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Overtourism and Local Political Debate: is the Over-Touristification of Cities Being Observed through a Broken Lens?

Abstract: The article aims to discuss how the mutual impact of anti-tourism movements and politics influences the picture of overtourism disseminated by the media. The examples of Barcelona and Amsterdam presented show how anti-tourism movements, and their postulates, merge with political programs and become a part of local or even domestic political debate. Politicians and supporting media have become interested in over-heating emotions for political reasons. As a result, the picture presented in the media might not mirror precisely the complex phenomenon of overtourism being experienced differently in different places in the same city, at different moments, and by different residents.

Keywords: anti-tourism movements; grassroots organizations; local politics; overtourism

Introduction

The phenomenon of overtourism is strongly associated with the thorny relationship between visitors and residents, and the continuous exchange between the two (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019). This has resulted in anti-tourism protests in highly visited European cities such as Berlin (Novy, 2018), Venice (Seraphin, Sheeran, Pilato, 2018; Visentin, Bertocchi, 2019), Barcelona (Bourliataux-Lajoinie, Dosquet, del Olmo Arriaga, 2019), Amsterdam (Pinkster, Boterman, 2017), and Dubrovnik (Abbasian, Onn, Arnautovic, 2019), as well as in other parts of the world, such as Central America or Southeast Asia (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019). With local protests, grassroots anti-tourism movements have emerged (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020) which have become the voices of local people but also stimulated further protests (Ruiz, 2022).

Successful grassroots movements have become involved in local politics, but the influence is bi-directional. This article aims to discuss how this mutual impact between politics and anti-tourism movements influences the picture of overtourism disseminated by the media. The risk of communication biases is great as the topic involves high emotions from residents (often in groups) (Saretzki, Wöhler, 2022). The literature review is supported by a study of two significant examples: Barcelona and Amsterdam. The development of grassroots movements in these cities illustrates how these movements became involved in local and even country-wide politics and the consequences of this.

The article is intended to be a voice in the discussion, presenting new ways of interpreting the research results already conducted in numerous cities. The conclusions suggest the necessity of a very careful analysis of the picture of overtourism in particular cities as the phenomenon observed can be very diverse, differently perceived by different groups of citizens, and finally used by particular political groupings according to their current political interests. This is also true for academic studies, as many are based on analyzing media materials without a deep understanding of the political line that a particular newspaper or internet news portal represents. It is difficult to get an objective picture of the phenomenon in an analyzed city without properly understanding the link between local politics and anti-tourism movements.

Here a case study method is used to analyze the examples of Barcelona and Amsterdam. The brief studies are supported by a literature review, including texts from the popular everyday press. This is why the outcome can only present initial results but may be a starting point to further academic debate and research.

Overtourism, tourism-phobia and social conflicts in cities

The negative impact of tourism exercised in numerous destinations heavily visited by tourists has been observed for a long time (Gilbert, Clark, 1997; Haralambopoulos, Pizam, 1996), rapid growth in numbers of global tourism (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019; UNWTO, 2020) accompanied by numerous qualitative changes in the nature of contemporary tourism (search for authenticity, platform economy; experience economy; city breaks etc.) (Żemła, 2020) however have led to overtourism being perceived as a phenomenon new and characteristic for the second and third decades of the 21st century (Żemła, 2020). After several years of extensive studies on this phenomenon, the academic debate is still open, and we are far from a commonly accepted and universal definition and description of overtourism (Pasquinelli et al., 2021). It appears that it is hardly possible to sum up overtourism in a simple formula, as it is used by a large number of stakeholders (Ruiz, 2022). However, several issues lie at the heart of the idea and can be attributed to it (Capocchi et al., 2021), among them, the changing nature of urban tourism and the growing role of cities as tourism destinations being among the most significant (Żemła, 2020). Overtourism has been reported in the academic literature in numerous European cities such as Barcelona (Álvarez-Sousa, 2021; Goodwin, 2021), Venice (Goodwin, 2021; Bertocchi, Camatti, 2022), Dubrovnik (Panayiotopoulos, Pisano, 2019), Prague (Kacprzak, 2021) and Kraków (Szromek, Walas, Kruczek, 2020; Szromek, Walas, Kruczek, 2022). Consequently, numerous and diverse conflicts around city tourism development have started to be found (Colomb, Novy, 2016; Szromek, Walas, Kruczek, 2020; Zmyślony, Kowalczyk-Anioł, Dembińska, 2020). Some initiatives, such as Tourism Friendly Cities, have been established to develop more sustainability (Szromek, Walas, Kruczek,

2022). However, strong discontent among resident groups has resulted in numerous mass and sometimes violent protests, followed by the development of anti-tourism movements in many cities (Ruiz, 2022). Finally, many urban destinations have exercised something that has started to be labeled in the literature as 'tourism-phobia' (Ramos, Mundet, 2021). Therefore, tourism research has partly shifted to conflict-related studies dealing with the global politicization of tourism in urban spaces (Ruiz, 2022).

