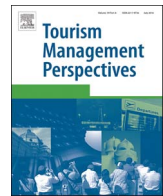




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Opinion Piece

Tourism governance and policy: Whither justice?

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ABSTRACT

This *Critical Opinion* discusses some themes and issues related to governance and policy in tourism. Shifts in modes of governance are described, along with some key concerns related to mobilities and hyper-neoliberalism. The paper raises the question of what constitutes good governance in the context of good tourism (e.g., sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, pro-poor tourism). Drawing on case research as well as theoretical influences, it forwards for future consideration justice as a key principle for good governance and policy in tourism. The importance of cultural values, and of addressing the historical context are noted. The *Critical Opinion* also calls on researchers to engage with diverse theoretical perspectives and research methodologies that can help facilitate “just governance” to tourism.

1. Brave New World?

It's a brave new world. The new century ushered in the global financial crisis of 2008, rising atmospheric carbon dioxide, sea levels, extreme weather disasters and climate refugees (but hey, there's “Last Chance Tourism” to profit from), along with escalating domestic and international terrorism. Xenophobia is on the rise too; social rights, gender rights, and human rights are under threat, as is freedom of movement—borders are slamming shut with “Brexit” and “America First”. Our students look to our research efforts and to us for guidance, it's their brave new world that we've fostered with our interests and beliefs driving tourism studies (personal contributions to consumer culture and climate change notwithstanding). Our dreams were big, our hearts were hopeful. Surely, noble global agendas like Millennium Development Goals (now expired and replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the broccoli forest of newly minted sustainability principles being forwarded by local to regional and supranational institutions would help guide the rapid growth and development of tourism towards “good tourism” (for the purpose of this discussion, envision this as inclusive of sustainable tourism, responsible tourism and pro-poor tourism approaches).¹ New governance forms, accreditation and certification programs, (mostly voluntary, of course) and a plethora of indicators have arisen but how well have these succeeded in the fragmented, growing complexity of the physical and virtual spaces in which tourism is imbricated? How well can we

evaluate the effectiveness of policy instruments and governance modes oriented to, for instance, community well-being (a goal of responsible/sustainable tourism)? Especially in this strange new world. Neoliberalized globalization marches on, aided by mobilities of capital, labor, finance, and technological revolutions. Governance has turned mobile, fled, morphed into...?

We speak quickly to share our thoughts and experiences, offering a partial perspective, sharing a few thoughts and themes we believe are important to the above questions. We appear to have failed to address some immense challenges, and though discourses are far from “value-neutral”, much of our writing on tourism policy, planning and governance has also failed to clearly show our own “positionality” (our value-laden standpoints). But, dear reader, not all of you stand accused as I do (mea culpa), and please don't implicate my co-author (our individual positionality arises from time to time here). Let's venture all together to explore our current state and whither the future of governance and policy—with apologies to all we've learned from and cannot acknowledge in this word constrained, reference limited, Opinion piece.

2. Tourism governance: From hopeful beginnings to...?

Academics awoke to the challenge of tourism “impacts” in the 1970s as critiques of mass tourism, neocolonialism and dependency spurred calls of “alternative tourism” and “responsible tourism.” Environmental

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¹ Poverty alleviation is the first goal on the SDGE list after all, see: <http://una-gp.org/the-sustainable-development-goals-2015-2030/>. Accessed Sept. 27, 2017.

