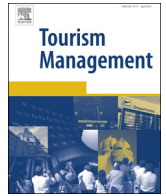




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Opinion Piece

The unspoken question: A response to Thomas and Ormerod

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Asks why anyone outside of academia should be interested in tourism research.
- Examines the political context in which impact factors operate.
- Places consideration of impact factors in wider context of obsession with metrics.

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1. Introduction

In their paper ‘The (almost imperceptible) impact of tourism research on policy and practice’, [Thomas and Ormerod \(2017\)](#) show great pragmatism, reflection and restraint in their exploration of the impact of UK tourism research (defined broadly to include hospitality and events) on various stakeholders, two principal instances of which are cited as ‘industry’ and policymakers. The analysis is interesting and considered, and perhaps the authors and others will, in due time, extend and develop the methodologies described to further substantiate the topic.

The point of this response to Thomas and Ormerod is to address what is here asserted to be the unspoken question hovering in the shadows of their analysis (and given their conclusions), namely why anybody outside academia should care about the impact of tourism research on policy and practice? The question is important because the topic is better understood, and future analyses in a similar vein will be more robust, if the various political and ideological factors bearing on the origins of this particular aspect of research assessment are surfaced rather than submerged in such discourse ([Willmott, 2011](#)). It is perfectly reasonable in novel and

provocative discourse to ‘cut to the chase’ by temporarily assuming awareness of the more abstract themes and issues underpinning the development of new knowledge, yet it also courts the danger that this development may continue devoid of wider context.

[Thomas and Ormerod's \(2017\)](#) rationale is, of course, predicated on the UK research evaluation framework's (REF) insistence on some self-assessment of research impact, impact being defined as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ ([HEFCE, 2016](#)). While a seemingly innocent enough formulation, it does raise the question of why such a measure is required and what this requirement implies for intellectual freedom within academia to select, formulate and prosecute research according to conscience. This is not to argue for the ‘traditional’ concept of academic freedom where ‘anything goes’ – even if such freedom was ever a reality, it is a ship that has long sailed. Rather, what will be suggested in this response is that the apparent lack of impact of tourism research outside the Academy can be understood in terms of the complex intersection between the disciplinary knowledge that tourism represents, the nature of disciplinary politics and the wider ideological context in which such knowledge is produced.

2. Disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary politics

Anybody studying a reasonably constructed humanities and/or social science degree in the 1970s, when tourism research first gained momentum, usually encountered issues pertaining to a discipline's content and boundaries by exposure to such texts as E. H. Carr's *What is History?* (1961) and [Elton's \(1967\)](#) quasi-response. In science [Thomas Kuhn's \(1962\) The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#) stimulated related discussions as did C. P. Snow's slightly earlier (1959 [1993]) essay on the two cultures (science and the humanities) and the (then viewed as ill-tempered) response of Cambridge English don F. R. [Leavis \(1962 \[2013\]\)](#).

Such debates continue, in some disciplines far fiercely than in

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others, though often dismissed as 'navel gazing'. While discussions about the essence of a subject may occasionally move centre stage, this is, in general, a rarity. Rather, critics usually operate at the periphery of their discipline, as unwelcome guests in their own house. In economics and finance there is an increasingly vigorous debate about the 'real world' failure of these subjects owing to their practitioners taking refuge in increasingly abstract quantitative models (e.g. Lawson, 2015). In geography, scholars such as Dorling (e.g. Dorling & Lee, 2016) continue to argue for a much wider disciplinary remit than might immediately be assumed to be the obvious purview of that field. In business and management studies, which at least in part influences some tourism scholarship the epistemological status of management knowledge is challenged by a reformist 'liberal critique' from within the mainstream (e.g. Ghoshal, 2005) and a 'critical management critique' of essentially neo-Marxist character (e.g. Tadajewski, Maclaran, Parsons, & Parker, 2013).

It is almost trite to rehearse the point that tourism as a subject, discipline, field of study or what you will (here following Thomas and Ormerod's, 2017, formulation of including events and hospitality) is both a multi- and cross-disciplinary field of inquiry attracting contributions from, inter alia, geographers, historians, sociologists, economists and, of course, those who have graduated from programmes in tourism management/studies. However, to reemphasise this point is to assert that, as with most academic disciplines, the potential impact of tourism knowledge is considerable and of possible interest to a wide variety of non-academic audiences. Tourism also faces problems of definition as to its content and boundaries but, perhaps more than in the other disciplines mentioned earlier, some fundamental issues have been left unresolved. For example, the work of the late Neil Leiper (e.g. 1999 and 2008) on such matters as disaggregating tourism employment and defining the tourism industry enjoys numerous citations but the ideas embraced in his arguments seem to be largely ignored. Thus, questions pertaining to the relationships between tourism and hospitality as fields of study and the tourism and hospitality industries remain unsettled with an often unspoken assumption among tourism scholars that the second of these is merely a subset of the first – a palpable nonsense (as long ago as 1994, Bull and Church were able to cite data that around 40% of demand for hospitality services came from non-tourism sources – the current proportion is unlikely to be less than that). A recent article by McKercher and Prideaux (2014) on the academic myths of tourism deserves to be widely read, debated and addressed but so far has, in regard of the latter at least, been met with apparent indifference.

