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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Tourism and degrowth

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ABSTRACT

The necessity and consequences of the exponential growth in tourism activity experienced throughout the world over the past half-century have been increasingly questioned by an expanding body of activists and critical researchers. One of the emerging responses within this debate concerns calls for reversing the trend in pursuit of touristic 'degrowth'. This discussion has been inspired by a longstanding body of research problematizing the imperative and consequences of economic growth more generally, initiated by natural and social scientists. This article offers a state-of-the-art overview of the application of degrowth perspectives to discussions of (sustainable) tourism development and outlines a future agenda for research and praxis continuing this important line of inquiry.

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Introduction

The necessity and consequences of the exponential growth in tourism activity experienced throughout the world over the past half-century have been increasingly questioned by an expanding body of activists and critical researchers. One of the emerging responses within this debate concerns calls for reversing the trend in pursuit of touristic 'degrowth'. This discussion has been inspired by a longstanding body of research problematizing the imperative and consequences of economic growth more generally, initiated by natural and social scientists such as Georgescu-Roegen (1971), Illich (1973), Gorz (1972), Mies (2007), Waring (2003), Latouche (2009), Kallis et al. (2018) and Hickel (2021), among many others. This article offers a state-of-the-art overview of the application of degrowth perspectives to discussions of (sustainable) tourism development and outlines a future agenda for research and praxis continuing this important line of inquiry.

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Foundations of degrowth

The term degrowth was originally coined by Andre Gorz, in 1972, the same year in which *The Limits of Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) was published projecting the potential biophysical and social limits of capitalist economic development. Over time, the booming degrowth literature has advocated for a redistributive and democratically organized reduction of the throughput of energy and resources in order to bring economies in the Global North in balance within the biophysical environment as a path to enhancing social justice, equity and human flourishing (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019; Kallis et al., 2018; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Since 2008, discussion of degrowth has experienced a leap in scale, through the introduction of the discussion into Anglophone literature (e.g. Schneider et al., 2010). Since these first English-language texts on degrowth appeared, the rate of publications has been dizzying, making degrowth one of the most prominent topics of current debate within both academia and social movements (e.g. D'Alisa et al., 2015; Hickel, 2020; Kallis et al., 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Despite the increasing popularity of degrowth in academic circles, there are some objections to it as well as proposals that fundamentally question use of the term altogether. For example, other proposals prefer to mobilize concepts such as post-growth, post-development, post-capitalism, prosperity without growth, eco-socialism, environmental justice, and good living, among others (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Kothari et al., 2019). The utility of the degrowth concept as well as its applicability in lower-income Global South contexts has also been questioned (e.g. Escobar, 2015; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Lacerda-Nobre et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). In response, however, Hickel asserts that given uneven global geographic development, 'degrowth in the North is meant to facilitate a process of decolonization in the South, to the extent that it releases communities in the South from the pressures of atmospheric colonization and material extractivism' (2021, p. 1109). Escobar (2015) suggests, similarly, that by deconstructing the very notion and praxis of development, degrowth in the Global North (Büscher, 2019) could and shall facilitate redistribution and decolonization policies and practices in the context of planetary boundaries. This entails contracting consumption of resources by the elite social classes and expanding prosperity for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised classes.

One of the key proposals in degrowth scholarship entails pursuit of equitable, democratic, voluntary, and planned reduction of the current material throughput in high-income societies. Hickel (2020) clarifies that this decrease is not focused on GDP reductions, but rather on the amount of material and energy metabolized within a given society. Within capitalist societies, the absence of growth is frequently associated with a recession or a crisis, and those who tend to suffer most the consequences of capitalist crises are the subaltern classes, since vulnerability is largely a function of unequal resource access (Malm, 2020). Furthermore, the capitalist class, through adopting the shock doctrine, has benefited from past crises and catastrophes, and will presumably do the same in future events (Klein, 2007). Acknowledging these issues, degrowth is increasingly posed as an explicitly anti-capitalist political project (Schmelzer et al., 2022). For some, indeed, degrowth is considered an 'impossible

theorem' within capitalism given the imperative of continuous economic accumulation to ensure the system's survival (Foster, 2011).

Degrowth is furthermore a call to abandon the centrality of economic growth as an overarching societal objective, and instead to centralize an ethos of *care* (Perez Orozco, 2014). In this sense, a main foci of degrowth discussions is the fundamental, though insufficiently acknowledged, role of reproductive work (Mies, 2007; Waring, 2003). Reproductive activities provide the conditions for the continuous regeneration of society, although their timing tends to be slower than the pace of capitalist working times (Salleh, 2012). Degrowth thinking recognizes that both women and the environment are frequently marginalized vis-a-vis their (usually undervalued) positions within the formal economy, while they in fact provide the fundamental basis for the economy's reproduction and growth.

The political agenda outlined in degrowth scholarship is built upon multiple pillars (Hickel, 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022), some of which can be summarized as: (1) planned reduction of environmental impact; (2) restriction of least necessary economic activities, to instead expand the most important sectors, such as health, education, public transport, housing, and access to information and care; (3) improvement of working conditions, including proposals for working-time reduction, and establishment of a universal basic income (UBI), thereby ensuring autonomy and collective self-organization; (4) reduction of inequality through massive income and wealth redistribution within and across national boundaries; (5) expansion of public goods and services; and (6) an ecological transition to reverse the environmental crisis.

