

1. Tourism in the Era of Anthropocene. Only Clumsy Solutions for a Wicked Problem

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Abstract

The tourism and travel industry can produce revenue and employment, giving humanity an opportunity for economic growth even after global crises. Due to its intrinsic force of recovery and development, it is time to rethink tourism to mitigate its impact and implement its sustainability in the era of the Anthropocene. This chapter aims to critically discuss the topic of sustainable tourism in the Anthropocene under the theoretical perspective proposed by the Cultural Theory, to interpret and give sense to policies which govern human mobility, focusing the attention on sustainable tourism. After resuming the concept of Anthropocene and the ongoing debate about its meaning, the chapter discusses sustainable tourism as a wicked problem and analyzes the eventuality to deal with the issue only by means of “clumsy solutions” and adopting fatiguing tools, such as stakeholders’ analysis, stakeholder involvement, and social network analysis.

Keywords:

Sustainable Tourism; Cultural Theory; Geography; Wicked Problems; Clumsy Solutions

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1. Introduction: theme, focus, and reference theory

After decades of uninterrupted growth and after recovering from the global financial crisis of 2008, international tourist arrivals reached a total number of 1.5 billion in 2019. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2020-2021 the number of international arrivals decreased by one billion, but with a slow and steady recovery over time. The latest UNWTO World Tourism Barometer reports that international tourist arrivals in all parts of the world have nearly tripled from January to July 2022 compared to the same period in 2021. The geographical areas that showed a strong recovery are Europe and the Middle East, followed by the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific (UNWTO, n. d.). The varying performances between geographical areas are due to different policies to contain the pandemic. Worldwide, the recovery of the travel and tourism industry is neat. The improving economic trend is a good thing, but the rebound in tourist numbers will coincide with new global consequences. Over time, tourism is an industry that can produce revenue and employment, giving humanity an opportunity for economic growth. Due to its intrinsic force of recovery and development, it is time to rethink tourism to mitigate its impact and implement its sustainability in the era of the Anthropocene.

This chapter aims to critically discuss this topic under the theoretical perspective proposed by the Cultural Theory (Douglas, 2007; Thompson, 2018), to interpret and give sense to policies which govern human mobility, focusing on the sustainability of the tourism and travel industry. Thus, the remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. The next section resumes the concept of Anthropocene and its still debated meaning. The third section discusses sustainable tourism as a wicked problem (Rittel, 1972; Buchanan, 1992). The fourth section analyzes the possibility to treat the issue of tourism in the Anthropocene, namely sustainable tourism, only using “clumsy solutions” (Verweij *et al.*, 2006), involving various tools, such as stakeholder analysis, stakeholder involvement, and social network analysis. All these tools entail costly, fatiguing, and never-ending practices, which nevertheless may find a solution to complex issues (Lindblom, 1959; Grimble, *et al.* 1995; Varvasovsky, Brugha 2000). The last section reports comments and conclusions.

2. Defining the Anthropocene

Around the end of the last century, Paul Crutzen and Eugen Stoemer (2000) launched the term Anthropocene to give a name to a new geological era after the end of the Holocene and the 12,000 years of climate balance that the plan-

et has enjoyed since the last ice age. The term has been a great success but is still controversial in scientific circles. Acquired from geology, it requires geologists to find stratigraphic evidence that can attest to its legitimacy. In other words, scientists should detect decisive bio-chemical geological traces of the ongoing global change in the Earth's system to definitively sanction the transition from one of the units of geological time to another (Boella, 2019). Anthropocene is, however, a phenomenon with great symbolic content among scientists as in the rest of society, due to a changed human sensitivity to the global dynamics of the Earth system. There has been widespread disillusionment with the idea that human – and not human – history is still characterized by evolution and progress. In this direction, some have proposed to adopt the expression *global change* instead of the still partial one of *climate change* (Hamilton, Grinewald, 2015). The idea that human impact on the environment is growing exponentially and unchecked is not new, but the term Anthropocene was born from a “situationist” intuition of Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, impatient with the hesitation of other colleagues during a seminar held in Cuernavaca (Mexico) in 2000. As often happens, the term was probably born unconsciously, according to what Freud (2011) called wits, the mottos of spirit. The word immediately had a bewildering effect on the attending lecturers.