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concerns weighed heavily in the 1980s; the 1990s ushered in further social concerns and *community*, almost forgotten in the grand institutional discourse of “sustainable tourism”, is fortunately retrieved but besieged by a maelstrom of indicators for “community-based tourism” (CBT). So, what constitutes “good governance” for sustainable tourism/responsible tourism (limiting our discussion here to these as approaches representing “good tourism”)? A few themes that arise in the literature and have troubled us in our own research may be helpful here:

- As top-down planning and policy making came under fire from different sources in both the private and public sectors, devolution of power and responsibility and new modes of governance have been charted by policy scholars tracing shifts from traditional hierarchies and markets towards governance via multi-stakeholder, collaborative “networks” and by “communities” (see [Bramwell & Lane, 2011](#); [Hall, 2012](#); [Dredge, 2010](#); [Jenkins & Dredge, 2016](#)). The term governance, traditionally reserved for government, has morphed along the way to being used by business and other sectors and institutions. Definitions of governance vary but how the state coordinates socio-economic systems to achieve sustainable tourism and how it relates to other policy actors in the process is critically important to understand. It involves allocating resources, deciding on policy and goals, delivering services, regulating and facilitating social action and social order.² Governance and tourism are inextricably imbricated in the wider governance context of economic development, sustainability, and social well-being. How can any aspect of tourism be addressed effectively by researchers without understanding the wider sociopolitical landscape of governance in which tourism, at all levels, is enmeshed? “Tailored and effective governance” is key to sustainable tourism ([Bramwell & Lane, 2011](#), p. 411). What constitutes “effective” in this brave new world? How well are various mechanisms, processes and institutions working towards, for instance, the well-being of communities, residents, destinations, among other priorities of sustainable tourism?
- A discouraging, consistent theme evident in the research literature on tourism governance is how it seems to have succumbed overall to an accelerated form of neoliberal capitalistic interests, at the macro-, meso- and local levels. [Amore and Hall \(2017\)](#) discuss the ‘hal- lowing out’ of regional authorities since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and their examination of national and urban development strategies reveal market-driven agendas exemplifying such *hyperneoliberalism*. [Moscardo’s \(2011\)](#) research on social representations in tourism planning reveals power in tourism planning was concentrated amidst a small number of stakeholders, oriented to corporatist economic interests, prioritizing efficiency, growth and profit, rather than the needs of destination residents. Policy scholar Dianne Dredge’s extensive research raises many challenges to governance in different domains. She identifies a neoliberal version of “public interest” in a case study of the Queensland State government’s actions on the Gold Coast, Australia, where little attention was paid to understand or operationalize the notion of public interest, specifically local community interests ([Dredge, 2010](#)). Small wins and successful resistance offer hope (see, for example, [Jenkins & Dredge, 2016](#)), but the picture looks bleak overall, particularly with respect to the public sector’s role in effective tourism governance.
- It is troubling then to see far too little attention to legislation and regulation of tourism. At the global level, the UN’s Tourism Bill of Rights and The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism offers ethical

guidelines but as critics point out these neoliberal global governance institutions have little *regulatory* force. At the local and business level, industry discourses of voluntary certification programs and self-governance preferences prevail; they may be aided by policy instruments supporting public-private partnerships and networks. Meanwhile, human rights and other social rights (as well as animal welfare and rights) are at increased risk as governance becomes increasingly challenged in this globally mobile landscape. What, then, constitutes good governance in a local-global tourism system that appears to lack sufficient regulation and oversight? Of course you’ll ask, what do y’all (a great Texas slang) mean by good governance? See footnotes 3 and 4 but let us think further as to what this means in the context of good governance for “good tourism.”³⁴

