The potential for justice through tourism

Freya Higgins-Desbiolles
The potential for justice through tourism

Freya Higgins-Desbiolles

Introduction

Concerns with justice emerge from the realm of philosophy where considerations of what creates a good life and a just society have been contemplated for millennia. These topics are of vital importance as humans are social beings who must create ways of living together well. Through a contemporary lens, tourism does not seem to be a conducive enterprise to think philosophically about what comprises a good life and a just society because tourism today is categorised as an individualistic, consumerist, hedonistic and commercial pursuit. However, the popularity of philosopher Alain de Botton’s *The art of travel* (2003) indicated tourism and travel are indeed worthy of philosophical contemplation and play a role in living a meaningful life.

However, it is difficult to view tourism as a field of moral endeavour when in a time of hyper neoliberal capitalism, it is narrowed to a view of it as a business, industry and engine of development. It is important to remember that this narrow understanding of tourism as a commercial industry has over-shadowed an earlier view of tourism as a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Such a mandate for tourism was clear in the well-studied European Grand Tour from the 17th century, which saw mainly upper class young men undertake a period of travel to gain a classics education and engage with the roots of Western civilisation (Brodsky-Porges, 1981). Even at the beginning of modern mass tourism with Thomas Cook in Great Britain, tourism was seen as a tool for democratisation and improvement of working people’s lives (Turner, Ash, 1975, p. 53). In the modern era, this idea that tourism could contribute to educational attainment, cross-cultural engagement, spiritual development and cosmopolitanism remained evident in such forms as pilgrimage, cultural tourism and educational exchanges. However, as neoliberal ideology has gained hegemony from the 1980s, this conceptualisation of tourism as an important social force has diminished so much so that to discuss forms...
such as social tourism, political tourism and justice tourism seem quite alien within the tourism discipline.

I am credited with bringing concerns with tourism as a social force to the tourism academy (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Evolving from this work was a concern with tourism’s interface with justice issues (although simultaneously Professor Regina Scheyvens and Executive Director of the Alternative Tourism Group of Palestine Rami Kassis were also investigating these issues). I was able to bring these insights to tourism because of my disciplinary origins in politics and international relations and my previous work experience with non-governmental organisations which informed this different perspective. While bringing biographical insights into academic work can attract charges of narcissism, just a brief exposition of how I formed these insights may help illuminate why this research trajectory emerged. In the late 1990s I worked or volunteered with One World Tours of Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam Australia), the Responsible Tourism Network and the Global Education Centre. These work experiences brought focus to my later tourism work which I was later to realise was at that point unusual in the tourism discipline. The work included: a concern with the rights of the “host” communities of tourism; a realisation that tourism can cause damaging and even deadly impacts; that regulations and interventions are essential for fair forms of tourism; and that issues of justice are integral to tourism. The research agendas that develop out of such a different positioning greatly contrasts to the accepted wisdom of current tourism where the focus is on the interests of the tourists and the tourism industry and the phenomenon is seen as a largely positive contributor to employment and economic growth.

While I was doing this work in the late 1990s there was a small number of researchers and a larger number of NGOs that were documenting the injustices of tourism and challenging tourism to reform for better equity and justice outcomes. Examples of the former include Jost Krippendorf (1999) and Deborah McLaren (1997). Krippendorf wrote a pioneering critique of tourism in his book *The Holiday Makers* and brought issues of responsibility and ethics to the forefront of tourism analysis. McLaren’s book on *Rethinking tourism and ecotravel* was a sustained critique of the various negative impacts of tourism and she went on to lead NGOs concerned with Indigenous rights in tourism (the Rethinking Tourism Project and Indigenous Rights in Tourism International). There were also academic analyses offered by analysts such as Turner and Ash (1975) and Nash (1989). NGOs were very active at all levels from the local to the global; these included the Hawai’i Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism, Tourism Concern, Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism and Tourism Watch. It was within this milieu that I began a PhD project in international relations focused on tourism as a force ironically supporting both exploitative, capitalist globalisation and a more equitable cosmopolitanism through cross-cultural learning. Chapters of my PhD thesis were the basis of the articles I published on tourism as a social force and justice through tourism.