After the launch of the term, the Anthropocene became synonymous with the hypothesis that the human species is a geological force like the much slower natural ones. In a few centuries, humans have caused changes similar to those of geological forces, such as glaciations, tectonic shifts, or the fall of asteroids. Human activity has left traces on the surface of the planet by digging wells and mines, building roads and cities, practising large-scale deforestation and monoculture farming. In doing so they changed the living conditions on the Earth. Such enormous changes will leave traces not only on the surface but also in the deepest parts of the planet. Chemical residues, plastics, and rare metals used for cell phones will leave sediments in the Earth strata that will survive for millennia. It seems that humanity has come to leave traces more durable than human life itself or the historical duration of monuments and texts written on tablets, papyri, codices, and manuscripts (Boella, 2009).

In any case, the Anthropocene is an ongoing phenomenon whose traces will remain forever unless the world ends soon. The industrial development, which has lasted about five centuries —an infinitesimal geological time— can leave traces as durable as the ones of mountains, rivers, oceans, and the marine fossils found in the Alps. It is therefore relevant to ask ourselves when it began. Many are the possible starting points. With the beginning of agri-

culture, the era of colonialism, the industrial revolution, the World Wars, the launch of the first atomic bomb, the boom of births, or with the rise in petroleum product consumption?

It would be necessary to define the passage from the Holocene and Anthropocene to sanction the end of the conception of nature as external to the human world. Whether it is meant as a mother/stepmother, a dwelling, or an infinite resource to exploit, nature is undergoing a conceptual redefinition (Smith, 1984). Nature is no longer an external entity subjected to human will but a unique interweaving between human and non-human entities that can no longer be subject to depredation or simply sustainable development. If we are already inside the Anthropocene, it means that the Earth is dying, but humanity is not able to put together individual choices with collective policies to govern a global event (Purdy, 2015).

Humanity faces a phase of disorientation and alienation, which has effects on both sensory and psychological experiences. The threat is as great as it is confused and indistinct. It is not yet possible to find words and expressions capable of uniquely directing the policies to govern the problems underlying the term Anthropocene. It presents itself as a typical wicked problem (Rittel, 1972) to which you cannot see the solution. Anyway, it would be too dangerous to deny policies only because phenomena are complex or because governance is ineffective.

3. Sustainable Tourism as a Wicked Problem

The concept of sustainable development appears as an idea acquired in contemporary society (Hall *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, its history is very long, even if the political-economic debate on how it should be declined has involved very different ideas coming from diverging positions. Nowadays the focus is on the environment and its conservation in an industrial society. However, this awareness is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating from the 1960s and 1970s. The spread of the term Anthropocene reveals the ongoing consciousness that the global impact of human beings on the planet has a scale similar to the modifications of geological forces. Understanding the relationship between the Earth and tourism is crucial, given the increasing importance of this activity from an environmental, social, and global economic point of view.

The Brundtland report in 1987 gave the following famous definition: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987, p. 49) Several tourism textbooks report the same formula for sustainable tourism, even if the report barely mentions the subject of tourism. Despite their recognized importance, neither sustainable development nor sustainable tourism started after the WCED. In other words, sustainability is an accepted concept but of intrinsically controversial use and application. The reason lies in the difficulty of defining the balanced or wise use of natural resources. The definition of the wise use of nature depends on values and ideologies that vary in time and space.

Notwithstanding the paramount growth of the travel and tourism industry has highlighted evident global scale impacts, many issues are yet controversial. The major ones are climate change, coastal urbanization, biodiversity loss, fossil fuel consumption, disease transmission, and cultural commodification. However, until not so long ago, the media emphasis was on the economic impact, considered more important than the environmental and social ones, which today are generally perceived as negative. For many decades, the main objective of the tourism industry has been to produce revenue and employment. Political economics realize that only businesses making profits can pay environmental taxes to offset environmental impacts (Mankiw, 2009). Moreover, tourism has been considered a feasible model for the economic growth of already-developed countries and the solution to the poverty problems of the less developed ones. Tourism was the panacea of the trade balance of many countries in the world (Tonini, 2010). Tourism’s negative effects became a problem in the 1970s and 1980s, owing to public concern about natural resource management. National ministries and international environmental agencies were established, also under the pressure of voluntary organizations. Impact studies, by taking sustainability into account, gradually considered the interrelationship between economic, social, and environmental impacts rather than focusing only on environmental ones –the original focus of the Brundtland Report. Thus, the concept of sustainable tourism is now multifaceted, more complex, and more intricate than in the past.

