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Tourist agency as valorisation
Making Dharavi into a tourist attraction

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ABSTRACT

Tourist agency is an area of renewed interest in tourism studies. Reflecting on existing scholarship the paper identifies, develops and critically examines three main approaches to tourism agency, namely the Service-dominant logic, the performative turn, and tourist valorisation. Tourist valorisation is proposed as a useful approach to theorise the role of tourists in the making of destinations and more broadly to conceptualise the intentions, modalities and outcomes of tourist agency. The paper contributes to the structuring of current scholarship on tourist agency. Empirically it addresses a knowledge gap concerning the role of tourists in the development of Dharavi, Mumbai into a tourist destination.

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Introduction

The agency of tourists, their role in shaping tourism and the broader world, should be of major interest for tourism studies. Tourism research however has traditionally often focused on understanding the production of tourism by state authorities (Richter, 1985), the life cycle of tourism attractions (Butler, 1985) and the organisation of tourism firms (Leiper, 1990; Tremblay, 1998). Recent years have shown a new interest in the agency of tourists among tourism scholars. The service dominant logic (SD-Logic) sees tourists as co-creators of value, extending previous view of tourists as mere consumers (Blazquez-Resino, Molina, & Esteban-Talaya, 2013; Cabiddu, Lui, & Piccoli, 2013; Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011). In humanities oriented tourism studies, the 'performative turn' also broadly considers tourist agency (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2003; Edensor, 1998) while Actor-Network Theory applications in tourism studies expand notions agency to account for diverse non-tourist, and non-human agencies (Ren, 2011). In this paper a critical review of these conceptual developments will be provided. The aim is to highlight the limits of notions of agency as proposed in the SD-logic and in literature associated with the performative turn. Tourist valorisation is proposed as alternative model of tourist agency. The approach is based on the idea of authentication in which Cohen and Cohen (2012) have recently conceptualised tourist attraction making. In addition to Cohen and Cohen's concern with meso- and macro-level implications of tourist agency, I want to highlight the contested nature of valorisation processes, in which a number of agents partake with different power to shape the process (Lugosi, 2016). To do so I employ Virno's (2004) discussion of post-Fordist production as a labour process that draws from a political reading of agency in the notion of praxis. Applying Virno here means to see tourist agency as both a political and a production process. Tourist practices such as increasing visibility of neighbourhoods or creating shared spaces of appearance and encounter, valorise attractions, destinations and experiences. Politically these processes may be disruptive of local value regimes in which valorisations are distributed unevenly and sometimes unjustly. As a production process such

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collective agency of tourists has meso- and marco-level implications in producing new attractions autonomously of attraction making pursued by tourism firms and tourism policy. Tourist valorisation is only relatively autonomous as it takes place with the specific structural constrains of post-Fordist capitalist production, in particular with regards to questions of ownership of platforms in/on which valorisation processes occur. This concerns, for example, the ownership of real estate in a neighbourhood subject to tourist valorisation, which may render the autonomous production by tourists subservient to the realisation of capital gains by the owners of real estate.

The paper also exemplifies tourist valorisation in an empirical study of attraction making, the case of the large relatively poor neighbourhood Dharavi in Mumbai. Dharavi has become a prime tourist attraction in Mumbai over the course of the last decade. Tourism in Dharavi, which is often referred to as a slum, is highly controversial. Tourism authorities in India and the state of Maharashtra have openly opposed tourism development in Dharavi (Dyson, 2012). Yet the numbers of international visitors have increased to over 20,000 in 2014 according to figures from the operators that offer tours of the neighbourhood (Frenzel & Blakeman, 2015). In a 2015 article the Times of India described Dharavi as the most photographed attraction of Mumbai (Shindel, 2015). This remarkable process has been reflected in a number of studies (Burgold & Rolfes, 2013; Diekmann & Hannam, 2012; Dyson, 2012; Frenzel & Blakeman, 2015; Jones & Sanyal, 2015; Meschkank, 2010). However, some aspects have not been touched upon, namely the role of tourists in making Dharavi into an attraction, and specific modalities of such agency, in particular tourist entrepreneurship, 'word of mouse' (i.e. online, peer-to-peer) marketing and the making of spaces of encounter. In this paper the aim is to elucidate 1) the significance of this tourist attraction making and secondly 2) discuss some of its modalities by employing tourist valorisation as a new conceptual approach to tourist agency.

There are a number of non-tourist agents in tourism, such as residents, tourism authorities and organisations, and non-human forms of agency that all play an important role in valorisation processes and destination making. This paper limits itself to addressing a knowledge gap concerning the understanding of tourist agency as both a political and a production process. Equally this paper is limited to one case study of Dharavi. In conceptually clarifying tourist valorisation with recourse to this case study the aim is to support future work on the diverse contributors to valorisation processes in tourism, across different sites and cases.

The paper is structured in three parts. In the first section, literature on tourist agency is critically reviewed. Three approaches are identified, two dominant ones and a third approach, tourist valorisation, that is developed based on the limits of the existing approaches. In the next section of the paper tourist valorisation will be employed to analyse the making of Dharavi into an attraction. Here existing research as well as empirical data from my own engagement with the destination will be presented and analysed. Finally, in the last section, the theoretical frameworks will be discussed in light of the data and avenues for further research will be explored.

Three approaches to the agency of tourists

The conceptualisation of agency is a contested terrain of social theory. Without attempting to provide a comprehensive picture of this terrain, I propose to read agency here, following Giddens (1991), as ontologically constituted of three major dimensions: 1) intentions, both conscious and unconscious, 2) modalities of action and 3) outcomes, both intended and unintended. As Bryant and Jary (1991) argue these have to be considered in both time and space. This is here understood as a call for grounded and situated research informing knowledge production with a more generalised validity. While structural concerns are pertinent to any discussion of agency, Giddens' theory of structuration emphasises the need to discuss agency and structure as intertwined, because neither does structure foreclose agency, not can agency be considered independent of or simply antagonistic to structure. Instead the dimensions of agency, from intentions, modalities and outcomes, are all subject to structural conditions. This means that any investigation of human's ability to shape the world should be considered in light of how the dimensions of agency play out in specific historical and spatial terrains.

In the field of tourism studies questions of agency were long discussed in the form of typological research. For Cohen (1979) tourists differ in significant ways in terms of their interests and types, or intentions, for example whether they are more interested in short breaks from routine or more sustained emersion with the visited places. Typological analysis forms the backbone of marketing oriented tourism studies (McCabe, 2014). In clustering and prescribing tourism behaviour, such research is useful to tourism businesses seeking to identify particular consumer groups in order to specifically tailor products for different markets. Tourist agency is discussed mostly as variations of consumer behaviour, building on a tradition of behaviour research (Howard & Sheth, 1969). In terms of discussing agency, this research asks about the intentions of tourists, and to some extent about the modalities of their agency, but does not consider the outcomes of their agency. Research on 'new tourism' (Poon, 1994) and niche markets (Novelli, 2007) discusses tourist types in increasing complexity, however without departing from the typological or behavioural research tradition. More recently however research has considered tourist agency beyond consumption, in terms of tourists' productivity and thus the outcome of agency, or their capacity to produce value, specifically under the service-dominant logic.

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