

Briefing paper - Tourism Degrowth

Facilitation: Filka Sekulova, ICTA UAB, Research&Degrowth (fisekulova@gmail.com)

1. Global tourism: environmental and social trends and impacts

When critically reviewing trends in global growth in tourism, the slogan of degrowth (Demaria et al. 2013) inevitably comes to mind. Tourism is a trillion-dollar industry, with arrivals/receipts growing at an annual of 3–5%, outperforming even international trade with economic gains of the sector blowing up to US\$1.2 trillion in 2016 (Travel & Tourism 2017, UNWTO 2016). The environmental impact of the sector is equally large (Gossling 2002), where transport scores highest in terms of its carbon footprint. According to Lenzen et al. (2018) tourist expenditure grew from US\$2.5 trillion in 2009 to US\$4.7 trillion in 2013, whereas the global carbon footprint of the sector grew from 3.9 to 4.5 GtCO₂, comprising 8% of total global GHG emissions. They find that the per capita carbon footprint increases strongly with affluence (wealthier people travel more), and decreases only weakly with improving technology. So far, neither efforts promoting responsible travel behaviour nor technological improvements have been able to bring down the increasing carbon footprint of tourism (ibid). Appallingly large are the impacts of tourism on biodiversity loss, soil erosion, water scarcity and water quality. Some may argue that the incomes from tourism be decoupled from its environmental imprint. Historical evidence and natural thermodynamic laws however points to the contrary: the higher the growth of the sector, the larger its environmental footprint/devastation (Hickel and Kallis 2019).

In terms of the social justice implications of global tourism, stories of displaced communities, labour precarity and poor working conditions abound. Büscher and Fletcher (2016) argue that tourism is not only a form of material violence due to the commodification processes involved, but also a manifestation of structural violence which is made invisible. A number of authors furthermore find that tourism contributes to forms of social prestige and reflects neoliberal lifestyles based on consumerism, commodification and capitalist production (Blázquez Salom et al., 2016). Blázquez Salom and Cañada (2011) further unveil tourism functioning as placebo by failing the promises of bringing ‘development’ and social well-being.

2. Barcelona as a hot-spot

The case of Barcelona is a sad illustration of both the environmental and social consequences of tourism, and its exponential growth. Last year (2018), the airport of Barcelona had more than 50 million arrivals, supposedly reaching the limits of its capacity. Moreover, the port of Barcelona ranks highest in Europe by number of passengers (about 2.7 million in 2018). Barcelona Municipality in 2016 registered 31 million overnight stays and altogether 23 million visitors (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2017), an increase of more than 800% since 1990. The social, cultural, political, relational and daily-life implications and ramifications of that growth are tremendous. The Stay Grounded Coalition in Barcelona identified some of these impacts in a joint statement (see <https://stay-grounded.org/barcelona-a-city-exploited-by-tourism/>).

Likewise, the growth of tourism in Barcelona cannot be explained without the expansion of high-speed transport infrastructure – both train and aviation, making Barcelona one of the main

tourist destinations in the Mediterranean zone. A recent study by Rico et al. (2019), for example, found that up to 82% of the tourists in Barcelona come by plane.

3. Policies for touristic degrowth proposed by social movements in Barcelona with a global relevance

As a way of curbing the devastating socio-environmental impacts of tourism, the social movements of Barcelona call for touristic degrowth with a number of emblematic proposals among them:

- Reduction of the number of visitors and overnight stays, by limiting the number of cruise ships and low-cost and intercontinental flights per day, coupled with a moratorium on the expansion of the airport;
- Permanent moratorium on the construction of new touristic accommodation and a reduction of touristic sleeping/accommodation placements;
- Reduction of the weight of tourism in the aggregate city economy, necessitating generation of alternative job-placements and economic enterprises that could replace touristically-oriented jobs and industries;
- Fair environmental taxation of cruise ships, aviation and touristic accommodation;
- Increase of the tourist charges for the services externalized to the public sector including the public transport, maintenance, cleaning and security of public space;
- An increase of the stock of public housing through different instruments, including public investment and legal obligation to create social housing by the private sector (30% -50%) in new construction and rehabilitation works;
- A rent-freeze for at least 5 years, as in the case of Berlin (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48677393>);
- Reclaiming the public space, scaling down tourist-oriented commerce and facilitating local shops and trading;
- Fair labor agreements for workers in the tourist sector; and creation of other jobs outside the tourist sector; in case there are not enough jobs an overall reduction of working hours from 40 to 30 (with a maximum level of payment) in order to share existing jobs is a possibility;
- Promotion of zero waste measures and lowering (GHG) emissions in the tourist sector;
- Moving from tourism management based on public-private undertakings (such as Turismo de Barcelona) to public-community management, where citizens can effectively participate through legal entitlement

4. Possible questions for discussion:

- Which of those are more socially just and more feasible? What are the pros and cons of price mechanisms versus limits/bans of certain practices?

- Can all those instruments be used in other overcrowded cities or countrysides? What could be differences in the application of such in the Global South?
- Does it make more sense to fight for local measures (like touristic limits at the Barcelona level) or national/international instruments like a tax on kerosene (airplanes) and heavy oil (ships)? Or both? What could be effective social movement strategies?
- Maybe a reflection of own travel and tourist behaviours and the underlying interests could be interesting, too.

5. Literature:

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