

Tourist destinations and the production of representations in tourism

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Abstract. Tourism geography and tourism studies have for a long time been interested in tourist destinations, their identity, representations and the changes occurring in them. In the view of the 'spatialisation of social theory', this article discusses the nature of tourist destinations and their representations. Tourist destinations are seen as dynamic, historical units with specific identities, which produce a notion of what the destination is and what it represents at the time.

Introduction

During the last two decades, space and terms such as place, region and landscape have become a part of the conceptual armament of social sciences and cultural studies. Nowadays, these geographical concepts are no longer the privilege of geographical studies of 'earth as our home'. The spatial turn of social and cultural studies, or the 'spatialisation of social theory' as Featherstone & Lash (1995: 1) put it, originates from theoretical discussions that took place in the mid 1980's and the early 1990's (see Massey 1984; Gregory & Urry 1985; Massey 1991; Crang & Thrift 2000). The discussion created also a need for new approaches to tourism geography and tourist destination research (see Britton 1991; Shaw & Williams 1994; Hall & Page 1999).

Tourism geography and tourism studies in general have for a long time been interested in tourist destinations, their identity and the changes occurring in them (see Gilbert

1939, 1949; Christaller 1963; Butler 1980). In view of the spatialisation of social theory and earlier discussions on locality studies in geography (see Massey 1991), this article discusses the idea of tourist destinations and their changes within human geography. The focus is on the tourist destination, its conceptual nature and touristic representations as a subject of study, development and everyday living.

Tourist destinations are seen as dynamic, historical units with specific identities characterised by hegemonic and other discourses, which all produce a notion of what the destination is and represents at the time.

A tourist destination?

The recent discussion regarding tourism, tourist attractions, destinations and their nature and changes has stressed the meaning and role of space and spatial representations (see Shields 1991; Sack 1992; Rojek 1993; Squire 1994; Ashworth & Dietvorst

1995; Mowforth & Munt 1998: 7, 55–62; Dann 1999; Aitchison et al. 2000; Gordon & Goodall 2000). As John Urry (1995: 1) argues: “almost all the major social and cultural theories bear upon the explanation of place.” This notion is relevant, especially for tourist destinations: the spaces and places of tourism.

Destination is by nature a problematic concept. It refers to a varying range of spatial scales (i.e. levels of representation) in tourism: continents, states, provinces, municipalities and other administrative units, tourist resorts or even single tourist products. Spatial scales and definitions of destinations based on administrative or other such units are sometimes useful and practical, but theoretically they tend to approach tourism as a spatial and geographical phenomenon from a technical and static viewpoint (see Saarinen 2001).

There has been relatively little research carried out into the tourist destination as a concept and a theoretical perspective (see Shields 1990; Meethan 1996). Thus we can agree with Michael Haywood (1986), who remarks how little attention has been given in the tourism literature to the identification of the unit of analysis, the tourist destination, or to its conceptual nature. This is quite surprising from a geographical point of view. After all, geography is often regarded as ‘the art of recognising, describing and interpreting the personalities of regions’ (Gilbert 1960: 158).

According to Framke (2002), the concept of destination can be approached from the conventional or the sociological perspective. The conventional approach represents a classic business oriented understanding of the destination. It is mainly a creation of the supply side of the tourism industry. In contrast to this, the sociologi-

cal approach underlines the constructive nature of tourist destination as a structure and result of social action and practice. It represents more the demand side of the tourism system than the conventional approach. However, social practices and actions are also a part of the industry’s operations in the construction of tourist destination in marketing and place promotion, for example, which makes the distinction between the conventional and sociological perspectives complex and partly problematic.

In tourism geography destinations are traditionally seen as spatial units for the economic activity of tourism with supporting infrastructure. From the perspective of the spatialisation of social theory, the geographical concept of region offers a basis for defining, describing and analysing the tourist destination as a socially constructed ‘locality’ and spatial structure where global processes all come together and are manifested in a place specific and concrete way (see Massey 1991).