- Good governance is both a goal and a means, but the focus has tended to be on means rather than the ends, [Rodrik \(2008\)](#) argues. The same critique applies to tourism governance and policy making. Collaborative and participatory processes for CBT are framed as a means to some other end, e.g., to resolve conflict, get input, control, empowerment to benefit from tourism, education and learning, important for good governance, but still a means. It may be valuable to re-envision such processes for resident participation, multi-stakeholder collaborative and communicative planning processes, as an end rather than simply as a means in the various modes of tourism governance and policy planning (see [Hall, 2012](#), for example). Facilitating democracy, civic society and global citizenship through direct resident and tourist engagement in destination governance and policy making issues (locally and globally!) is a vitally important *goal* of good governance in tourism—a point that becomes clearer further below, read onwards...
- Setting out clear goals for tourism governance and policy making is crucial (it’s a basic planning principle), but neither participatory processes nor goal setting is sufficient. These must be coupled with a sensitive historical and cultural lens (avoid being criticized for exercising Anglo-Saxon, colonial, or imperialist values!). [Schroeder’s \(2015\)](#) study of the popular concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan demonstrates the importance of setting clear policy goals, but these, along with policy instruments for collaborative governance were simply inadequate; effective implementation of GNH principles in tourism occurred due to synergies with cultural values of Buddhism among those who were tasked with implementing GNH through various policy instruments. But intangibles such as cultural values can be easily omitted in planning and decision making, particularly where evaluation is driven by scientific, measurable, managerial tools. And “public interest” must take account of diverse groups and interests, some of which may be historically marginalized or disempowered. Our study of tourism in Quintana Roo, Mexico, over the years taught us much about the importance of understanding historically embedded sociocultural influences. We share this briefly below to set our abstract musings concretely in practice.
- Tourism governance in Quintana Roo is arranged to favor the private industry and the government. As articulated in Quintana Roo’s Tourism Legislation, Chapter II⁵, tourism policy and decision

² The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997), for instance, describes governance as:

the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences”.

³ The notion of “good governance” generally includes the following attributes: transparency, effective government (e.g., its ability to formulate and implement sound policies, reform structures, manage resources, facilitate economic and social well-being, rule of law, lack of corruption, citizen voice and participation ([Rodrik, 2008](#)).

⁴ The World Bank defines governance as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development” and good governance as synonymous to with “sound development management” ([World Bank, 1992:2](#)). Note, however, that consideration of human rights and social rights in addition to economic and political rights has been made clearer in various iterations over time, becoming a greater priority.

⁵ State tourism policy, as well as the execution of tourism strategies and action plans in the state is the responsibility of the Secretariat of Tourism of Quintana Roo (SEDETUR). Quintana Roo’s Tourism Law is available at <http://cancun.gob.mx/transparencia/files/>

making is done in coordination and consultation with a tourism Advisory Council presided by the state governor and integrated by members he/she appoints, which can include the Secretary of Tourism, town mayors, hoteliers, and representatives of key tourism private business (restaurants, tour operators, and transportation companies). Unless they are large business owners, local residents have little say in advisory councils; there are no formal mechanisms established for consulting and/or involving local communities in tourism decision-making at the municipal or state level (Quintana Roo's Tourism Legislation, Chapter II). Non-for-profit organizations as well as local social and cultural grassroots groups and the academia "can be invited" to express their opinions and concerns about tourism but are not granted voting rights. These are reserved for representatives from the private industry. Indigenous Maya people are excluded from decision-making through institutional arrangements that have denied them formal representation, voting rights, and meaningful consultation through which they can exert influence. Onsite research revealed narratives of tourism government officials that linked this political marginalization to cultural racism and ethnic prejudice against the Maya, who are deemed as inferior and incapable of participating in tourism governance.

- As you can imagine, diving into this research as co-author Blanca did as a graduate student, took courage and conviction, daring to ask uncomfortable questions to public and private sector officials, learning from local residents over time the complexity of marginalization and subjection in this study domain. She cared about their well-being.
- We have learned, separately and together, that justice and equality, democracy and difference, are important considerations for good governance and policy action. Theoretical inspiration came from a number of sources, including planning theorist Susan Fainstein. She argues for justice to be first principle for evaluating public policy effectiveness; justice is "a primary goal for urban policy" (Fainstein, 2017: 13). Set in a western liberal pluralistic context, justice in her 'just city' incorporates values of democracy, diversity and equity (*ibid*). Much more work is needed to understand what justice means in the context of tourism governance and Quintana Roo, although the case appears to broadly corroborate the three values she forwards (see also Jamal & Camargo, 2014, and see Fainstein, 2017, for her description of these values). For now, perhaps we can offer a broad, tentative proposition: Identifying justice principles appropriate to the social and political context can help to guide governance and evaluate public policy effectiveness in tourism destinations.