The 2000s saw the tourism academy be greatly influenced by neoliberalism as tourism studies began to be based in schools of business, management and marketing (Ayikoru, Tribe & Airey, 2009). This has led to a disjuncture between the tourism academy and those external to it at the coalface of tourism injustices such as NGOs and local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, Whyte & Tedmanson, 2013). It is also important to realise that during this time as tourism was being “industrialised” and “managerialised”, tourism authorities such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the World Travel and Tourism Council and the multinational corporations of tourism
such as British Airways promoted policies to offset any criticism of tourism’s negative impacts and their corporatized tourism agendas through dedicated agendas of “sustainability”, corporate social responsibility and pro-poor tourism (see Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008). So while moving rhetoric emanated from sophisticated programmes of whitewashing and greenwashing tourism, the neoliberal business of tourism continued to package places as tourism destinations, set up global agreements like the General Agreement on Trade in Services to ensure industry profits and global political and economic structures secured a corporatized model of tourism development that has had grave implications for local communities around the world (as evident in well published issues in places such as Barcelona, Venice, Jamaica and Bali).

As a result, thought leaders on “sustainable tourism” in the tourism academy, Bramwell and Lane, could claim in an editorial “While more researchers are beginning to look at the equality of tourism outcomes, there is still relatively little research on the wider issues of equity, fairness and social justice in tourism” (2008, p. 2). What has occurred has been investigations of inequality and tourism (Cole & Morgan, 2010) and justice tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008) which have sought to address questions of who benefits from tourism, how tourism can be made fairer and more just, what are the purposes of tourism and at the more extreme end, how tourism can be mobilised as a tool for securing justice.

I. What is justice tourism or justice through tourism

Perhaps the earliest consideration of issues of justice in tourism in the academy was Hultsman’s consideration of “just tourism”, which he suggested could mean “fair” or “proper” tourism or alternatively “merely” tourism (1995, p. 560). In Hultsman’s work to build an ethical framework for tourism he focused on both the tourists’ experience of tourism and the need to develop a “principled” practice and “ethicality” in tourism and ensuring that this imbues tourism curricula (Hultsman, 1995, pp. 559–562). Absent from his analysis was any consideration of the receiving community or the justness or equity of relations between the tourists and the locals.

Director of the NGO the Alternative Tourism Group of Palestine Rami Kassis outlined view of justice tourism from his experience of using tourism to effect change in Palestine. Kassis observed: “justice tourism is a social and cultural response to the policy of cultural domination as reflected in the globalization of tourism” (Kassis, n.d.).

In her cutting edge textbook on tourism for community empowerment, Scheyvens described justice tourism as “both ethical and equitable” and claimed it has the following attributes:

- builds solidarity between visitors and those visited;
- promotes mutual understanding and relationships based on equity, sharing and respect;
- supports self-sufficiency and self-determination of local communities;

An even more comprehensive listing of key attributes is found in Scheyvens’ extensive quotation from an Australia tour agency called Just Travel. “Just travel” is described from the point of view of the traveller as providing:

- the knowledge that s/he is not an agent of oppression but is attempting to participate in the liberation process;
• a travel experience that will offer genuine possibilities of forming meaningful relationships with people of different cultures;
• an opportunity to experience firsthand what other people are doing to create new life possibilities for themselves and others;

Scheyvens outlined five forms of justice tourism, which include:

• the “hosts” telling their stories of past oppression
• tourists learning about poverty issues
• tourists undertaking voluntary conservation work
• tourists undertaking voluntary development work

I have proposed that justice tourism initiatives contribute to efforts to build more socially and ecologically benign forms of tourism and development to build positive futures (2008). In this analysis of justice tourism, I outlined examples, including: Global Exchange’s human rights tours around the world; the Community Leadership program of Oxfam Australia taking Australians to learn about community development strategies from Indian communities; and the Ladakh project of the International Society for Ecology and Culture which offers Ladakhi leaders exchanges to developed countries so they can gain critical insights into western livelihoods and the cultural costs of the western development model (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008). Situating this analysis in terms of social activism for more just forms of globalisation, I argued that “some wish to harness alternative tourism in the effort to secure a more equitable, alternative globalisation” and I documented NGO efforts to place tourism on the World Social Forum agenda from 2004 (2008, pp. 357-8).

There are two notable areas where considerations of justice tourism have offered incisive insights: the situation of Palestine and the use of tourism to advocate for environmental justice. Both of these topic areas have inspired important examples of academic activism in the tourism academy.