The concept of region has gained numerous meanings during the history of academic geography, and some of them also refer to the technical definitions of tourist destinations. A fundamental basis for the tourist destination as a concept and theoretical framework can be sought for here within the *idea of a region* based on spatial realities constructed by historically contingent social practices (Paasi 1986, 1991; see Pred 1984). From that basis, the geographical concept of region is a historically produced structure which is lived, experienced and represented through different administrative, economic and cultural practices. Through these practices the tourist destination as region is constructed as a part of a larger regional (spatial) system and as part

of the awareness of the people (see Gilbert 1960; Cosgrove 1985).

In the context of tourism, this definition carries the connotation that tourist destination is understood as a social construction characterised by the idea of region rather than physical or administrative bounds or elements (see Giddens 1985: 275). This does not necessarily lead to “the sociological notion” of tourist destination outlined by Framke (2002). Tourist destination based on the idea of a region refers to the socially constructed meanings and representations of the destination; its nature, culture and touristically produced attractions that manifest *local geographies* in a tourism context. These touristic local geographies are the products of the interaction of ‘supply and demand’ structures in the tourism system and the combination of social, economic and political processes and practices in a specific space.

The idea of a tourism region is a reality that is produced and represented in a specific manner and it distinguishes the destination from its surrounding environment and other tourism regions (Saarinen 1998). As Gilbert (1960: 158) has noted, “regions, like individuals, have very different characters” and these characters “are constantly changing and developing”. The central elements in the changing nature of tourist destinations are representations and the production of them in tourism.

The production of representations in tourism

The question and nature of representations is crucial for tourism and its development (Squire 1994: 5; Crang 1997; Thrift 1997; Cloke & Perkins 1998; Edensor 1998: 13–7; Del Casino & Hanna 2000). Etymolog-

ically representations can be understood as presentations drawn up not by copying the object ‘as it is’ but by re-presenting it in a new form and/or textual environment (fig. 1).

Representation integrates meanings and language to cultural structures. It involves the use of images, symbols and language which stand for or represent ‘things’. Thus, representation is the production of the meaning of issues (concepts) through language and it is the link between the two which enables us to refer to either ‘real’ world of objects and phenomena or to imaginary worlds of objects and issues (Hall 1997: 15–17). In the world of tourism, for example, the two are often mixed.

In tourism, destinations and related attractions are the very sites of representations, which are based on discourses constituting the identity of destinations and producing meanings for places, cultures, attractions and activities in tourism. Representations textualising touristic space are a part and material of the discourses of tourist destinations. They are historically and culturally specific descriptions that manifest a power to represent ‘Something by Some-

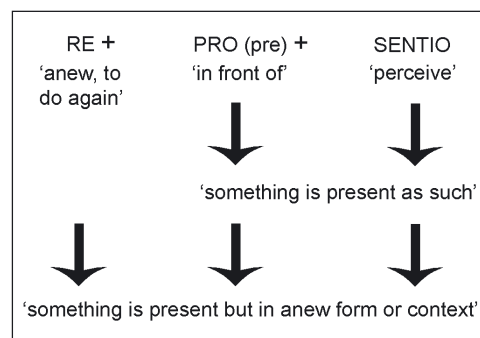


Figure 1. The elements and meaning of the term *re+pre+sentation* from Latin into English.

one to Somebody'. Thus power issues and ideologies are always involved in representations (see Lefebvre 1991: 38–9, 69; Hall 1992; Hall 1994: 175–200). In fact, according to Cheong & Miller (2000: 372), “there is power everywhere in tourism” – not only in representations – which has raised critical questions also concerning the academic research and its hegemonic structures.

In tourism and tourism studies, the representations of destinations are often produced and approached in a contextual relationship between the producer, product and customer (fig. 2). The producer refers to the industry and its different actors and practices. The product represents a destination and its characteristics, and the customers are tourists or potential tourists. However, this triangle does not necessarily

leave any role for local communities or other similar non-hegemonic groups, for example, in the production of representations in tourism development. Neither does that leave possibilities for an academic study to analyse other views than the hegemonic ones, which has caused a debate concerning the so-called crisis of representation in research.

