

## The crisis of Tourism Research and COVID-19

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### **Abstract**

The present commentary pieces centers on the crisis the tourism industry faces today in view of the advance of COVID-19 as well as the consequences on the tourism research. The piece exerts a radical view on the economic-based paradigm laying the foundations to a new understanding of tourism epistemology. The economic based paradigm focused on the tourist as the only agent capable of providing valuable information but how can we study tourism in a world without tourism? The present piece explores the limitations and problems of tourism research when it embraces a managerial perspective pushing other methods and voices to a peripheral position.

**Key words: Tourism Research, Hospitality, COVID-19, Epistemology of tourism.**

Over the years, scholars have proclaimed the urgency to lead tourism research to a stage of maturation. When Jafar Jafari (2001) coins the term “the scientification of tourism”, he refers to the growth of publications, doctoral dissertations, journals and books which take from tourism their main object of study. As Jafari puts it, “the scientific inquiry” reveals the last stage of maturation which allows the adoption of a practical-applied basis. Other scholars, recently, have objected tourism research has reached a status of scientific discipline. Basically, they hold the thesis that the lack of a specific object of study associated to the multidisciplinary nature of tourism has invariably ushered the tourism research into a gridlock (Coles, Hall & Duval, 2006; Tribe 1997; 2007; Barca 2011). John Tribe, who goes forward, laments that the numerous publications and the interests of social scientists for tourism do not suffice to declare the scientification of tourism. As he adheres, tourism has evolved according to a great dispersion of knowledge production, Tribe dubs as “the indiscipline of tourism” without mentioning the lack of agenda by the side of Academia to set the epistemological borders of the discipline (Tribe 2007; 2010). In this vein, Chambers & Racik (2015) acknowledge that the discipline faces some challenges but far from being statics, the borders of disciplines evolve and coalesce in the threshold of time. Instead of re-formulating the epistemological basis of discipline, scholars should expand the horizons of tourism research. It is safe to say, one of the problems of the discipline seems to be its paradoxical condition. Although many studies have published the advances in the discipline, little is known about the nature of tourism (Barca 2011; Coles, Hall & Duval, 2006). Tourism seems to be an industrial activity, which is centered on a commercial logic, and a social

institution. This tension was surely aggravated by the monopoly of managerial disciplines and the adoption of the economic-based paradigm (Tribe 1997). The current tourism research is not oriented to understand what tourism means, but in looking at sustainable forms of production to protect the destination. As Tribe (1997) eloquently notes, while sociology, anthropology and geography have clearly delimited their object of study, the applied-research in the fields of tourism mistakenly focuses on tourist destination, recreational parks, and leisure-spots. In this way, the tourist is enthralled as the only valid source of knowledge and information while other actors, who play a leading role in the system, are systematically silenced (Pritchard & Morgan, 2007; Franklin 2007; Harris, Wilson & Altjevic, 2007). Applied research is widely based on open or closed-end questionnaires which are administered over tourists at transport hubs, airports and shop malls. At a closer look, sometimes these quantitative methods obscure more than clarify simply because interviewees are unfamiliar with the inner-world or lie to protect their interests. What does a gangster answer when one asks: what is your profession? of course one might speculate he will say: businessman!

What is equally important, there is a significant dispute respecting to the etymological nature of the term tourism which was not solved even to date (Korstanje 2007). This moot point raises two intriguing questions: are marketing and management responsible for tourism research crisis?, what is the connection of this crisis with COVID-19?

One of the pioneering voices, who devoted his efforts to respond to the first question, was Adrian Franklin. As a leading scholar in the so-called “critical turn”, a critical wave emerged to criticize the influence of tourism management in the education process, knowledge production and the Academia, Franklin alerts that the economic-based paradigm not only subordinated other methodological positions but also cultivated a materialist viewpoint of tourism with a focus on profitability and business. He coins the term “tourist-centricity” to denote a one-sided methodological tradition-oriented to focus on tourists as the only interlocutor with the fieldworker. To some extent, the tourist-centricity legitimates itself in the reproduction of the tourist site and its potentialities for business (Franklin 2007).

Last but not least, since its original appearance, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the word tourism mutated to different meanings and shapes. Today, scholars have many applications for the term derived in dark-tourism, Slum-tourism, Slow-tourism, Virtual tourism, and so forth. Although each term includes the same activity, tourism, no less true is that the managerial perspective classifies different forms of tourism tailored to consumers’ demands. There are many sub-types of tourism insofar as consumers have. The epistemology of tourism, at least for the managerial gaze, is shaped and subordinated to tourists’ preferences. But the economic-based paradigm has many problems to continue making research because the activity is certainly paralyzed. Is tourism research viable in a world without tourists?

The present note of research gives conceptually two alternative answers. On one hand, tourism –as a social institution- will surely change to new forms and contexts –ie. Virtual tourism- which will be fertile grounds for future investigations. On another, other actors who were historically relegated by the

economic-based theory will be taken seriously in consideration. This point invites –echoing Chambers & Rakic- scholars to imagine new borders and horizons for the discipline in the years to come.

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