3. Venturing forth in research and practice

A short "Opinion" piece can hardly allow us to ground our comments and thoughts in well-supported arguments, but a few concerns and considerations have been offered as we progress into the post-apocalyptic unknowns of this century. While the literature had advanced significantly in addressing process related aspects and identifying various governance typologies and communicative and collaborative planning approaches, etc., much more is needed. A few thoughts are offered below with hope and trepidation:

- (i) Decontextualized, ahistorical research is so passé—avoid it. Tourism and governance are embedded in a wider societal domain spatially and temporally. Institutional structures that govern the distribution, use and conservation of tourism related goods are shaped by sociopolitical and cultural values which are often set in complex histories. The interests and values of policy actors and

other stakeholder in tourism need to be identified, with careful attention to intangible aspects such as cultural values and institutionally embedded injustices. The problematic notion of "public interest" has become even more complicated in the diverse, cosmopolitan, mobile, sociopolitical landscape in which climate change and other sustainability and societal issues are playing out today. Understanding social processes and cultural values, with attentiveness to diversity and difference is crucial.

- (ii) One hopeful direction is to explore the potential of justice as a key principle of good governance and for evaluating policy action in tourism. We mentioned above that planning theorist Susan Fainstein identified democracy, diversity and equity as three important values for "just" governance (Fainstein, 2017). There is merit in exploring the role of justice to guide good governance and policies in tourism, as the Quintana Roo case suggests. But it is worrisome to see how little justice is studied in tourism studies. A Scopus search we conducted in June (2017) for tourism and hospitality articles that use justice in their title led to 35 academic works (65% published after 2015) that range in scope from global justice, destination justice, to organizational justice. A second Scopus search on 'tourism governance', "destination governance" and justice related key words (e.g. equity, rights, discrimination, exclusion) conducted in September 2017 also revealed 35 articles. Equity was a clear dimension here, plus a number of descriptive case studies identify and discuss inequalities, exploitation, domination, disempowerment, or racism. However, very few studies have ventured into theory building and knowledge gaps are evident among researchers and reviewers alike (yes, yes, mea culpa!).
- (iii) Reaching into the rich theoretical literature in ethics, political philosophy, gender and feminist studies, urban planning, critical theory, geography and sociology (among others), can help to understand diverse governance, justice and ethical perspectives such as utilitarianism in government policy, rights under liberal pluralism, political economy and inequality, to name a few. It can also sensitize us (and reviewers!) to understanding the importance of defining or describing carefully terms such as governance and justice. Justice is highly complex and means different things to different people. For some, it is to do with rights and duties, the distribution of income, wealth and opportunities, principles of fairness, equality, liberty, etc. For others, it is about power, for yet others it is about social well-being and building a good society (note the implications for governance and policy here).
- (iv) It takes courage and willingness to engage in critical research on difficult issues such as exclusion of local people from tourism policy and decision-making, dominant neoliberal discourses and power structures in the political economy of tourism, inequities and discrimination related to ethnic minorities, immigrant workers, people with disabilities, LGTB tourists and employees, among others. How willing are we step outside our comfort zone to engage in such inquiry? Would you consider research methodologies that engage with practice, e.g., community service learning, participatory action research that can engage directly with policy instruments, networks, communities, before we lose our desktops to the flood waters lapping at our feet, or our social rights to live and travel safely and freely?

Lest we forget our own values and positionality in the politics of tourism research, metrics and promotions interests, an ethical responsibility lies upon us here too. What we as researchers believe about tourism, its goals, operations and intended outcomes, how it ought to be governed, our personal and political values, and the way these shape our research also need to be critically analyzed, made explicit and open to be challenged. What do we choose to include/exclude in our (always partial) research lens and methodologies, based on our theoretical influences, sociocultural and political values? Perhaps you see our partial view, our concerns and our interest in the cause of *just governance*, so we

(footnote continued)

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shall leave it here, for now!

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