Tourism for many years, especially after the global financial crisis of 2008–2010, has been perceived as one of the most influential drivers of the socio-economic development of cities (Namberger et al., 2019). Tourism has been at the heart of city revitalization plans worldwide. In the post-industrial age, cities have moved from their status as centers of industrial production to be centers of consumption, and tourism has been expected to play a focal role (Clancy, 2019: 20). The significant economic benefits to cities have been accompanied, however, by high costs, mainly of a socio-cultural but also economic nature (Amore, Falk, Adie, 2020; Żemła, 2020). These costs might have been considered unexpected, as the situation in tourism cities has turned out to be different than in many other traditional and thoroughly studied destinations such as mountain and seaside resorts (Namberger et al., 2019; Żemła, 2020). According to Clancy (2019: 20), 'how those costs and benefits are distributed lies at the heart of contemporary protests concerning over-tourism'. The main problem is the fact that, in most cases, the majority of residents earn their living outside of tourism and cannot see any positive effect of tourism development on their financial status (Żemła, Szromek, 2021). Citizens have felt excluded, not only from benefits but from decision-making. Instead, much of the measurement of tourism's impact is superficial, focusing mainly on arrivals and gross earnings, and stakeholder consultations frequently involve only tourism providers and tourists themselves (Clancy, 2019). Protest and resistance are often the effects of the increasing touristification of particular parts of cities (Saretzki, Wöhler, 2022).

One of the common sources of conflict between hosts and guests in tourism cities is competition for access to public spaces between these two groups (Goodwin, 2017). The touristification of everyday life affects residents' "as if tourists" attitudes (Lloyd, Clark, 2001); similar to urban tourists, they consume the "new urban culture devoted to aesthetic pursuits" (Judd, 2003), use the same urban infrastructure, and follow the same activities. In doing so, the boundaries between tourists (out-of-town), visitors from other city districts (so-called internal tourists), and residents, as well as distinctions between tourism and everyday life, blur (Ashworth, Page, 2011; Saretzki, Wöhler, 2022).

The increasing conflicts between host communities and tourists and, at the beginning, spontaneous protests have led to new urban social movements in different destinations (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019: 2). Groups of local activists have been created based on residents' perceptions and dissatisfaction, or even anger, towards unwanted forms and methods of tourism development (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020).

Anti-tourism attitudes and social movements

Anti-tourism social movements have recently become a characteristic element of the landscape of over-touristified cities. Their appearance and development are explained based on contemporary sociological theories. According to Milano, Novelli, Cheer (2020), original social movements theory, as advanced over four decades ago, as well as new social movements

theory, state that the mobilization of grassroots actors and organized activists is a vital re-sponse to the problematic socio-political, economic and environmental transformations that marginalize and undermine ecological endowments. For many years, social movements were perceived as focused on workers' struggles against precarious working conditions, social exclusion, sex discrimination, healthcare services, gender inequality and the privatization of education (Cohen, Rai, 2000). However, critical debates related to the visitor economy and tourism have recently become focal to social movement narratives, as evidenced in debates and assemblies that appeal for action (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020). The social movement theory considers this kind of social activism as bottom-up and predicated on rectifying problematic disjunctures following socio-economic, political and environmental changes. Milano, Novelli, Cheer (2020) mention advocacy groups as "social movement networks" based on individuals in networks with common aspirations around attaining positions of democratic reform, social justice, fairness and redress for circumstances which are often characterized by poor governance, deficient planning, mismanagement, etc.

Searching for the theoretical background of social movements in tourism Maitland (2007) refers to conflicts resulting from tourism-related transformations in cities as an out-come of class opposition; however, most scholars mention significant differences between these two issues. According to Ruiz (2022), the actors participating in tourism-related social movements are distinct from classic revolutionary factory workers, as commonly referred to in Keynesian discourses, and are linked with middle-class urbanites struggling to preserve and maintain their quality of life amidst contemporary postindustrial neoliberal contexts.