Palestine with its “Occupied Territories” under illegal occupation since 1967 has used tourism as a tool to present its case to the international community through political tours. A number of works have examined justice tourism in the Palestinian context. I offered an analysis of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) as an example of “volunteer tourism” for justice (2009). Isaac (2009) offered an analysis of Bethlehem’s “segregation wall” as a tourist attraction and placed it in the categories of justice and solidarity tourism. The Alternative Tourism Group of Palestine (ATG) submitted a chapter to an edited volume on The politics and power of tourism in Palestine which examined the ATG’s work in fostering solidarity tourism with the Palestinian people (Kassis, Solomon & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2016). This work stated:

"ATG takes its clients not as other travel and tour operators would on selfish, hedonistic ventures. Rather, ATG would accompany visitors on a journey with a purpose and with intent to both learn and unlearn through gaining accurate insights into Palestine and the struggle for justice as viewed through the eyes of Palestinians and based on their aspirations. It is, indeed, an attempt to foster shared aspirations for a more just and peaceful world which is vital to all of us as a common humanity”(Kassis, Solomon &Higgins-Desbiolles, 2016, pp. 47-48).

Another site for ongoing struggle is that for environmental justice. Tourism has been accused of being a tool of environmental racism as marginalised communities have
tourism forced on them as tourism corporations and complicit governments seek to profit from the beautiful environments of others (Trask, 1993). However, recent work demonstrates that tourism can also be harnessed as a tool for advocates for environmental justice to use to build awareness and solidarity. The movement for environmental justice seeks to redress unfair distributions of environmental harms on marginalised communities and people of colour and to secure their meaningful participation in decision-making. Pezzullo (2007) presented a study of tourism being used for advocacy for environmental justice in the United States in her book *Toxic tourism: Rhetorics of pollution, travel and environmental justice*. Pezzullo is an activist academic that used ethnographic participant observation of toxic tours that visit polluted or polluting sites to show how environmental justice advocates use tourism to inform people of communities suffering environmental injustices, to create coalitions to act and to transform these situations of gross injustice.

In these two cases, Palestine and toxic tours for environmental justice, we see how tourism is not underestimated as a tool for awareness-raising, building solidarity and inspiring transformative action. These diverse cases, Palestine and American “toxic tours”, demonstrate that some proponents embrace tourism’s capacities as an educative, consciousness-raising, political tool that is seized by certain categories of tourists and their hosts to engage in building bonds of solidarity.

**II. Critiques**

Butcher (2003) countered efforts to push through issues of ethics and justice in tourism arguing that this “moralisation” of tourism was a joyless effort by its proponents to castigate tourists for their boorishness, to keep developing countries in a state of underdevelopment, to diminish the capacities for local community agency and to impose their moral values on tourists. Butcher’s work argues that modern mass tourism brings benefits in terms of economic development, leisure pleasure for tourists and a pathway to modernisation and prosperity for developing countries that should not be diminished by the “moralisers”.

Critical race studies analyst Mahrouse (2008 & 2014) has offered a more nuanced critique of what she designates as “transnational solidarity activism” (one form of justice tourism of concern here). She has researched transnational solidarity activists such as those of the ISM and she characterizes them as “white/Westerners as mediators of the Others’ suffering” (Mahrouse, 2008, p. 89). She argued that these activists act as mediators as they try to make people back home aware of the injustices suffered by peoples such as the Palestinians. She used Arendt’s theory contrasting compassion and pity to assess whether these activists are successful in goals as justice advocates; Mahrouse demonstrated that the effort is problematic. As Mahrouse stated:

“The important distinctions between the two centre on the relationship to the sufferer. In Arendt’s view, a relationship of compassion is more or less an equal one and implies a sharing of suffering. Relationships of pity, on the other hand, re-enact the power differentials between the viewer and the sufferer, rather than disrupt them” (2008, p. 98).

Mahrouse found in her research that when activists return home and tell of the suffering of the people they have visited on solidarity tours, because generally both the teller and the audience are both white/western people of privilege, the teller potentially becomes
the object of the compassion of their listeners, while their narrations only evoke pity for the people whose experiences are recounted. Thus the activists’ goals are potentially thwarted by the very power differentials their actions are attempting to address.

20 Mahrouse’s insights have been confirmed from people on the ground receiving justice tourists. Landy’s research on activist tourists in Palestine reported:

“One interviewee working in Palestinian tourism was sharply critical of activist tourism. While recognizing the good intentions behind it, she characterized it as a disempowering activity – a means for activists to portray themselves as heroes and then walk away from the situation, leaving locals to feel that political action is a seasonal foreign-orientated activity” (2008, p. 198).