For years, academic studies have considered tourism within the bigger issue of human mobility (Lew, *et al.*, 2008). There are numerous divergent lines of thought on this subject, all of which are partially correct. Nevertheless, any subsequent policy, if singularly adopted, is bound to fail (Rittel, 1972). At issue is the problem of governance, at different scales of intervention and in view of vertical integration (Fritz *et al.*, 2009; Rodrik, 2008).

The general term *governance* indicates the process, institutions, and ways through which the government functions are implemented. It aims at dealing with the real sociopolitical environment which conditions the results of any attempted policy (North *et al.*, 2008). This political aptitude appears to be soundly coherent with the acknowledgement that, behind different ways of reasoning, stand more or less numerous social groups, all of which represent different interests and different ways of perceiving and organising social relations. An interpretive theory is necessary to delineate the policies sustained by different social groups, and subsequently induce the different positions to an effective intervention (Verweij *et al.* 2006), namely a *governance* of such an issue as sustainable tourism.

As above stated, the relations between tourism and Anthropocene are immensely complex. Even with a partial approach, namely within tourism studies, eminent scholars wrote:

‘Sustainability is a ‘wicked’ or meta-policy problem that has led to new institutional arrangements and policy settings at international, national and local scales. Sustainable tourism is a subset of this broader policy arena, with its own specific set of institutions and policy actors at various scales, as well as being a sub-set of tourism policy overall.’ (Hall *et al.* 2015, p. 5).

The meaning of the expression *wicked problem* (Rittel, 1972) is this: it is impossible or very difficult to find an ultimate solution because decisions are based on incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements, very often lacking or difficult to recognize. A wicked problem shows a surprising novelty as well as a tenacious content; it is highly complex rather than complicated; it is located across different systems, and a single hierarchy cannot solve it. Often, solutions produce other problems, there is a non-definition of eventual success, and rules appear to have no ending (Verweij *et al.* 2006). Uncertainty and ambiguity are evident and unavoidable; solutions are to be considered not *right or wrong* but do lay on *better or worse* choices (Grint *et al.*, 2016; Rodrik, 2008); finally, human societies very often divide themselves in fiercely opposite opinions (Verweij *et al.* 2006). Then, it is the social-cultural variability of the *issue* to be treated, in search of credible, yet highly fatiguing, solutions.

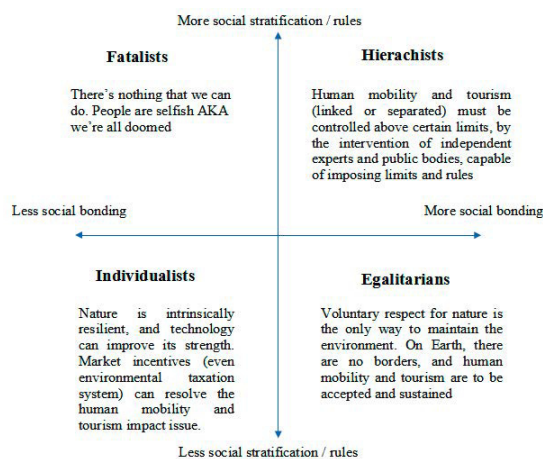
This social variability has been interpreted by the so-called grid-group cultural theory, also known as grid-group analysis, Cultural Theory, or theory of socio-cultural variability; such an approach has initially been developed by

the British anthropologists Mary Douglas and Michael Thompson, and the American political scientist Aaron Wildavsky (Mamadouh, 1999).

According to this theory, scholars described: “four primary ways of organizing, perceiving and justifying social relations [...]: (1) egalitarianism; (2) hierarchy; (3) individualism; and (4) fatalism” (Verweij *t al.*, 2006, p. 819). These four “world views” are in conflict in every aspect of social life, even melding each other and mediating the extreme points. It is obvious that also human mobility and (sustainable) tourism, separated or melded as interacting issues, are differently approached by diverse cultures embedded in these social relations.

