



# A STRATEGIC-RELATIONAL APPROACH TO TOURISM POLICY

**Pantazis Pastras**

University of Birmingham, UK

**Bill Bramwell**

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

**Abstract:** Government is often prominent in tourism policy making and policy initiatives for destinations. It is important to understand whether and how government coordinates the tourism policies and activities among different actors, institutional arrangements and administrative levels, and how such government influence may evolve temporally. This issue is explored from a new institutionalism perspective that considers the co-evolution of structures and practices that shape tourism policies and activities. Use is also made of a strategic-relational approach to social theory to understand structure and agency relationships. These perspectives are applied to understand continuities and changes in government involvement in tourism marketing policies for Athens, Greece from 2000 to 2008, a period when the city staged the 2004 Olympic Games. **Keywords:** tourism policy, strategic-relational approach, path dependence, institutional coordination, tourism marketing. © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

Government involvement in tourism in destinations through regulation, mobilizing and guidance is an important research theme in the tourism literature. State engagement may be justified because the state is well placed to work for collective interests and to steer the actions of diverse actors, and its actions are relatively open to public scrutiny. The state, however, may not necessarily promote democracy, efficient policymaking, equitable policy outcomes, or effective coordination in destinations. Government involves the formal and informal institutions and practices of the state, and it is organised in a hierarchy from national to regional and local geographical scales. Effective coordination of tourism work by the state depends on it securing mutual cooperation and priorities about actions among different government

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**Pantazis Pastras** was recently awarded his doctorate at the University of Birmingham, UK (Troias 53, 11251 Athens, Greece. Email <pastrasp@gmail.com>). He has research interests in tourism policy, sustainable tourism, and the governance of urban tourism.

**Bill Bramwell** is Professor of Tourism at Sheffield Hallam University, UK (Sheffield, S1 1WB, UK. Email <w.m.bramwell@shu.ac.uk>). He edits the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and he conducts research on tourism policy, sustainable tourism, and environmental politics and tourism.

organisations and between the state and actors beyond government. Such coordination can be difficult to achieve in destinations because there are likely to be divergent policy preferences among the actors.

The state's involvement in coordinating and directing tourism activities in destinations evolves over time. In many countries changes resulted from neo-liberal public sector reforms begun in the 1980s and 1990s that meant that the state became less involved in regulation, infrastructure investment and service provision for tourism (Bevir, 2009; Dredge & Jenkins, 2007; Shone & Memon, 2008). There was more emphasis on government facilitating private sector initiatives, rather than government having the lead role, and this has prompted debate about the balance of benefits between organized interests and the rest of society (Hall, 2000; Jeffries, 2001; Sakai, 2006). Governance in destinations has been less likely to involve formal government, and instead there is more involvement of networks of other actors and also use of markets and quasi-markets. Partnership working has been emphasised in tourism policy work, which brings together the public and private sectors, NGOs and community groups. With tourism marketing, for instance, numerous public-private sector city visitor and convention bureaus have been established. The tendency for neo-liberalism to overlook the well-being of certain groups of actors, however, was itself a stimulus to interest groups to request to be more fully involved in policy making.

The institutional changes resulting from neo-liberal reforms often reduce the responsibilities and financial costs resting with the state, which fits with the neo-liberal doctrine of "rolling back" government (Rhodes, 1997; Sharma & Gupta, 2006). Partnership-based arrangements may widen participation in policy making, but potentially they can also have disadvantages. They may reduce the government's ability to coordinate tourism policies for destinations, prompt an inefficient duplication of effort, unfairly advantage commercial sector partners in policy making, and encourage a focus on economic competitiveness above other considerations (Augustyn & Knowles, 2000; Bramwell & Rawding, 1994; Lutz & Ryan, 1997).

Another change that can reduce the state's ability to coordinate tourism activities occurs when government is devolved from national to more local geographical scales. In many developing countries authority tends to be concentrated within central government and its bureaucracies. There are often calls here for the transfer of responsibilities from central to lower tiers of government and also to other agencies due to the belief that decentralisation brings decision making closer to the population and improves service delivery (de Oliveira, 2002). Decentralisation or re-scaling within multi-level governance, however, can result in complex interactions between central and local government and between state and non-state actors, and this complexity may raise concerns over the transparency of power relationships and accountability.

The increasing use of partnerships and forums, and the enhanced devolution of authority to local government, potentially can reduce central government's ability to coordinate and steer tourism policy

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