Ethnography on tourist spaces

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Abstract: Tourism-related research, despite the great number of books and studies, seems to face one of its worst epistemological crises. At some extent, scholars have serious difficulties to define what tourism means. Though anthropology was the discipline more prone to tourism, as it is, a rite of passage, the current state of indiscipline claimed by Tribe, de Escalona and Korstanje as well as the autonomy of an international academy is more oriented to marketing than to science, are some of the problems tourism research faces today (Tribe, 1997, 2010; Korstanje, 2010; de Escalona, 2015). In this difficult context, Nogues Pedregal provides readers with a masterful ethnography which serves to interpret, understand and decipher the shifts over territory once tourism is adapted as a main activity. Though a lot has been written on the effects of tourism, this seminal book describes with accuracy how these transformations are gradually happening.

Keywords: epistemology of tourism; tourism; methodologies.


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1 Introduction

Despite of the abundant literature and the advance of tourism-related research, a deep epistemological crisis emerged because of the fragmentation of produced-knowledge, which result misleading notions of what tourism means. Over recent years, this point was adamantly explored by some voices as Tribe, Muñoz, de Escalona, and Korstanje. The problem seems to be aggravated by the indifference of the International Academy for the Study of Tourism, in shedding light on the epistemological problems researchers often face in their tasks (Tribe, 1997, 2010; Korstanje, 2010; de Escalona, 2015). In this difficult context, Nogues Pedregal’s book one more time exhibits a fertile ground to think seriously in the fields of tourism research. Discussing the role played by ethnographers,
at time of entering in the fields to understand in what way tourism affects not only daily life of natives but their political scaffolding, Nogues Pedregal reminds that over decade’s tourists and anthropologists – though considered travellers – were playing two contrasting roles. At some extent, touring was strongly associated to escapement or the maximisation of pleasure while ethnographers signalled to the needs of discovery.

As this backdrop, one might question from the angle of natives, both anthropologists and tourists are strangers. Organised in six interesting chapters, this book offers a study case based on Zahara de los Atunes, Spain.

The first chapter of this valuable project dissects the conceptual pillars of ethnography from its original adoption by the founding parents of anthropology. The dichotomy was given by the needs of ‘being there’ together natives to validate not only what they said, but their practices, meaning and rituals. When ethnographers usually interrogate to aborigines why they perform some ritual, they replied, because that way our ancestors did. In this respect, any fieldwork is destined to fail without a dense-description of involving culture. As a complex activity, tourism should be studied and understood in its intersection with other institutions in situ. It is unfortunate that in tourism fields, researchers give further credits to what tourists said in applied questionnaires or interviewees. This represents a methodological obstacle for fieldworker simply because peoples sometimes lie or even are unfamiliar with real reasons of their behaviours. Nogues Pedregal reminds how important ethnography, which is something else than asking, in tourism fields is. The second chapter, complementarily, is centred on the ethnography conducted in Zahara de los Atunes, Andalucia Spain. Methodologically speaking, he combines diverse approaches to re-construct his object, alternating functionalist structural viewpoints with micro-social insights to expand the current performance of activities as they are framed in the territory. Representing a well achieved chapter orienting the discussion to a much deeper process of acculturation, Zahara’s ethnography encompasses a deep description about stakeholders’ interaction as well as the evolution of their respective interests. International tourist demands not only changed the morphology of site, but also introduced some shifts in the native customs, many of them adapted to the tourist-gaze. Zahara was interpellated by newcomers situating an already-established group, known as Los de Siempre, which situates as a privileged class. The two great families in Zahara have benefited from agricultural sector, tourism and real-estate investments, however, no less true is that the community passed from agriculture to a capitalised economy based on services and tourist consumption. While the investment of capital owners in this study-case excluded some groups, contradicting specialised literature, local traditional families obtained substantial profits and benefits from the adoption of tourism. As Nogues Pedregal put it, pressing local actors to reformulate their strategies and tactics of adaptation, the conflict delineated the boundaries between classic families and a new emergent class, petite bourgeoisie families. The question whether the meaning of prestige was associated to tradition was pitted against the secular conspicuous consumption accelerated by modern tourism. Third chapter explores the transformation of Zahara as a tourist product, or a commodity ready to be consumed by a much broader European demand. To what extent, tourism produces substantial territorial changes for tourism-receiving communities, as well as the problems native should overcome during the transformation are the common-thread argument of this project.
Doubtless, Nogues Padregal calls, the adoption of tourism as a continuation of a modern neo-colonialism, since it co-produces a sense of dependency between the peripheral farms and the central urban cities. In that way, this lack of autonomy sets the pace to a new facet where more globalised decentralised practices as eco-tourism or rural tourism engage with globalised forces of consumption. A last stage of stability not only reduces the conflict among classes, but also returns to a balanced state of equilibrium. Basically, this seminal book shows how tourism evolves through the formulation of contrasting forces, which combines the quest for authenticity with the commoditisation of culture. It is not accident to assume there is a great difference between the tourist space, which is refurbished to produce an aura of exemplary, from the anthropological place, where authority and kinship prevail ingrained in tradition. Last but not least, fourth and fifth chapters discuss in detail the problems and benefits in the host and guest encounter as well as the cultural changes observed during his fieldwork. Dotted of a vast trajectory in ethnographies Nogues Padregal crystallises his experience in this book, which poses as a must-read project for tourism-students, ethnographers, practitioners and social scientist interested by the effects of acculturation prompted by modern tourism. Far from being a profitable industry, Noguès Padregal acknowledges that tourism corresponds with a ‘social institution’ articulated to emulate a return to a pure and authentic ‘lost paradise’.

References