distribution are constituted out of the dialectics of class struggle and inequalities of power (Mason, 2015: 161–2). And finally, to construe political economy as simply a technical question concerned with how to enhance productivity and growth ignores the rich and equally significant contribution of anthropology and sociology to our understanding of how societies come to organise their economic affairs and to what end (Wolf, 1982).

(Re)locating the political economy of tourism

In spite of the undoubted significance of tourism in the national accounts of many economies and global trade, research into tourism development has until recently remained largely disconnected from questions of political economy (Clancy, 1999; Steiner, 2006). This is in marked contrast to the economics of tourism (see Eadington & Redman, 1991) and indeed, other domains of tourism social science (see Dann & Cohen, 1991; Matthews & Richter, 1991; Nash & Smith, 1991; Richter, 1983). Part of the explanation for this may lie in the fact that the concerns of political economy have to some extent been subsumed into the anthropology and sociology of tourism, as well as tourism policy, planning and sustainability.

Although the ‘idea of sustainability in tourism’ has been referred to in terms of a ‘new paradigm’ (Saarinen, 2006: 1123), it in fact encompasses a multitude of different theoretical perspectives. This has resulted in a great deal of theoretical inconsistency and conceptual vagueness together with a lack of substantive engagement with the ‘analysis of wider structural conditions’ (Steiner, 2006: 165). An over-riding pragmatism meant that sustainable tourism has often been associated with the advocacy of small-scale locally-owned ‘alternatives’ to the allegedly destructive forces of ‘imperialistic’ mass tourism (see Butler, 1992: 37–40). Equally, sustainable tourism thinking has often been overshadowed by concerns to do with the ‘viability of the tourism industry’ rather than rigorous analysis of its developmental forms and distributional outcomes (Holden, 2008: 158).

While the advocacy of small-scale ‘community-based’ forms of tourism (see Brohman, 1996) often fell short of full-blown political economy analysis, such approaches nonetheless contained echoes of Schumacher’s (1974) ‘small is beautiful’ and green critiques of ‘developmentalism’ espoused by Friberg and Hettne (1985) (cited in Adams, 1990: 70–71). Furthermore, they created a platform for the application of such concepts as the environmental limits to growth, power and social equity to the analysis of the use and organisation of natural resources for tourism, as evidenced by recent work in the political ecology of tourism (Cole, 2012; Cole & Ferguson, 2015; Nepal and Saarinen, 2013; Stonich, 1998).

Arguably, a significant contribution to the lack of theoretical development in the political of tourism lies can be attributed to the lack of analytical clarity and long-running disagreements regarding the precise parameters and industrial configurations of the ‘tourism industries’ themselves (see D’Hauteserre, 2006; Judd, 2006; Leiper, 2008). Such conceptual vagueness has been compounded by a the predominance of analyses that define tourism primarily in relation to consumption (Judd, 2006: 324). Coupled with a tendency to foreground issues of scale (i.e., ‘mass’ vs ‘alternative’ tourism) over the economic and political relations of power (see Rodenburg, 1980; Jenkins, 1982), this has diverted consistent analytical focus on the forces of accumulation and configurations of class and institutional power that shape the structures and distributional outcomes of tourism development.

Further occluding the precise focus of political economy analysis in tourism is the ‘kaleidoscopic character of tourism capitalism’ (Gibson, 2009: 529), and the concomitant difficulty of exerting ‘property rights over tourism experiences’ (Williams, 2004: 62). Despite considerable corporate concentration in key tourism and hospitality subindustries, notably in international tour operations, airlines and hotel chains, the political economy of tourism comprises a multitude of firms of varying size, scope and ownership. That being said, Britton (1991: 451–2) highlighted the reluctance of scholars to recognise the ‘capitalistic nature’ of tourism and to ‘conceptualise fully its role in capital accumulation’. More recently, critical tourism analysts have challenged what they argue is the predominance of applied business perspectives and scientific positivism in tourism research (Pritchard & Morgan, 2007). Finally, one could argue that tourism’s uniquely privileged position within the framework of the United Nations system through the UNWTO (see Ferguson, 2007), and its association with discourses of peace, conservation and sustainability, has arguably reinforced a benign view of tourism, to some extent hindering the emergence of critical theoretical perspectives on tourism development.

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