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Research Note

Producing nature for tourism: A political ecology angle

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Given the importance of 'nature' for tourism, the long neglect of political ecology's potential for tourism studies is surprising. As one of political ecology's most cited scholars recently put it: "[…] the political ecology of tourism has received the most cursory treatment" (Blaikie, 2016: xi). With some recent journal papers and two large edited volumes connecting political ecology and tourism, this situation is showing clear signs of change (Jönsson, 2016; Mostafanezhad, Norum, Shelton, & Thompson-Carr, 2016; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016; Rainer, 2016). While the issues discussed by this body of literature are broad, I argue that insufficient attention has been paid – both theoretically and empirically – to the production of nature for leisure and tourism, and particularly to its key role in increasing land value and speculating on future returns. This research note aims to show why a stronger focus on the production of nature holds potential for further developing a political ecology of tourism.

Publications connecting political ecology and tourism have hardly ever referred to Smith's production of nature thesis (Smith, 2007, 2008). At first glance, this might not really be surprising, as the 'nature' for tourism consumption is frequently represented and marketed as idyllic and pristine, awaiting the tourist in a state of quasi unspoiltness.[1] Nevertheless, as political ecologists have observed, these landscapes have frequently been thoroughly transformed and reordered – not only discursively but also, and crucially, materially – in order to fit tourists' expectations of nature (e.g. Bunce, 2008; Jönsson, 2016; Rainer, 2016). Following Smith (2007), I am not arguing that nature is infinitely malleable by referring to the production of nature. Preexisting landscapes and physical preconditions can restrain the production process (e.g. in the case of little water availability in an area in which a golf course is planned) or enable it (e.g. in the case of a landscape characterized by slopes and dunes, which the golf course architect can integrate into its landscape design). Nevertheless, it is through the process of developing the golf course that physical preconditions (in many cases formerly unexploited or even considered worthless) are transformed, and a desirable and desired landscape – a 'natural resource' for tourism and leisure – is produced. In the context of tourism studies, stressing this active production of nature offers the potential to gain new insights, as the 'naturalness' of tourism and leisure landscapes is generally even more taken for granted than in the case of other economic activities (Franklin & Crang, 2001: 16–17).

Working on the assumption, that "[…] tourism has been a decisive force in the extension and intensification of neoliberalism" (Duffy, 2016: xvii), I argue that producing nature for tourism and leisure has become a crucial financial investment option. The production of nature (e.g. lagoons, lakes, dunes, open green spaces, forests, golf courses, beaches, nature reserves) for large upscale leisure and tourist complexes has become a strategy for investors looking for opportunities to reproduce global surplus capital. In this sense, tourism and leisure natures are the material expression of what Harvey calls a spatial fix, capital's geographical expansion

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[1] Of course, at the same time, tourists desire nature(s) to be unspoilt and pristine.

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"through fixing investments spatially, embedding them in the land, to create an entirely new landscape […] for capital accumulation" (Harvey, 2001: 28). Particularly in peripheral rural areas, major profits are expected (and frequently extracted) from extraordinary increases in land prices. The production of leisure natures to make tourist resorts fit "[…] temporarily deterritorialized and significantly globalized visions of the rural" (McCarthy, 2008: 131) is a prerequisite for being able to speculate on future returns from the value of the land holdings. Frequently, the simple announcement of the production of upscale leisure developments already drives land prices up. Hence, the development of upscale tourist resorts is centrally about speculative real estate investment.

The production of nature *makes* land/real estate a particularly attractive asset class. An important part of the (expectations regarding) land price increases is directly linked to the production of nature. It is the promise that leisure and tourist resorts (will) fit a global clientele's expectation of an upscale environment that drives property prices up. Before the start and during the early periods of construction, returns on investments can be particularly high, as investors (e.g. through buying a stake in the project or through acquiring land plots inside of those resorts) have to imagine how landscapes will look like and believe in the developers' master plans and the success of the project, which is riskier and thus also more profitable than investing in later periods of construction (Rainer, 2016: 113). Following Smith (2007), the production of upscale leisure nature can be seen as an accumulation strategy in its own right, building on the potential for subsequent rent extraction and value appropriation.[2]

Particularly in the Global South, the growth of tourism is, to a large extent, based on increasing investments in large-scale tourist complexes. As Zoomers (2010: 438–439) stresses, the rapidly rising investments in large resorts can be seen as an important driver for the current global land grab. Upscale resorts provide a range of opportunities for investors due to the (possible) interconnections of tourism, leisure, temporary and permanent migration, and financial speculation. The blurring of boundaries with the rapidly growing phenomenon of amenity migration become obvious. Cañada (2010: 11), for example, speaks of a "touristic residentialization" in Central America, one of the regions where the number of large resorts has rapidly increased.

Through lax environmental regulations and few controls, opportunities for land privatization, provision of infrastructure, allocation of soft credits, and tax benefits for large investments, states frequently work as a facilitator for upscale resort development. The potential of employment generation is stressed, whereas its role in deepening uneven development (Smith, 2008) – particularly through rapidly increasing land and property values in destinations forcing those who cannot afford them to leave – is ignored. One could argue that uneven development is a desired component of upscale tourism and leisure projects, as they are designed to mark social distinction. The 'natural landscapes' inside these resorts, which are frequently produced through profound material transformations and demand intensive maintenance work, play an important role in (re-)producing class relations. Their use is exclusive and highly exclusionary, accentuating socio-ecological inequalities.

At least since Britton's (1991) seminal paper, the importance of the tourism-related land market is not new to tourism scholars. Nevertheless, the increasingly financially driven upscale leisure and tourism development – for which, as I have shown, the production of nature plays a pivotal role – has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. There is great potential for further connecting of tourism and political ecological analysis to provide a more fine-grained picture of how, why, and with what effects nature is produced for tourism in general and for upscale tourism and leisure in particular.

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[2] Andreucci, García-Lamarca, Wedekind, & Swyngedouw (2017) have recently highlighted the under-appreciated significance of rent for political ecological analysis and have stressed that Smith's production of nature thesis primarily relates to natures produced for rent extraction. The production of tourism natures is an excellent example for this point.