The identity of a tourist destination based on the specific representations can be seen as a historically specific construction composed of the discourses (language) and realms of social practices in a specific space. As a result of discursive practices, tourist destinations are often seen as products of a transformation process whereby they are developing towards spatial homogenisation – the general tendency described in geog-

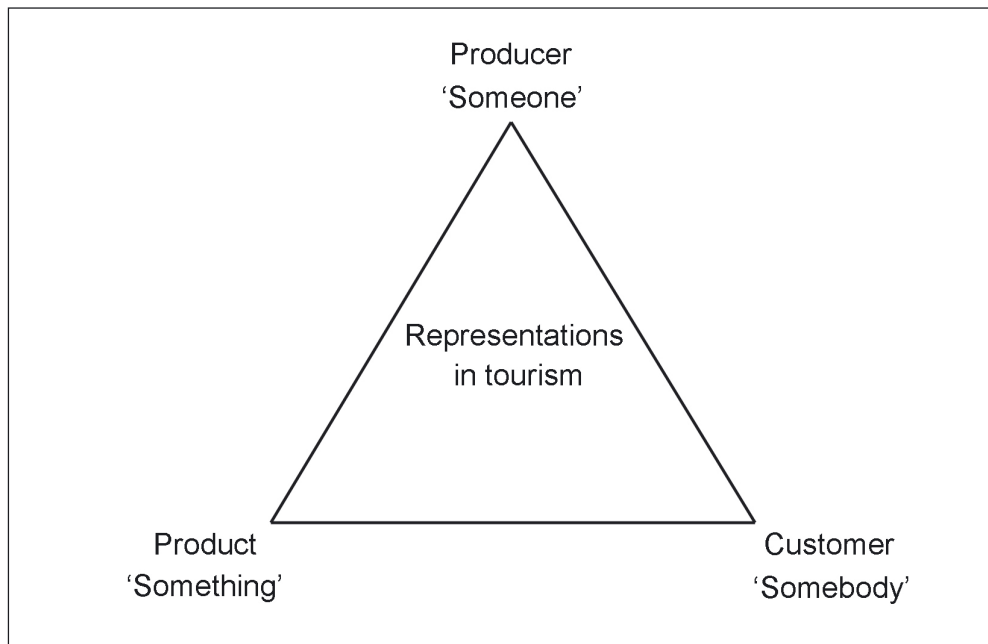


Figure 2. The production 'triangle' of representations in tourism and tourism development.

raphy by Edward Relph (1976). This spatial homogenisation is a process in which destinations are converted into places with similar physical and symbolic features, attractions and images. In addition, the tourist infrastructure, facilities and ‘sense of place’ may also imitate and increasingly refer to the places where most of the tourists – the consumers – and the capital for development and construction are coming from (Saarinen 2001).

The homogenisation process demonstrates in a way the idea of *time-space compression* propounded by David Harvey (1989) in which space and spatial experience shrink as a result of increasing movement of capital, goods and information. According to Harvey, capitalistic markets and actors are seeking to overcome the barriers of geographical distance and are constantly stretching their economic, political and cultural relationships to influence new places, i.e. markets and resources (see Harvey 1985). Time and space are not the only elements compressed by this circulation and (over)accumulation of capital, for tourist “destinations come in and out of fashion and tourism moves on elsewhere” (Mowforth & Munt 1998: 30). During this circulation tourist destinations are modified and developed towards homogenisation and mass-scale industry in order to effectively serve the accumulation of capital and the larger spatial structure of tourism.

From one perspective, spatial homogenisation is a ‘logical’ process in tourism development and in the current globalisation of markets and social systems. Destinations are spaces designed and built up on the premises of attracting non-local tourists and capital. Donald Getz (1999: 24), for example, defines a tourist space, which is here also called a destination, “as an area

dominated by tourist activities or one that is organised for meeting the needs of visitors.” Touristic needs and values are therefore the leading guidelines in a market-driven economic activity such as tourism. Relph (1976) calls this process of homogenisation an ‘erosion of place’: a change of original cultural and physical landscape and the loss of a unique sense of place.

