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Response to sustainability paper by Font

Xavier Font's lead paper discusses the impact agenda with respect to sustainable tourism. He argues that sustainable tourism has been appropriated by business for its own, not necessarily sustainable, ends, 'greenwashing' being the result. He problematizes, but argues for, research into behaviour change to promote a truer sustainable tourism development.

'Sustainable development' can be appropriated by almost anyone for any purpose at any time. It is necessarily ill defined and impervious to measurement. The term sustainable development poses a question – how can societies progress now without undermining their capacity to progress in the future? – but provides no clear answers. This is hardly surprising as the concept of progress itself, as well as more prosaically what constitutes 'good development', has been subject to a sustained critique for some decades. In fact the rise and rise of sustainability, especially since the 1992 UN Conference in Rio on Environment and Development, is itself a product of a diminishing consensus on what constitutes economic and social progress.

The prefix 'sustainable' is now almost compulsory in front of a variety of human activities and phenomena: tourism, development, communities, architecture, agriculture, etc. As a rhetorical device, it places the writer in the camp of the development-critical and the ethical. Yet there is little agreement on what is and what is not sustainable: as soon as one type of tourism or project is argued to be sustainable, someone else will argue that it either does not pay enough attention to biodiversity, or that it pays too much attention to the environment and too little to the community, or perhaps too little to economic growth.

The choices to be made over development are at least as much political as they are economic or environmental. My own view is that there is a pervasive pessimism with regard to economic growth, tourism included, in much of the literature (Butcher, 2003). All too often 'small is beautiful' inspired ecotourism or some other community based label is passed off as a solution (albeit partial and problematic) to an exaggerated problem of what one commentator called the 'spectre' of mass tourism (Croall, 1995).

Sustainable tourism carries *particular* ethical and environmental assumptions that are presented through the imperative of sustainability as *universal* norms that all should buy into. That can limit the scope and vision of research: what constitutes good development is already decided, and the academic's role is limited to how to bring it about. My concern is hence less to do with the 'greenwashing' emphasised by Font, and more the prior assumption of what constitutes 'ethical' and 'sustainable' tourism.

The lead paper poses the question of what 'we' should do, and implicitly addresses the role of the expert. Many academics writing about tourism can claim to be experts in their respective fields. Experts can try to ascertain what *is*, objectively, the case with regard to the environment. They can also gauge the views and feelings of a community, although this is often presented in very limited terms: what impact will a given project have on a given way of life at a given point in time? This can promote a presentism, a tendency to examine development in terms of short term incremental changes that change 'the way things are' or the pre-existing 'way of life' (Butcher, 2007).

But development, by definition, is future oriented. The future of societies, or even just the tourism industry, involves far more than how a community or a society is configured now. It involves desires and aspirations for the future, as well as traditions inherited from the past. Development by its nature poses the question of what *ought* to be. Here, expertise, be it scientific or social scientific, is never definitive.

The article also discusses the capacity of research to contribute to behaviour change in the direction of sustainable development. The politics of behaviour change have become a key feature of modern political life in the last 20 years. Child rearing, play, health, drinking and smoking have all moved from being private decisions to matters of public, political import. Advocacy of behaviour change in the direction of 'prosocial behaviour' has become commonplace in policy communities in all sorts of areas, such as education and social work.

Parallel to this is the rise of 'consumerism' as a malady underpinning society's problems – see the reference to 'hedonistic over consumption' in the lead paper. The critique of consumption, or consumerism, is rooted in the post-World War Two critiques of the effect of mass consumption on political and social consciousness developed by the Frankfurt School writers and notably by Marcuse (1991, original 1964). However, from the 1980s critics of consumerism focused on its effects on the environment and also on its role in alienating people from the natural world. Consumerism, most often used as a derogatory term for consumption, has replaced production as the axis around which much political debate revolves.

The rise of a politics of behaviour, of which consumerism is a key part, runs parallel to the collapse of politics proper. The decline of contested visions of the future of Left and Right, narratives that mediated individual experience to the social and political realms, leave the individual cut adrift from political change. Without competing visions of how society could be, how it *is* dominates, and social moral, even political, missions are reposed to the individual in the context of their everyday life (Giddens, 1991). Many see this as leading to neoliberal hegemony, but I would see it more in terms of an absence of any political vision or transcendental narratives of how society does and should work (Heartfield, 2006). Politics (with a big P) is derided as corrupt and useless, so the impulse to act upon the world reflects back on the individual, their behaviour, their consumption, their 'environmental footprint'; politics 'with a small p' if you like, or for Giddens, 'life politics' (1991).

The politics of behaviour change could be limiting with regard to achieving the 'good development' that sustainable development claims to point towards. Others have argued that the emphasis on ethical consumption that is often associated with pro-sustainable development consumption is politically anaesthetising, encouraging private responsibility for an issue that is by its nature public and political, regardless of one's view on what good development actually looks like.

The most positive development of recent decades has been the economic growth in emerging economies, most notably India and China. It is transformative development, not what most often passes for sustainable development, that has lifted millions out of poverty and, in global terms, led to a more equal world. So whilst it is good to 'reflect on the role of the researcher in promoting sustainable change' through tourism, it is more important to reflect upon what sort of change we are talking about. Emphasis on behaviour change to promote sustainable tourism (given the assumptions attached to this) may be quite limiting for the researcher and for the societies they purport to help.

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