Local activist groups showing an anti-tourism attitude or being involved in the impair-ment of tourism are not a new phenomenon, and their beginning might be found as early as the 1950s (Ruiz, 2022). In world tourism cities specifically, the overtourism discourse is rooted in the growing concern of tourism development models which lead to inflationary effects on the real estate market, saturation and privatization of public spaces, a decrease in inhabitants' purchasing power, precarious working conditions and the transformation of the commercial fabric of cities that undermine their essential characteristics (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020). The factors described above are focal in the process of touristification and of the social movements and their postulates. Finally, this has led to what was described by Colomb and Novy (2016) as urban tourism politicization from below in international tourist hotspots in almost all continents.

It is necessary to remember that the postulates of local anti-tourism movements are quite diverse mirroring differing problems connected with overtourism development in particular cities, and these reflect the numerous local conditions generating those prob-lems. Typically, one of the main topics raised by social movements in port cities such as Venice and Barcelona is the problem of the externalities of cruise tourism development which are extremely negative (González, 2018; Goodwin, 2021). In Barcelona, issues having their genesis in the real estate bubble and economic crisis of 2008–2011 (Blanco-Romero, Blázquez-Salom, Cànoves, 2018), and in Berlin, still having unsolved real estate problems rooted in the communist times, one of the most prominent topics connected with tourism development is short-term rental and its devastating impact on the local housing market (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019). Protests in Kraków and Seville were directed mainly against the hyper-gentrification of the old cities (Jover, Díaz-Parra, 2022; Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2019; Zmyślony, Kowalczyk-Anioł, Dembińska, 2020). In Amsterdam, the biggest issue was the misbehavior of visitors searching for drugs and sex experiences (Araya López, 2020).

Political position of anti-tourism social movements

Anti-tourism social movements and their activist participants, especially in the early phase of development of this kind of grassroots movement, tend to be presented in rather a romantic manner in numerous media accounts (Ledsom, 2019) and sometimes in academic debate too (O'Regan et al., 2022; Ruiz, 2022). They are described as 'local heroes' pronouncing local anger and the voices of the 'silent majority.' Ruiz (2022) presents an example of an organization from Barcelona describing itself as a political agent and as a representative of "the people" and that they mediate between "us" and the city government. Such narration cannot be criticized as a rule, as in numerous examples especially in the emergence phase of the development of anti-tourism movements. There are numerous reasons why the anti-tourism movements are growing in strength and becoming a part of the local political landscape, with all the typical features and brutality of political competition.

Even though many anti-tourism movements did not express any political views at the beginning, and many are still trying to be politically neutral, their agenda is strongly influenced by such views (Ruiz, 2022). In almost all cases, their postulates are derived from the degrowth paradigm (Andriotis, 2018; Dwyer, 2023; Lundmark, Zhang, Hall, 2020) and critique of the neoliberal doctrine (Saretzki, Wöhler, 2022). According to Milano, Novelli, Cheer (2020: 1862), the link between degrowth and social movements 'might be the after effect of how some contemporary social activism is predicated on growth and transformation that is disproportionately justified upon an overarching economic rationale to maintain productivity, employment and income growth'. This means social movements find themselves in opposition to globalization and neoliberal agendas. Initially, the degrowth discourse overlapped with the transition from modernity to postmodernity and coincided with the turn from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism (Harvey, 1990). Together with the neoliberal city boom in the 1970s, urban areas were a place of massive property improvement, increased population densities, housing speculation and higher levels of economic activity (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020).

Embeddedness in the critique of the neoliberal order made numerous anti-tourism social movements promising partners for other movements more engaged with local and national policy, especially, but not only, those representing leftist views. Additionally, in a few urban destinations, several groups exist that do not necessarily agree on all the objectives but tend to collaborate (Ruiz, 2022). For instance, some groups in Venice are related to tourism but have different focuses. Among them, it is possible to point to *ASC Venezia* (housing), *Comitato No Grandi Navi* (ports), *Venezia Pulita* (ecology), *Gruppo25Aprile* and *OPA* (with interests in broad topics related to tourism) (Ruiz, 2022). Such plurality may introduce competition between the groups but also enhance cooperation. For example, *Comitato No Grandi Navi* and *Gruppo25Aprile* co-organized a big demonstration with almost 10,000 participants in 2019 (Cricket, 2019). Groups either amalgamating or working together has also enhanced the political position of local anti-tourism groupings in Venice. As a result, some of them gained seats on Venice City Council in 2020 (Ruiz, 2022). A similar situation can be seen in Barcelona (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020).