In Figure 1, the social classification according to the theory is resumed for tourism. The “grid” axis assesses the intensity of constraints or laws affecting individual behavior. On the opposite, the “group” axis assesses the extent of individual commitment to a social unit, influencing the thought and actions of individual agents. Combining two values (high and low) per dimension (grid and group) the figure displays four ways of organizing social relations, as above said: egalitarianism, hierarchy, individualism, and fatalism. These are also different ways humans perceive problems, and privileged policies or rules to be assumed.

Fig. 1. The grid-group analysis of human mobility and tourism



Source: elaboration from Verweij et al. 2006

Explanations of the picture are as follows. Egalitarians see humans and nature as intrinsically interconnected, and the fragility of nature can be managed only by light and responsible human behaviors. Voluntary respect for nature is the only way to maintain the environment. On Earth there are no borders and human mobility should be accepted and sustained, because coercive institutions, the market, and the bureaucracy of policy, are responsible for both the market and policy failures, acknowledged even by economics (Anthoff, Hahn, 2010). The unquestioned production-consumption social architecture of advanced industrial society is the actual responsible for natural resources destruction (Haraway, 2015; Moore, 2017). The absence of caring for nature is the core of economic growth, producing distortions even in understanding real problems, inducing demand for unsustainable products and social relations, including impacting forms of tourism. Uneven distribution of wealth is responsible for social pains which induce migrations and exclusion from tourism. Greedy persons treat in the same bad manner nature and humanity, generating struggles and loss of well-being. People should understand that humans and the Earth are a holistic unity, and the sole possible policy is to avoid any activity that damages the environment, adopting a strict precautionary principle (O’Riordan, 2013). Centralized decisions delegated to global bureaucratic institutions are ineffective, and only grass-roots organizations should become activists in fighting the perverted effect of uneven distribution of leisure time.

Hierarchists claim the world is controllable if nature is not pressed by free riders, who should be fined. People are imperfect, but solid institutions can resolve human flaws. Uneven distribution of tourists must be controlled above certain limits, by the intervention of independent experts and public bodies, capable of imposing limits and rules.

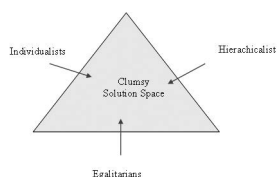
Hierarchists trust in long-term policy, not considering the immediate, or short time deadline of necessary interventions. Furthermore, they think that the individual initiative is helpless, producing the so-called tragedy of the (global) commons (Vogler, 2012). Thus, only global agreements can solve the uneven development of the travel and tourism industry, accepting intergovernmental treaties, promoted and sustained by global authorities, such as UN agencies and mainstream environmental organizations. In this model, political leadership and governance are substituting individual decisions, without changing the overall philosophy based on voluntary agreements.

Individualists are those completely trusting in market functioning. Nature is intrinsically resilient, and technology can improve its strength. Social actors are inherently selfish and behave as separate and competing individuals.

They strongly believe that market incentives (even negative as an environmental taxation system) can resolve the distribution of travelers around the globe (Mankiew, 2009). Anyway, changes are acceptable just because they are not catastrophic nor uniformly negative; individualists assert that competitive agents will discover the resolving invention.

Fatalists believe that there is no meaning in nature and life, there is no possibility to have a better situation than the current one, because even humans are intrinsically unreliable (Lovelock, 2010). Nothing to do for managing tourism. This latter way of life can be excluded from reasoning, and the three other ways of thinking define the so-called “clumsy solution space” (Grint, Jones, 2016), which is the space of *not elegant but possible solutions* coming from the melding of different ways of reasoning.

Pic. 2. Clumsy Solution Space



Source: elaboration from Grint, Jones, 2016

4. Clumsy solutions for the sustainable tourism problem

If the ongoing model of the travel and tourism industry and its impacts on the environment are global problems needing global responses, any policy discourse is affected by never-ending confrontation among political choices informed by diverse actors whose cultures are produced by different ways of life (Verweij *et al.* 2006). Ignoring the co-existence of several ways of life is risky because it makes the whole policy less effective. Namely, both individualism and egalitarianism would be chaos-making without the empowerment of an effective hierarchy. In its turn, the latter would be: “stagnant without the creative energy of individualism, uncohesive without the binding force of equality, unstable without the passivity and acquiescence of fatalism.” (Schwartz, 1991, cited in Verweij *et al.*, 2006: 822).

