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On the mobility of tourism mobilities

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COMMENTARY

On the mobility of tourism mobilities

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Tourism mobilities are increasing over time and over space. However, while overall growth is clearly of significance, there is a need for a greater interrogation of some of the underlying assumptions made with respect to the nature of tourism mobility in the highly North American and Eurocentric English language tourism literature. Therefore, closer examination of mobilities in the so-called emerging economies that are becoming of growing importance with respect to aggregate tourism consumption and production may shed significant light on our understandings of tourism and associated mobilities.

Keywords: mobility; immobility; globalisation; neoliberalism; mobility gap; academic fashion

Much has been made of international tourism arrivals surpassing 1 billion (1.035 billion) arrivals for the first time in history in 2012 (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2013). However, while this headline figure is important, it arguably draws attention away from some of the broader trends and patterns in tourism mobility that will provide some of the greatest challenges for tourism research, as well as ensuring the sustainability of tourism, in coming years (Hall, Gössling, & Scott, 2015).

Perhaps foremost in considering tourism patterns and flows is the need to recognise the enormous amount of domestic tourism activity that exists. Although there is no internationally consistent and comprehensive set of data for domestic tourism, the UNWTO estimated that in 2005 5 billion arrivals were by same-day visitors (4 billion domestic and 1 billion international) and 4.8 billion from arrivals of tourists staying overnight (4 billion domestic and 800 million international). Taking into account that an international trip can generate arrivals in more than one destination country, the number of trips is regarded as somewhat lower than the number of arrivals. For 2005 the global number of international tourist trips (i.e. trips by overnight visitors) was estimated at 750 million corresponding to 16% of the total number of tourist trips, with domestic trips representing 84% or 4 billion tourist trips (Scott et al., 2008). International and domestic overnight tourist arrivals are illustrated in Table 1 together with extrapolations for 2010, 2013, 2020 and 2030. Table 1 highlights that on the basis of current tourism and population trends then sometime around 2016–2017 the total number of visitor arrivals by international and domestic overnight visitors
will exceed the world’s population for the first time. This obviously does not mean that everyone is a tourist but it does reinforce the relative extent to which the world has become mobile and the need to understand the environmental, social and economic repercussions of such large-scale voluntary human movement as well as the consequence of immobility.

The growth of tourism-related mobility is related to a number of factors including overall increases in global population, urbanisation and the diffusion of a consumer culture that values travel-related consumption (Hall, 2005). Tourism, and the tourism industries, also serves to reinforce urbanisation processes and consumer cultures. Tourism is deeply embedded within contemporary neoliberal globalisation and the integration of economic capital with social and mobility capital (Harvey, 2005). The serial reproduction of tourism as fun and easily available has become one of the central elements of the representation of tourism in destination promotion (Hall, 2010). Current forms of tourism mobility also overlie and, in some cases transform, older forms of temporary mobility, such as pilgrimage and trading relationships. However, the reality is that tourism is an idealised commodity that is only accessible to some. Tourism is therefore part of a ‘mobility gap’ in which the ‘hypermobile’ or ‘kinetic elite’ travel ever more frequently, while many do not travel far for leisure or business at all (Gössling, Ceron, Dubios, & Hall, 2009). For example, it is estimated that the percentage of the world’s population participating in international air travel is in the order of just 2–3% (Peeters, Gössling, & Becken, 2006), even though it makes up around half of all international travel. The growing gap between rich and poor is therefore not only expressed in terms of capital and income (Atkinson & Piketty, 2007; Harvey, 2007, 2014; Piketty, 2014), but also with respect to mobility (Hall, 2010, 2011). In the African context, Pirie (2009, p. 22) has also powerfully noted:

The mobility gap may match the wide differentials of income and life chances on the continent; it is surely rooted in and expresses gaps in privilege and plenty. The condition presupposes what might be termed a ‘mobility morality’. Super-mobile people are at one end of the mobility scale. At the other extreme are Africans stranded in rural villages where mobility deprivation is acute. They are the kinetic underclass.

Pirie (2009, p. 21) also concludes that the ‘way we act on, and the way we think, talk and write about, geographical mobility needs reconceptualizing in terms of fairness, equity, environmental justice, and human rights’. Indeed, one of the great ironies of the study of tourism in the twenty-first century is that despite the adoption by many of the concept of mobility, there is relatively little attention to the less mobile in contemporary society.
Moreover, much attention is given to understanding mobility within a particular narrow Western sociological frame rather than seeking to understand temporary mobility from either different disciplinary perspectives, which of course may be time and space contingent, or from different geographical and cultural frames (Hall, 2013; Winter, 2009a, 2009b) including domestic and outbound tourism growth in non-Western countries (UNWTO, 2011, 2014).

Cohen and Cohen’s (2015a, 2015b) papers on tourism mobilities in emerging world regions therefore provide a welcome base from which to investigate non-European articulations and expressions of tourism-related mobility. They note the importance of travel had a multiplicity of origins in societies in emerging economies, with most not possessing an equivalent emic term to ‘tourism’ although different ‘mobility constellations’ could be identified. The value of this approach is also supported by Chen and Chang (2015), while Rogerson (2015) highlights the significance of underresearched mobilities of sub-Saharan Africa noting that in interpreting the complex flows of business mobilities in the African continent it is necessary to go beyond dominant Northern conceptions of what constitutes a business tourist and, in particular, to understand the activities of the informal-sector business tourist (see also Moswete & Darley, 2012). However, Coles (2015), building on some of his earlier work (Coles, Duval, & Hall, 2004; Coles & Hall, 2006), raises some valuable questions as to whether the tourism mobilities agenda travels well both in space, to its application in ‘new’ intellectual and geographical destinations, and over time, and the extent to which new academic fashions may have replaced interest in mobility even though the conceptual implications are not fully worked through (Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2005, 2006, 2009).

This cluster of papers in Current Issues in Tourism that focus on tourism mobility therefore provide a useful base from which to examine not only the notion of mobilities, but also the way in which ideas are able to be transported between different geographical and cultural contexts – or not. In so doing, they not only raise fundamental questions about the validity of comparative research in tourism studies, but also help generate awareness of many of the underexplored and unchallenged assumptions of tourism mobilities that exist within the dominant Anglo-American/Eurocentric literatures on tourism.

References