21 This quote reinforces the fact that the tourism encounter, by its very nature as a form of short-term temporary travel, is fleeting and the solidarity it can engender is limited unless conscious efforts are made to upset the power equation.

22 Mahrouse’s critique alerts us to be attentive to the structural foundations of contemporary injustices which limit the capacities of privileged tourists to be effective in their justice touring. As long as privileged tourists are the ones to tour disadvantaged communities and to choose the timing and nature of their interventions for “good”, the problems of privilege, patronisation and pity are ever present. Structural activism for justice and equality are essential and people positioned in privilege must prepare to give up some of their power and privilege in this process.

III. Looking forward

23 The best hope to advance conceptualisations of justice tourism arguably comes from the emerging critical tourism studies movement. Tribe asserted that “critical research is uniquely placed to contribute to better management and governance of tourism” because it foregrounds the roles of ideology and power relations (2008, p. 253).

24 Critical social theory is contested but one conceptualisation asserted:

"A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 288).

25 Wilson, Harris and Small have helped shape the critical tourism studies domain (2008: p. 16) and they advised: "Those employing a critical approach would generally be concerned with resisting positivist modes of enquiry, unmasking power relations, seeking emancipation, addressing inequalities, or calling for change or action within the field they are exploring... Critical tourism and hospitality scholars are also drawn to these ideals”.

26 Pritchard, Morgan, and Ateljevic (2011) tried to direct the critical tourism agenda to what they called “hopeful tourism” research which they described as:“...a values-led humanist approach based on partnership, reciprocity and ethics, which aims for co-created learning, and which recognises the power of sacred and indigenous knowledge and passionate scholarship” (2011, p. 929). Whyte and I critiqued this work and the evolution of critical tourism scholarship which we viewed as “...overly focused on the researchers’needs rather than the needs of those with whom the researcher should be insolidarity” (2013, p. 429). We also argued that this hopeful tourism agenda failed to adequately engage with its parent discipline, critical theory which we characterised as:
“...about deconstructing power and privilege so that an emancipatory praxis can be co-developed with communities and peoples suffering oppression” (Higgins-Desbiolles & Whyte, 2013, p. 429). This is the essential role that critical tourism should play in gearing tourism to achieve just outcomes.

These efforts grow increasingly more important as evidence builds that we are entering challenging times. Neoliberal processes have seen wealth accumulate to fewer and fewer people (Piketty, 2014) and the bonds of social solidarity are under strain as competition and insecurity cause widespread fear and a turning against multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Growing nationalistic populism and anti-free trade sentiments suggest neoliberalism and capitalist globalisation may now be under threat, possibly even in retreat. A critical question is whether this will open up better pathways for tourism to resume its social justice potentials or will it further undermine it?

Butcher cautioned in his critique of the “new moral tourism” that “our holidays have become a vessel into which we are encouraged to pour environmental angst and fears of globalisation” (2003, p. 139). But Butcher reveals his agenda when he designates “our holidays” rather than “their homes” or “their futures”, shifting emphasis from the “hosts’” rights to the tourists’ desires. A justice tourism agenda requires a privileging of the rights and needs of the host communities of tourism as their futures are shaped by the form of tourism that is implemented in their communities. To prioritise the needs of tourists for holidays and the tourism industry to accumulate profits above the rights of host communities for survival and thriving, is in itself the gravest injustice of contemporary tourism.

In addition to a better focus on the rights of host communities in tourism, a justice tourism agenda should also examine these cutting edge topics:

- Structural injustices and their relationships to tourism development. Local – global theory could be employed as a conceptual tool to understand how justice must be achieved: at the local level where communities are impacted by tourism and simultaneously at the global level addressing global free trade processes that impose tourism on local communities to their detriment.

- Climate injustice issues and the role of tourism in exacerbating these problems. Whole communities are going to find their homes and livelihoods destroyed as climate change and global environmental change begin to impact them. Whole communities and even nations are going to have to re-locate and thus adding to the new phenomenon of environmental refugees.

- The justice of a full mobilities approach to human travel rather than facilitating privileged tourists. Global environmental change, the conflicts induced by increasing precarities and the desire to secure better livelihoods seem set to compel human movement on an unprecedented scale. In such a context, a goal of dismantling the UNWTO and replacing it with a UN agency for the right to mobility will become more imperative.