Despite the fact that most of the academic literature on degrowth remains largely abstract and theoretical, there is a growing body of research focused on its practical applications too. Without pretending to be exhaustive, some of the topics analysed from a degrowth approach are, among others: degrowth-based alternatives in cities like Stuttgart (Schmid, 2021); food-systems (Nelson & Edwards, 2021); housing (Nelson & Schneider, 2018); urban planning (Krähmer, 2022; Xue, 2021); energy transitions (Keyßer & Lenzen, 2022; Kunze & Becker, 2015); blue degrowth (Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020); technology (Kerschner et al., 2018); labor relations (Barca, 2019); degrowth and feminism (Hanaček et al., 2020); and degrowth and the pluriverse (Kaul et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Yet some still contend that degrowth remains too focused on small-scale and grassroots movements rather than confronting the state and global politics (Schwartzman, 2012). Nonetheless, the question of the state and institutional transformation have long been a focus for degrowth scholars too (Kallis, 2013; D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020), in terms of the need for redistribution of wealth *via* setting maximum income thresholds (D'Alisa et al., 2015), public regulation of activity licenses, or establishment of progressive pricing for consumption and disposal (Lehtinen, 2018).

Approaches to touristic degrowth

Global tourism has become one key factor in the process of environmental degradation at a planetary scale (Hall et al., 2015) and a paramount expression of a 'fossil capitalism' that has been revealed as highly vulnerable to chronic emergencies (Malm, 2016, 2020). Critical tourism scholars have long analysed the socio-environmental

costs and conflicts associated with touristification. The questions of limits and carrying capacity were introduced early in tourism studies (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and critical analysis of the tourist industry as a capitalist mode of accumulation has grown since Britton's (1991) initial analysis. Some of these critical approaches emerged within discussion of potential for Sustainable Tourism (ST) to redress negative impacts as a component of the global sustainable development agenda. In 1998, Mowforth and Munt (2016) published a vibrant critique of the potential to pursue sustainable tourism under capitalism. Yet the hegemonic vision of ST was very much Brundtland-as-Usual inspired, and erected on fragile theoretical foundations (Sharpley, 2020). As an example, while the UNWTO theoretically promotes ST, at the same time its unwavering promotion of global tourism growth seems to be blind to copious scientific evidence concerning the climate change impacts of such growth (Gössling & Peeters, 2015; Keyßer & Lenzen, 2021; Sun et al., 2022). Tourism-driven economic growth cannot be simply 'made sustainable' for a number of reasons, including the inherent impossibility of sufficiently 'decoupling' growth from environmental impacts (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). In this regard, Chakraborty (2021) argues that for tourism to contribute to sustainability it must be reconceptualized from the perspective of biophysical limits.

Critiques of the hegemonic ST vision have made important contributions to re-politicizing the sustainability question. However, there is a growing divide between critical academic discourse and tourism practice, which has predominantly adhered to this conventional vision (Sharpley, 2020). Consequently, some scholars have advanced alternative theoretical proposals that more radically problematize the relationship between tourism and environment. In 2009, coinciding with the global financial meltdown, two initial works advocated a paradigm shift towards degrowth tourism (Hall, 2009) and post-development tourism (Sharpley, 2009). Eventually, a number of critical tourism scholars joined the debate to problematize touristification from a degrowth perspective. It is in this context that a succession of works have been published since 2018, most significantly the following books: *Degrowth in Tourism* (Andriotis, 2018); *Tourism and Degrowth* (Fletcher et al., 2020); *Degrowth and Tourism* (Hall et al., 2021); and *Issues and Cases of Degrowth in Tourism* (Andriotis, 2021).

When analysing the current state of research on tourism degrowth, Lundmark et al. (2021: 8) point out that there is 'a strong focus on Europe and especially the Mediterranean region, concentrating on Barcelona, Costa del Sol, Malaga and Marbella, as well as coastal tourism'. This emphasis is not random, but has resulted from a convergence of two key factors: first, the presence of a dynamic research collective on degrowth around the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB); second, the fact that intensification of touristification combined with austerity policies and increasing inequality has been particularly significant in that region. Social movements and activist scholars located in these spaces have denounced this process of profound touristic commodification – commonly labelled 'overtourism' – and in response have introduced discussion of *decreixement turistic* (or touristic degrowth) alongside claims to the right to the city (Blanco-Romero et al., 2019; Milano et al., 2019).

