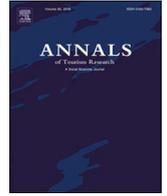


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Tourism transition in peripheral rural areas: Theories, issues and strategies



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between “rural peripherality” and “tourism transition” to describe the ongoing transformations within the tourist supply in rural areas, highlighting the importance these concepts are acquiring in both the theoretical debate and the formation of policies. Based on the classification of peripheral areas provided by the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas, the authors have undertaken a detailed statistical analysis at the municipality level, considering tourism as an important driver of socio-economical change. A model of governance based on “transition management” is put forward as a practical tool to guide these processes. A case study conducted through participatory action-research offered the opportunity to overcome existing governance practices and experiment with more adaptive methods to manage the transition.

Introduction

Aims of the study

The direct observation of some critical concerns at the municipality level in Italian peripheral rural areas led the authors to reflect upon both the theoretical paradigms and the possible strategies for supporting and overcoming some of the problems that confront local tourist development processes nowadays, such as: innovation and change, territorial governance, stakeholder collaboration, networking, and policy-making. The central question of the research design (Creswell, 2009) is then to explore whether the tourist offer in peripheral rural areas addresses a specific need that differentiates it from mainstream tourism and therefore requires alternative management policies.

On a broad theoretical level, the paper develops a critical analysis of the role contemporary tourism can play in peripheral rural contexts as a driver of change, particularly in terms of revitalisation and enhancement of countryside capital (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006). Special attention is paid to the particular conditions these processes require in order to be successfully realised. If, on the one hand, demand for non-popular-destinations in general (and for rural areas specifically) increasingly involves new tourist practices (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Urry, 1995), then, on the other, it is necessary to provide a renewed offer based on a wider and more efficient range of services (Hummelbrunner & Miglbauer, 1994) that are able to meet new tourists' expectations (Fiorello & Bo, 2012).

One of the main themes the authors have analysed is the territorial polarisation that occurred in terms of tourist development during the last few decades.

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Like other socio-economic phenomena, tourism organisation and marketing have been interpreted and managed according to a hierarchical “core-periphery” model (Britton, 1981; Chaperon & Bramwell, 2013; Lai & Li, 2012; Murphy & Andressen, 1988). Tourist flows, facilities and services have been concentrated in a few ganglion centres that have operated like attractive poles (Corigliano, Viganò, & Mottironi, 2015). According to the dependency theory developed in the 1960s and 70s (Britton, 1981), for example, the relation between core and periphery—as well as between urban and rural areas—may involve the stronger resorts or metropolitan areas (the cores) exploiting the weaker, which have often emerged as “pleasure peripheries” (Brown & Hall, 2000; Turner & Ash, 1975). Trading patterns have often been imposed that benefit the central powers. When this happens, tourist revenue generated at the periphery is seen as a means of reinforcing the business based in more developed, stronger areas. In several peripheral areas, tourist models have often resulted in enclave tourist resorts becoming connected with external capital rather than integrated in local economies (for example in Northern Europe: see Kauppila, Saarinen, & Leinonen, 2009).

In other places where investment in tourism has been absent (as in some rural areas of the Italian Apennines), the disappearance of the principal economic locally based activity—mainly agriculture—due to changes in food production, eventually caused demographic decline and abandonment. The concomitant decrease and aging of the population have often culminated in a critical situation where innovation has been prevented by poor exchange between socio-economic actors. Thus, these areas have usually been characterised by a low level of autonomy in planning capability. With poor access to and from markets, they have been largely absent from travel itineraries, apart from a small trickle of independent tourists.

Aside from its geographical location, therefore, the meaning of the term “periphery” itself has carried social, political and economic implications, often becoming a synonym for marginalisation, economic disadvantage, lack of technological infrastructure and political weakness.

In order to better understand the Italian context of the case study to be presented, some statistical data related to the tourist offer in peripheral areas have been analysed with reference to the framework proposed by the National Strategy of Inner Areas (NSIA), which has been experimenting since 2012. The classification of the municipalities used by the NSIA has been applied to analyse the dynamics of the tourist offer in the peripheries; specifically, how it has developed in different geographical locations, the extent to which it has diversified according to the various accommodation facilities, and how it has handled the prevailing negative demographic dynamics.

Peripheries and the transition to new rural tourist products

As Hummelbrunner and Miglbauer (1994) had already pointed out in the 90s, new cultural trends are re-orienting tourists' choices. These trends include: (a) a growing environmental awareness; (b) individualisation and an openness to new experiences; (c) an emergent appeal for highly original and tailor-made travel experiences; and (d) a growing desire to participate in and to be integrated within a local life-style. New tourist practices have affirmed the presence of these trends within the contemporary market and rural tourism has transformed into a complex, multi-faceted business covering a series of niche activities and thereby becoming an umbrella term (rather than a tightly defined phenomenon) with multiple market appeal (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). These types of product not only include agritourism but also wellness tourism, activity tourism, mountain biking and hiking, cultural and heritage tourism, food and wine tourism, and environmentally friendly activities. Tourists appear particularly attracted to differentiation and the search for distinctiveness (Baudrillard, 1974; Bourdieu, 1979) embodied by the countryside context and the pursuit of in-depth experiential value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), to authenticity (Lindholm, 2008; Salvatore, 2006), to slowness (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Salvatore, 2013), and to responsibility (Goodwin & Francis, 2003).

A new complexity is therefore appearing that offers peripheral rural areas the chance to reconsider their position in positive terms. The very same attributes that were previously considered to be disadvantageous are now being valued as new opportunities (Brown & Hall, 2000). Isolation and remoteness have come to represent peace and distinctiveness, rurality is considered to be a way of getting in touch with nature, and traditional lifestyles are the basis of a heritage experience.

As a result of all these changes, the relation between rural peripheral areas and tourism points towards a twofold perspective: firstly, the important change rurality itself has been undergoing (Garrod et al., 2006; Hoggart & Paniagua, 2001); and secondly, the downgrading of “mass tourism” and the related emergence of the new tourist practices (Fiorello & Bo, 2012), which are particularly sensitive to a “sense of place” (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015).

These transformations are closely related to each other and are captured by the authors with the theoretical concept of “tourism transition”. It is taken for granted that each transition comprises processes of co-evolution involving changes in stakeholders' needs and wants, in institutions, as well as in culture and practices (Kemp, Loorbach, & Rotmans, 2007). By “tourism transition” in this paper it is meant: (a) firstly, a cultural transformation of the rural peripheries from places of dependency from places of dependency and/or abandonment to ones of symbolic consumption (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015); (b) secondly, a paradigm shift related to a divergent conceptualisation of remoteness based on environmental, cultural and societal quality of life, rather than on marginality; (c) thirdly, a meaningful re-organisation of the tourist supply shifted towards common tourist products (Fiorello & Bo, 2012) that are the outcome of a new planning model focusing on “community-based” tourism (Jones, 2005).

All these conditions allow us to go beyond the stereotypical idea of the periphery as a “marginal area” and to re-consider its intrinsic attractive force in terms of tourist interest. Facing the challenge of becoming increasingly attractive tourist destinations, peripheries may now try to assert their agency (Chaperon & Bramwell, 2013). This means seizing the development opportunities presented by tourist flows more independently, favouring the re-activation of local resources in innovative ways, and potentially even triggering an escape from the crisis of traditional economics. An approach centred on agency offers the ability to overcome the determinism suggested by the concept of dependency because it acknowledges that local actors possess the ability to free themselves

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