Finally, homogenisation may lead towards de-differentiation of tourist destinations in the course of the transformation process. The idea of de-differentiation is based on the currently contested nature of modern categories. According to Rojek (1993: 5, see also 2001), the de-differentiation refers to “a condition in which former social, economic and political distinctions cease to obtain.” The division between work and leisure, for example, is no longer regarded as a clear-cut one. On the other hand, de-differentiation does not refer to a complete change from modern to post-modern or late-modern. Rather, it manifests the ongoing changes in contemporary tourism and tourist experiences (Gordon & Goodall 2000). For example, destinations are typically working environments for the hosts and landscapes of leisure and pleasure for tourists, but they are also increasingly being used as working environments by ‘tourists’ and ‘semi-locals’ using second-homes for distance working and as seasonal living places (see Williams & Kaltenborn 1999; Williams & Hall 2000; Williams et al. 2000; Sherlock 2001). This tendency is also evident in northern Finland, for example (see Saarinen 2003).

By contrast with homogenisation, tourism is a competitive economic activity that creates spatial differentiation. Some places, cities and regions are more successful than others in the competition between destina-

tions and grow economically and politically in the hierarchy of regions, while others lose their capacity to attract new tourists, investors and capital, and also inhabitants, second homes and other forms of economic activity. These two processes – spatial homogenisation and spatial differentiation – are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are different sides of the very same coin, for while destinations are transforming towards similarity and their original character is being eroded away in a Relpian manner, they are also undergoing differentiation and being framed and elevated from their surrounding regional structure and their ‘original’ character.

Concluding discussion: competing representations in tourism

The new social and economic contexts and the changes that have taken place in tourism and in the theoretical and conceptual perspectives of human geography have created a need to re-evaluate the idea of tourist destination as unfixed and unproblematic spatial unit. Tourist destinations are socio-spatial structures constructed by social forces, systems and relations. On the other hand, these social systems and realities are also seen to be composed and organised by geographical structures in certain socio-spatial contexts. This dialectic nature of the construction of tourist destination and its representations can be characterised by the concepts of *social spatialisation* and *spatial socialisation*. The former refers to the Rob Shield’s (1991) notion of an ongoing social and cultural process which is constructed by institutional practices along with discourses of the destinations and society in general. However, from

the perspective of spatial turn in tourism studies, the social spatialisation can also be turned upside down.

Referring to Shield’s approach, Anssi Paasi (1996: 8) formulates the idea of *spatial socialisation*. It can be understood broadly as a socialisation process based on a territorially or symbolically defined space and spatial identity. Tourist destinations are symbolically defined spaces, and their identities also influence and construct certain kind of tourism activities and tourists (see Dann 1996: 79). Alongside this spatial socialisation there is an ongoing process of social spatialisation. Space is a medium for organising social structures such as tourist activities, the tourism industry, capital and divisions of labour etc., but in the end space matters only through the medium of socio-cultural practices and structures manifested in certain spaces.

Using Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) approach, Shields (1991) sees the production and re-production of space and related place-myths as an active and non-neutral action. The destinations are open to signification and to struggles over their representations and social meanings. This ongoing economic, socio-political and cultural competition operates not only between tourist destinations but also inside the destinations. Evolving tourism produces the spaces of tourism, landscapes representing the values, needs and actions of the tourism industry rather than other local interests or identities (see Hollinshead 1999). As pointed out by Lefebvre (1991: 58), peripheral tourist destinations characterised by amenity-rich landscapes are constructed and represented as leisure-oriented spaces for Western urbanised societies. A large-scale tourism industry usually represents non-local development that does not “derive from process-

es internal to those societies” (Urry 1990: 64; see Britton 1991). This is not necessarily a problem, but it may create one without active policy efforts towards local participation in tourism development and planning.

The possible contradiction between local and non-local values and interests includes the moral and ethical aspect of producing space. Space as a social construct is a moral category that defines and maps what is allowed and suitable, preferable or unwanted in a certain spatial context and in certain social situations (Sack 1992: 22–23, 196; Proctor 1998; Bridge 2000). In addition to representations, meanings and values, the production of tourism space also

involves a discursive spatial struggle inside the destinations over practices related to land-use, resources and economics. It includes a possible process by which local values and attitudes are demonstrated as ‘other’ by constructing them as being different, distinctive and even ‘lower’ relative to non-local and tourist value systems. Therefore, it is important to analyse the representations and their production in tourism. This requires new conceptualisations of tourist destinations, and not only economic but also pluralistic, socio-cultural and historical perspectives of tourism destinations and their representations in order to cope with the potential crisis of representation in academic research.

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