- Recognition of the impacts and scale of human-induced change leading to the declaration of the era of the Anthropocene. As a result, the rights of non-human entities will become more important. Already the rights of animals are gaining greater support. This has impacted the conduct of tourism as major entities turn against tourism experiences that exploit and abuse animals. Additionally, there is growing recognition of the rights of nature in legislation; with whole environments and features of environments given personhood in some jurisdictions. For example, respecting Maori values, some rivers and mountains are now recognised as legal persons under New Zealand law (see for example Kennedy, 2012).
• Related to this point is the need for engagement with diverse world views to understand the
meaning and value of things, including tourism. In the above case, Indigenous Maori
worldviews on the interconnections and relationships with natural entities is beginning to
influence national relationships with the natural world and its “resources”. Islamic
understandings of travel and its role in spiritual development provides another example of
the value of diverse perspectives (Inayatullah, 1995).
• The work of NGOS for justice in tourism is significant. The force that is most active for
justice remains the NGOS and tourism academics should better engage with them. This could
be facilitated by increasing the number and capabilities of activist academics/ public
intellectuals.
• The need for an activist movement in academia to support justice initiatives. There is hope
that the recent drive in universities for engaged research may offer some impetus for more
tourism scholars to build collaborative bonds with NGOs and communities for forcing
tourism to build justice.

The key issue of our time is how to rebuild human co-existence in social and ecological
terms after more than three decades when neoliberalism in economics, politics and
cultures has violently imposed a consumerist, selfish, individualistic and hedonistic
worldview that will be hard counteract. The tourism academy presents a battlefield for
the soul of tourism as tourism proponents such as Butcher build a neoliberal agenda for
tourism that contains a hidden violence (instigated my powerful MNCs, supported by
collaborating governments and underpinned by structural processes of imposed tourism).

The proponents of justice tourism represent a critical force for reclaiming the capacities
tourism to provide opportunities for individuals to grow and for communities to
 collaborate in building self-determining and positive futures. Usurping tourism for justice
is the most promising agenda before the tourism academy and the focused agenda for
reclaiming tourism presented here gives us a powerful implement for social and
ecological good.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annals of Tourism Research, 36, 2, 191-221.

Brodsky-Porges, E., 1981, « The grand tour travel as an educational device 1600–1800 », Annals of
Tourism Research, 8, 2, 171-186.

Bramwell, B., Lane, B., 2008, « Priorities in sustainable tourism research », Journal of Sustainable
Tourism, 16,1, 1-4.


Isaac, R., 2009, « Alternative tourism: can the segregation wall in Bethlehem be a tourist attraction?», Tourism and Hospitality Planning and Development, 6, 3, 247-254.


McLaren, D., 1997, Rethinking tourism and ecotravel, West Hartford, CT, Kumarian.


Mahrouse, G., 2014, Conflicted commitments: Race, privilege and power in transnational solidarity activism, Georgetown, ON, McGill-Queen’s University Press.


This article considers the potential for tourism to contribute to efforts to secure justice. It reviews the evolution of tourism from a respected tool for personal development and social transformation to its now industrialised form under neoliberalism where its value is estimated in terms of employment and income. Despite this context, recognition that the justice issues of tourism and justice capacities of tourism are worthy of analysis has grown in the 2000s. Justice tourism takes many forms and is facilitated by a number of means and stakeholders, but at its core it is focused on ensuring tourism delivers more sociologically and ecologically benign forms of tourism development which create better futures for all stakeholders, but particularly the hosting communities. Efforts to make tourism more responsible, ethical and just have been critiqued, both from a neoliberal perspective that tourism is not a site for moralisation and from a critical race positioning that many forms of justice tourism might not attain their goals of solidarity and emancipation.

Looking forward, this analysis suggests that it is imperative that future research and action addresses the larger structural issues of justice and that the critical tourism studies movement is potentially a promising vehicle for this work. Additionally challenging contemporary times demand renewed and more rigorous focus. Future topics to consider include structural issues of mobility in a precarious world, climate injustices, justice for non-human others in the era of the Anthropocene and diverse paradigms and worldviews for thinking through justice tourism.
AUTHOR

FREYA HIGGINS-DESBIOLLES

Senior Lecturer, School of Management, University of South Australia