Local anti-tourism movements gained an even more significant position in local politics after they entered international collaboration. The most commonly given example of such cooperation is the emergence of the Network of Southern European Cities against Touristification (*Sud d'Europa contra la Turistització* – SETnet), which includes groups from

Barcelona, Ibiza, Palma de Mallorca, Malta, Florence and Venice, among others (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019). The network was established in May 2018 during the Neighbourhood Forum on Tourism (*Foro Vecinal sobre Turismo*) held in Barcelona (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020). Such international collaboration also changed the perception of overtourism among social movements. In this new perception, '*overtourism seems to represent a broad set of global political demands and struggles rather than a purely local economic, social or environmental problem*' (Ruiz, 2022: 149).

Local elections in big cities play a much more critical and broader role in nationwide "big" politics than just a local event. Especially in countries where mayors are directly elected, mayors of big cities are among the most powerful and significant positions in nationwide politics (Kolczyński, 2015). The example of the president (mayor) of Warsaw can be pointed out as this position is perceived as ranking number five in the entire country (after the national president, the speakers of the two chambers of parliament, and the prime minister). This makes local elections in big cities as rather being played out between large nationwide political parties, than a game for strong candidates from local movements.

The strong position of local movements and their candidates would not be possible without cooperation with political parties. After that, willing or not, they become a part of nationwide political competition with all its consequences. Embedded in civic activism and a critique of the neoliberal economic order, social movements became natural partners for leftist parties and, immediately after, adversaries for the right. This has made overtourism and its perception a political issue, with the media supporting leading parties in giving appropriate political accounts. For example, the archives of Gazeta Wyborcza, the biggest Polish newspaper associated with leftist and centrist views, contain 17 texts on overtourism, all presenting a narrative typical for anti-tourism social movements. Opposed to this, the archives of Do Rzeczy, one of the biggest newspapers supporting conservative views, do not contain a single text with the term "overtourism" (both archives accessed in November 2023). This is quite typical of the overtourism debate. As Russo et al. (2022) state, while many arguments are presented by anti-tourism movements in the public debate, arguments presenting the positive impact of tourism on city development are almost absent.

Examples of the political success of anti-tourism activists and movements

The most prominent example of the political success of social anti-tourism movements and activists is the story of the ABTS group and its leader, Ada Colau, in Barcelona. The genesis of grassroots organizations in Barcelona lies in 2009 and the global financial crisis (Russo et al., 2022) when Barcelona and the whole of Spain at that time were hit severely by the burst of the real estate market bubble. Among the first grassroots organizations was *Plataforma para Vítimas de Hipotecas* (Platform for Mortgage Victims; PAH), run by Ada Colau. The sudden growth of tourism in the city, accompanied by short-term rental development, even complicated the situation in the real estate market, making houses and apartments less and less available for residents. Growing numbers of tourists and emerging competition between locals and visitors to use public spaces in the city made many people, as well as local organizations, increasingly sceptical towards uncontrolled tourism development, and anti-tourism postulates arose in the following years. In November 2015, some 28 residents'

organizations from different neighborhoods and other groups and bodies came together to form the *Assemblea de Barris per un Turisme Sostenible* (Neighbourhood Assembly for Sustainable Tourism or ABTS) (Ramos, Mundet, 2021). At the same time, grassroots organizations entered local politics, establishing their local political party, *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in Common), which took part in local elections in 2015. In both cases, Ada Colau was among the leaders. *Barcelona en Comú* was successful in the elections and took 11 seats out of 41 on the city council. As an effect, Ada Colau was appointed as mayor, which was possible thanks to a coalition with the leftist party PSC. This event has helped foster a more open debate on tourism-related issues and legitimized grassroots movements on the Barcelona Tourism and City Board (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020). At the same time, ABTS grew in power and entered international cooperation. In 2016 and 2018 Barcelona and ABTS hosted two international meetings of grassroots anti-tourism organizations from several countries – *Foro Vecinal sobre Turismo* (Neighbourhood Forum on Tourism). These events resulted in the emergence of *Sud d'Europa contra la Turistització* (Southern European Cities against Touristification; SET Network), which at the beginning was a cooperation network of social movements from different cities in Spain, Italy, Portugal and Malta (Milano, Novelli, Cheer, 2020).

