

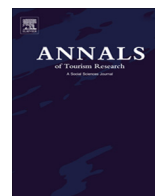


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Theorizing the concept of alienation in tourism studies

Lan Xue^a, David Manuel-Navarrete^{b,*}, Christine N. Buzinde^c

^a Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University, United States

^b School of Sustainability, Arizona State University, United States

^c School of Community Resources and Development, Arizona State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The concept of alienation has been extensively analyzed outside tourism studies to understand human existence within society. Unlike the notion of authenticity—a complementary yet distinct term—alienation has been scarcely researched within tourism studies. Yet, as is argued in this paper, alienation adds theoretical depth to the sociological study of tourism and it also resituates discussions on authenticity within the context of capitalist relations of production, consumerism, and existentialism. The goal of this conceptual paper is two-fold. First, it discusses the evolution of the concept of alienation within sociology and cognate disciplines. Second, it addresses the applicability of the concept to tourism studies and proposes a working model to guide future examinations of the nexus between alienation and tourism.

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Introduction

The introduction of the terms authenticity and alienation in tourism studies is attributed to MacCannell (1976)'s work, specifically, his seminal text *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. MacCannell notes that modern societies are based on cultural productions, which give rise to “a modern form of alienation of individuals interested only in the model [brought about by the cultural production] or the life-style, not in the life it represents” (p. 32). Applying this to tourism studies, he argues that tourists' constant search for authenticity is attributable to their need to escape the alienation they experience in their home/work environs. At the same time, MacCannell is skeptical about the possibility that tourists can find real authenticity in touristic experiences and consequently be free from *alienation*. In fact, he notes that failure to achieve authentic touristic experiences can indeed lead to the genesis of a new (post-industrial) form of *alienation*. In his view, “the alienation of the worker stops

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 480 727 9235; fax: +1 480 965 8 87.

E-mail address: davidmn@asu.edu (D. Manuel-Navarrete).

where the alienation of the sightseer begins” and from this perspective he regards *alienation* as both a cause and a consequence of tourism (MacCannell, 1976, p. 6).

The relative absence of scholarly engagements with the concept of alienation within tourism studies is unparalleled in cognate disciplines, particularly sociology wherein the term has been extensively debated (Musto, 2010). Despite prevalence in the social sciences and humanities, ebbs and flows characterize the term's academic history. Offering a rationale for this historical trend, Dahms (2006) states that:

[a]s alienation became prevalent, it also became submerged, and less accessible and visible. In the social sciences, many specific tools developed and employed can be explained in terms of the increasing prevalence of alienation, the effort to foster enlightenment while advancing unenlightenment, and the development of the social sciences as progressive concealment of alienation (p. 36).

Researchers have generally adopted the term to facilitate critical interrogations on human existence within society. According to Yuill (2011), investigations that focus on the concept of alienation offer “considerable insight into a wide range of subjective experiences and structural conditions” that characterize modern day society (p. 105). Articulating the importance of the term, Seeman (1959), a predominant figure known for his studies on alienation, quoted Kahler (1957, p. 43) by stating that “the history of [hu]man[s] could very well be written as a history of the alienation of [hu]man[s].”

Of importance and particular relevance for tourism studies is the fact that from its inception the concept of alienation was discussed in relation to the notion of authenticity, which is central to tourism research. Various scholars within and outside the field of tourism studies address the concept's connection to authenticity (see Ballard, 1990; Cohen, 1988; Heidegger, 1962; MacCannell, 1976; Rae, 2010; Schmid, 2005). For these scholars, alienation is regarded as “constitutively tied to, and underpinned by, a specific conception of the authentic self” (Rae, 2010, p. 22). Indeed, the concepts of alienation and authenticity are complementary however they are neither equivalent nor interchangeable. Furthermore, as will be explained in the subsequent section, alienation embodies a self-emancipatory vantage point and an intellectual pedigree that authenticity lacks. Despite the mutually supportive link between alienation and authenticity, theorizations of alienation in tourism that move beyond evanescent accounts have remained scarce.

Perhaps the dearth, to date, of theorizations that link alienation to tourism studies can be attributed to the field's ‘truncation’ in theoretical discussions on authenticity (a notable exception to the rule is Belhassen, Caton, and Stewart (2008) work). In a recent article, Cohen and Cohen (2012) discuss the evolution of sociological theories within tourism studies and they indicate that:

[t]he twin argument that moderns seek authenticity outside of modernity, and that locals stage it for them, appeared to have the potential to become the basis of a paradigm for the sociological study of tourism. Towards the end of the last century, however, the sociological study of tourism moved largely away from the problematic of authenticity... and fractured into a plethora of sub-types (p. 2179).

The emphasis on disaggregating authenticity into different types allowed for a singular focus on certain meanings but we argue that it also prevented the emergence of new theoretical linkages with germane concepts (*i.e.*, alienation) that would have provided a broader theoretical basis from which to further explore tourism as a complex social phenomenon.

We propose that new interrogations into the concept of alienation can offer valuable insights into the nexus between human experiences (of alienation) and the various forms of tourism structures that characterize modern day society. For instance, further theorizations of alienation, in conjunction with authenticity, can result in nascent paradigms that can be instrumental in the continual development of the sociological study of tourism (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). We also propose that discussions on alienation can contribute to critical tourism studies by complementing the predominant focus on “culture, discourse and representation” (*e.g.*, the case of authenticity) with analyses of “the structures and relations of power associated with globalization and neo-liberal capitalism” (Bianchi, 2009, p. 487). Critical tourism studies deals with, amongst other things, issues of social justice and advocacy orientation (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). These issues are in many ways linked to the emancipatory component of the concept of alienation.

Given the current hiatus in tourism literature, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to investigate the evolution of the concept of alienation and to reflect on its applicability for critical approaches to

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