Solutions based on a singular approach may be defined as “elegant” but are inexorably ineffective; policymakers should better understand the importance of considering altogether the three “elegant” approaches, merging them and thus implementing “clumsy solutions” when facing “wicked problems” (Verweij *et al.*, 2006).

The very first proposed sense of the term *wicked* is not that of *evil*, but rather that of an immensely complicated and untamable issue (Rittel, 1972; Buchanan, 1992). It is possible to argue that one further meaning of the term *wicked* could be that humanity tends to split in contradictory perceptions, being impotent in finding a common solution. In this sense, the meaning of *wicked* may also be that of *evil*, producing the actual impossibility of reciprocal understanding like in the building of the Tower of Babel (Klijn, Koppenjan, 2014). Thus, *clumsiness* must accept the existence of contradictory problem perceptions and solutions; humans should make their own best to stress the eventual synergies and take into serious account any difference in problem perception.

So, any sustainable tourism policy must adopt fatiguing and expensive tools, hoping to be effective. In this sense it is called *clumsy*, also because it should be flexible, switching in strategies, inelegantly prompt to take U-turn paths, confronting diverse interests and values among stakeholders. In real life, various stakeholder groups can endorse a policy option but for very different reasons; and international cooperation would privilege technological development and leave complicated consensus-searching to the local levels of policymaking (Corinto, 2016; Verweij *et al.*, 2006).

International institutions such as the World Bank ten years ago stressed the importance of governance and problem-driven political economy (GPE) as an actual critical point in favoring development (Fritz *et al.*, 2009). The main idea is that in governing huge global problems, *good enough* governance and *feasible approaches* to reforming problematic issues are acceptable (Rodrik, 2008). The problem is not to reach the ultimate goal, but rather achieve and maintain the proper direction; it is much better to have a diagnostic political tool than a prescriptive policy and follow the good path, whether at the country, sector, thematic, or project level (Fritz *et al.*, 2009).

That being said, the proposed clumsiness to be adopted in governing such a wicked problem as sustainable tourism matches with the pragmatic vision of the World Bank (often contested by popular discourse), suggesting the implementation of fatiguing governance tools. These tools can be better arranged for local initiatives, which involve different stakeholders, with conflicting points of view and socioeconomic interests, still committed to a

common problem. The very issue in sustainable tourism analysis could be the diverse interests of travel and tourism global companies and tourist operators in grabbing the quota of total international tourists and in managing tourist destinations in less developed countries. Anyway, even this eventuality does confirm the impossibility to treat such a problem solely by adopting singular elegant policies.

5. Comments and Conclusions

The chapter dealt with different social positions on sustainable tourism in the Anthropocene, illustrating a strongly complex situation, accepting that it is impossible to state a clear practice of policies on sustainable tourism, and searching possible theoretical interpretations and feasible policies. Sustainable tourism is better expressed as a spatial human movement based on both environmental and socioeconomic concerns, and the limits to tourism should be better considered to state effective governance. Even arguing that tourism will have a future big impact on the planet, it is still more correct to consider that environmental, economic, and social degradation are permeable categories. Considering only one motive and only one way of reasoning is reductionist and could produce misleading and failing policies. Better knowledge is necessary about how to implement sustainability policies, their meaning and their influences at global and regional levels, but the focus could conveniently shift to necessary and effective governance of tourism on the Earth.

Thus, it is much better to consider the necessity to implement more fatiguing political tools, but capable of involving real people who bear a diverse way of living and producing opinions. Any global tourism policy based on one or two positions described through the grid-group theory will be partial and consequently ineffective. Ignoring this will result in the failure of all good intentions; at the worst, producing the opposite result of inducing more social conflicts. The excluded voices will be induced to manifest their political position violently, causing the intervention of repressive force. The result could be a spiral of self-feeding social conflict.

Also, within the complex issue of sustainable tourism, policymakers should better consider some theoretical findings. According to Verweij *et al.* (2006) it is credible that the reasonable perspective of governance of global and regional tourism is that of implementing *clumsiness*, accepting to avoid “elegant” policies, and, on the contrary, implementing collaborative though fatiguing tools for policymaking.

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