Ada Colau, as mayor, implemented numerous regulations to prioritize residents' needs over tourism development. In particular, strict regulations were imposed on short-term rentals and the building of new accommodation facilities. At the same time, tourism was still growing, as well as its pressure, and it became even more important in local public debate (Russo et al., 2022). In 2019, the coalition of *Barcelona en Comú* and PSC was successful in the local election again, and Ada Colau started her second term. During these two terms, Ada Colau faced numerous problems other than the issue of overtourism which had led her to power. During the Catalan independence debate in 2017, the coalition of *Barcelona en Comú* and PSC, and Ada Colau, remained loyal to Madrid's government. She was also the face of pandemic lockdowns in the city. Finally, she was involved in corruption affairs and lost her seat in the election in 2023.

A different story of a merger of anti-tourism postulates and political programs can be found in Amsterdam. As a result of the local election in 2018, Femke Halsema, representing the leftist and green GroenLinks party, was appointed Mayor of Amsterdam. Even though she had no anti-tourism background she became the voice of the anti-tourism movement. Halsema's views on problems related to tourism might well be mirrored by a few sentences presented in the press: "I think, in reaction to the economic crisis of 2008, Amsterdam probably sold itself short. We were longing for many more tourists and international travellers, and it changed the atmosphere. Not because of the number of people but the kinds of people that were attracted to Amsterdam" (Boztas, 2020). She advocated for the profile of city visitors to be changed. She put forward limiting access to soft drugs to residents only, more strict regulations on the sex services sector, and implementing high fees for violating local rules regarding residents' sense of security and peace, to achieve this. 'Enjoy and Respect' – campaigns to make tourists aware that there are also people living in the tourist-historic city were also implemented (Hospers, 2019). Not all of her initiatives were successful however in city council voting.

Conclusions

The examples of Barcelona and Amsterdam presented show how anti-tourism postulates gain their positions in political programs, and illustrate two forms of this process. In the Barcelona example, anti-tourism movements and activists became powerful local politicians (Ruiz, 2022). In the Amsterdam example, the anti-tourism postulates were adopted by significant existing political parties (Boztas, 2020). The severe competition between political parties results in particular parties positioning themselves on tourism, and based on coalitions merging their programs. As *Barcelona en Comú* and Colau took a loyalist position during the Catalan dispute on the country's independence, their anti-tourism postulates became closer to other loyalist parties and against Catalan separatists. Similarly, the anti-tourism postulates presented by the leftist Halsema were neglected by their rightist opponents on the city council (Boztas, 2020). In both cities and countries, influential media publications support both wings of the political scene. Also, these media create a picture of the problem in line with a particular political program, and they heat or cool local emotions toward overtourism (Hospers, 2019). This is facilitated by the fact that problems connected with overtourism are diverse and differently experienced by particular residents and also changeable over time due to the seasonal nature of tourism. Still, the media often offer a one-dimensional black and white picture instead of objective and in-depth analysis. Building academic knowledge based on this picture is risky and not effective.

The engagement of politicians and political parties, as well as their supporting media, has led to the situation that overtourism has become part of the mainstream in political debate, and some parties, usually representing leftist views, are interested in over-heating the topic and the emotions around it. This task might be realized by the media when presenting anti-tourism narratives. In this way, media relations do not necessarily reflect the social emotions around tourism development (Hospers, 2019) but also manage them and keep them high. It does not mean that the problem is artificial, but there is a risk that the picture derived from media analysis might be exaggerated. This is important as numerous academic studies on overtourism are also based on media analysis, often without an analysis of the political engagement of the media being used (Pasquinelli et al., 2021; Phi, 2020).

Putting overtourism discourse in the heart of political debate has made the term presented over-simplified and one-dimensional. In narratives of social movements and their political partners' tourism has started to be presented as 'purely evil' (Russo et al., 2022), however, the reality is often much more complex. The intensity of tourism development is not equal in different parts of a city and is seasonal (Amore, Falk, Adie, 2020) which is why the emotions raised among citizens are also subject to changes in time and place (Żemła, Szromek, 2021). People living and working in different districts point to different tourism-related problems. Additionally, people from different social groups tend to show diverse attitudes towards tourism. Kruczek, Szromek, Żemła (2023) detected that, for example, younger residents tend to be much more tolerant towards tourism development.

Limitations

The issue of the interrelations between local politics and the perception of overtourism in particular European cities needs to be further studied. In fact, it is only just beginning. The presented paper is just one starting point, and it is not intended to offer any solutions.

At this stage, it is not even intended to give a full picture of the existing relations. The aim is to turn attention to a phenomenon that is very interesting and important for the contemporary understanding of overtourism. In that sense, this text is intended to be rather a voice in the discussion than offer methodologically rigorous research. However, it has presented examples of two significant European metropolises where all the issues described were found convincing and that the topic is worth researchers' attention.

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