Thus far, the body of research on tourism degrowth has focused *inter alia* on the following topics. First, development of the theoretical basis and research agenda on tourism degrowth (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Second,

critical analysis of tourism capital accumulation, its contradictions and social contestation (e.g. Navarro-Jurado et al., 2019). Third, from a demand-side perspective, a focus on degrowth-inspired travelling (e.g. Andriotis, 2018; Díaz-Soria, 2017). Fourth, tourism degrowth policies and planning and their own contradictions (e.g. Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019). Fifth, the relationship among energy, climate change and tourism degrowth (e.g. Adedoyin & Bekun, 2020; Balsalobre-Lorente, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2023; Torres & Moranta, 2020). Sixth, reconceptualization of tourism in light of climate change, emphasizing the role of domestic or proximity tourism as a potential degrowth strategy (e.g. Ballantine, 2021; Cañada & Izcara, 2021; Romagosa, 2020). Seventh, discourse analysis of tourism degrowth and appropriation of the term by the ruling class for greenwashing (e.g. Gascón, 2019; Valdivielso & Moranta, 2019). Eighth, putting degrowth tourism to work, particularly in relation to community-based tourism (e.g. Cañada, 2021; Ruíz-Ballesteros, 2021).

However, it is important to recognize that while the 'tourism degrowth' term is relatively recent, many of the ideas and topics explored under that rubric have been investigated for some time from different theoretical perspectives. In this sense, discussion of tourism degrowth shares common threads with proposals and case studies from the political ecology of tourism (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016), tourism and feminism (Devine & Ojeda, 2017), political economy of tourism (Bianchi, 2018; Bianchi & de Man, 2021), post-capitalist tourism (Fletcher et al., 2021), and convivial tourism (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020), among others. More important than the term of analysis itself, therefore, is the critical problematization of touristification and building a political agenda for transforming tourism for reproduction of life rather than reproduction of capital.

Finally, based on existing research and proposals from grassroots degrowth movements, touristic degrowth can be understood as a multi-layer strategy based on the following principles:

1. resistance against the *structural* (as opposed to direct, physical) violence (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020) of tourism development, touristification and dispossession;
2. planned reduction of the resources used and waste produced by tourism activities;
3. de-touristification as a downsizing of tourism, particularly within very touristified spaces, combined with a process of degrowth-inspired economic diversification;
4. post-capitalist economic and social re-organization of the tourism industry, which implies its collective appropriation and socialisation;
5. rethinking tourism, leisure and recreation in times of chronic emergencies for the reproduction of life and conviviality; and
6. de-commodification of tourism, leisure and recreation.

A future research agenda

Looking to the future, we propose that the potential for tourism degrowth can be enhanced by pursuing the various lines of research outlined by Fletcher et al. (2019):

1. *Tourism and sustainability as a political question.* This strand of analysis would use the banner of tourism degrowth as a strategy to re-politicize tourism development generally and sustainable tourism in particular.
2. *Distribution of costs and benefits within tourism development and management.* This line of research would undertake critical analysis of the political economy and political ecology of tourism's function as a form of capital accumulation, particularly in terms of who gains and who loses in the process of tourism development.
3. *The biophysical limits to tourism growth.* This research would investigate the social and biophysical costs of tourism development under capitalism, providing an assessment of the ecological costs and forms of metabolism entailed in this process.
4. *Post-capitalist tourism in practice.* This agenda would study practices of tourism degrowth (explicit or implicit) and their contradictions currently in operation or gestation throughout the world.
5. *Commoning tourism and redistributing value.* Following from the preceding, this line of investigation would explore the potential for tourism degrowth to transform the political and economic organization of the industry, particularly in pursuit of collectivization or redistribution of surplus value.
6. *Tourism degrowth as de-touristification.* This research would contribute to exploring the potential of tourism degrowth to function as de-branding, de-touristification or 'detourism' – that is, in reducing the intensity and impacts of tourism particularly in saturated destinations, and in this way facilitating a radical rethinking of the tourism 'industry'.
7. *The right to metabolism.* This agenda would seek to more clearly define and conceptualize tourism degrowth as a reduction of the material and energy flows required by tourism capital, on the one hand, as well as a transformation of the political organization of material and energy flows within a triple movement scenario, on the other, in this way promoting the 'right to metabolism' as a radical political project.

Conclusions

The biophysical, cultural and political stakes surrounding tourism's socio-ecological transformation are extremely high, and adequately addressing these requires multiple lenses, critical perspectives, methodological frameworks and participatory approaches. The future research programme we propose is thus based on harnessing the potential for tourism degrowth as a strategy to repoliticize questions of tourism development in general and sustainable tourism particularly. This point of departure frees the study of tourism from any preconceived bias favouring the industry *a priori*. From this vantage point, a critical analysis of the role of tourism as a form of uneven capitalist development can be undertaken. This analysis should include diagnosis of the social and biophysical costs of tourism development under capitalism, to assess potential for transforming the industry's political and economic organization. The culmination of this inquiry will entail contributing constructively to policy and practice, through

the study of existing examples of touristic degrowth (explicit or implicit). For practical purposes, the most saturated tourist destinations are the best and most urgent 'laboratories', or points of departure, within which to investigate the potential of degrowth to reduce tourism's intensity and impacts. Finally, we highlight again the need to recognize and elaborate the 'right to metabolism', defined as a radical political project that explores the potential for proportional reduction of the flows of materials and energy required by tourism, as well as political reorganization of these flows, to facilitate socio-ecological transformation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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