The credibility of a subject area to a large extent depends on the content and boundaries of that area being, if not settled, then at least lacking in excessive fluidity. By failing to resolve certain conceptual and empirical 'myths', or rather pretending they are secondary to the wider ambitions of the subject, tourism arguably fails this test, but has, paradoxically, at least so far, and within the Academy, made a virtue of brushing over fundamental conceptual issues and presented a moderately coherent if somewhat fragile façade to others. It has done this (as have many other disciplines) by inflating the general economic and social importance of the field (c.f. McKercher & Prideaux, 2014) and by seeking to expand the boundaries of the area as far as possible – tourism has, in other words, and like many other subjects, employed political strategies in consolidating its legitimacy within academia.

The results of these ambitions are not difficult to discern. In tourism *sans* (as it were) hospitality and events, there is a division between institutional (the nature, management and impact of events on society with an emphasis on policy and economic conventionalism) and sociological approaches (usually more abstract) that can be regarded as either a testimony to the breadth of

the subject or evidence of its continuing atomisation. Early diversity in the growth of sociological approaches to tourism (one thinks of the work of Dean MacCannell and Erik Cohen) has, in the last two decades, been restricted owing to the unparalleled influence of one concept – that of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1992). Urry, already a well-regarded social theorist when *The Tourist Gaze* was published, both genuinely inspired younger tourism researchers and leant credibility to tourism research more widely (it may be pertinent to note that the book's publication came at a time when the UK's post-1992 universities were created from polytechnics where most tourism education resided). Those writers, including the present author, who think that the concept is of minor passing interest are viewed as beyond the pale.

Urry's achievement was to speak to the growing number of social scientists embracing various forms of interpretive sociology and in particular the then fashion for postmodernism (see also Lash & Urry, 1994). In so doing, however, most sociological knowledge of tourism can justly be described as post-theoretical, that is, representing both a retreat from social realism (in which the other and now 'junior strand' of tourism research focusing on industry and policy is undoubtedly grounded) as well as some degree of intellectual infantilism (see for example Callinicos, 1990; Benson & Stangroom, 2007). In terms of tourism disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary politics therefore, we have a largely bifurcated subject in research terms. A significant (and indeed the earliest) strand is economics and policy biased with an orientation towards 'real world' issues (for example, the role of the tourism multiplier; tourism and international development) the second and dominant strand is one of sociological impressionism. There is a middle ground, but it consists mainly of what might be termed 'research of duty', often small-scale quantitative studies of limited significance to theoretical or empirical development but relatively easy to produce in quantity and, of course, encouraged and indeed preferred in our publish or perish culture.

Including within tourism, as Thomas and Ormerod (2017) do, the subjects of events management and hospitality management, both subjects defined by professional practice, a slightly – but only slightly – different picture emerges. In recent years, loosely social scientific perspectives on hospitality have emerged and continue to develop, albeit slowly (Lashley, 2017). Inspired by the perceived limitations of hospitality *management* as a subject, these perspectives are not some attempt at a *post hoc* justification for that subject but a multi-/cross-disciplinary effort to come to terms with the subtlety of the concept of hospitality. In events management, theoretical developments have been much more rapid than in hospitality and broadly mirror those in the tourism subject more generally, dividing between an institutional approach – see for example (Bladen, Kennell, Abson, & Wilde, 2011) and a largely ignored and altogether more radical sociological approach, perhaps best typified (in the UK) by writers like Rojek (2013). One consequence of this is that 'events management' has grown rapidly as a subject in higher education and arguably established a credibility that hospitality management has yet to achieve.

3. Wider ideological considerations

No doubt many colleagues will reject the foregoing descriptions as caricatures, which of course they are. A perhaps over-exertive effort has been made to demonstrate one simple point – namely that like many academic subjects, tourism is multi-faceted – and one rather more complex point. This relates to the absence of any theoretical, conceptual and empirical synergies between tourism and its parent/sibling disciplines. Where are the *bodies* of work reflecting tourism's much vaunted wider intersection with society, incorporating, by definition, a broad number of theoretically

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