

GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH OF TOURISM PHENOMENA – BETWEEN UNDENIABLE UTILITY AND ARTIFICIAL NEED

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Abstract. L’approche géographique des phénomènes et processus touristiques est l’une des plus répandues aujourd’hui. Dans ce pseudo-domaine d’étude, très populaire au début du XXI^{ème} siècle et très dynamique aussi, la légitimité de certaines sciences est interrogée. Sur la base d’une littérature de spécialité à la fois francophone et anglophone, mais aussi à partir d’un exemple pratique, l’étude a démontré le rôle que la géographie, par ses outils, ses méthodes de recherche et sa manière de représentation joue dans l’étude des phénomènes touristiques. On a ensuite isolé l’approche géographique en démontrant ses limites et les sciences avec lesquelles la géographie interagit pour bien mener à fin ses démarches.

Keywords: *geography, tourism studies, tourism geography*

1. Introduction

Today, the tourism is one of the most dynamic of the economic branches, its expansion, confirmed by the World Tourism Organization⁴ statistics, being really astonishing, particularly in the global economic recession that we are in. This growth, visible especially in the last four decades, exercised a very strong attraction on different sciences, from economics to psychology, from geography to sociology, the tourism being a typical example of pluridisciplinary interest.

On the other hand, a new and successfully locution, equally among the geographers, regardless of their own specialisation, but also among the decisional factors is that „everything can be mapped”. Not only the mountains, the rivers, the cities, the population distribution, but also the economic development, the flows (human, economic or transport), the earthquakes, the famine in the world, nuclear armament, tourist trails, World religions, conflicts, types of political regimes, economical systems, elections, everything can be mapped, because we are

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⁴ According to World Tourism Organization, in 2010 were 940 million international tourism arrivals (+ 6,6% compared to 2009) and up to €693 billion revenues (+4,7% compared to 2009). The data for the first months of 2011 don’t suggest any decline of this trend, on the contrary a bigger growth is expected due to the East-Asian and South American emerging countries.

Source : <http://www.worldtourismdirectory.com/news/10275>

tributary of the space. With such an armament at its own disposal, the penetration of the geography into tourism is not at all a surprise, but rather a legitimate fact.

But sometimes the geography, like any other science capable to easily get in other fields of study, inclines to expand its influence area, to exceed its prerogatives and to invade unknown fields.

First objective of this study is to determinate on the strength of literature the role of the geography in tourism phenomena studies of any kind, to observe and analyse the utility or the futility in various approaches, studies, urban planning politics.

The second objective, somehow derivate from the first one is to establish, this time based on a practical example, the limits of a strictly geographical approach in tourism and the interactions or the (inter)dependences on other sciences. It's implicit that the geography, of whose utility we are about to specify, cannot explain by itself, the entire tourism process. But we should draw the limits of the geographical approach, to see how far can extend the legitimacy of such kind of study and what are the replacement tools when this one becomes redundant.

Our goal is not to verify the justness of the geography of tourism or its impact over the scientific world, but to check the legitimacy of using a geographically approach, tools, devices and techniques characteristics of geographers in tourism phenomena analysis and explanation.

2. Geography and tourism research

Geography is a discipline, focusing on “how cultures and societies write themselves onto the earth and how both the environmental and the social are transformed in the process” (Schoenberger, 2001, p. 377).

The need to see other places and the thrill of discovering the unknown have been the trigger for tourism phenomenon (Akdağ, Öter, 2011). Today, tourism is one of the most important socio-economic realisations of the world, with significant impact on places and people. Since tourism is by definition a spatial process, it represents one of geography's objects of study. The geographical interest in this phenomenon grew along with the appearance of geography of tourism. This new discipline has evolved mainly in a research domain focusing on spatial dispersion of tourism, impact of tourism on related areas, selection and justification of tourism destinations, rules of land use and planning in tourism zones.

The object of geography is to analyze where, how and why this leisure field of study marks the space, which are the interactions between its distinctive components and the hosting environment, whether natural or socio-economic. The geography allows us to comprehend the way in which the tourism develops in space and its effects on the creation of leisure spaces and on the non-tourist spatial modifications, but which still present a tourist function (Dewailly, Flament, 2000, p. 5).

Geography is a discipline, focusing on “how cultures and societies write themselves onto the earth and how both the environmental and the social are transformed in the process” (Schoenberger, 2001, p. 377). Tourism, by contrast, is a field, an *object* of study, rather than a discipline (Tribe, 1997). As Graburn and Jafari (1991, pp. 7–8) explain: “no single discipline alone can accommodate, treat, or understand tourism; it can be studied only if disciplinary boundaries are crossed and if multidisciplinary perspectives are sought and formed”.

Continuing education and interdisciplinarity have made significant progress in tourism research. We adhere to the statement that “the tourists, the touristic places and the rapport between them should be in central attention” (Stock et al., 2003, p. 4) but we must

keep in mind that the geographer cannot have the tourist in the centre of his analysis; the geographer is not also a philosopher, psychologist, ethnologist, anthropologist nor a sociologist. The geographer can only contribute to a thorough analysis which would (and need to) be the result of, at least, all scientific competences of the specialists that we've mentioned (Dewailly, 2006).

Some critics point to the lack of validity in differentiating between the rationale of research and its intended use. There is a widely accepted premise within academic geography (Johnston, 2000) that there are clear divisions between pure and applied research. This debate is particularly relevant for tourism given the commercial focus of the subject matter and the debates on the lack of embeddedness between the spatial focus of geographical research and the business and commercial practices of tourism. Yet the debate of applied versus theoretical knowledge has now been elevated beyond the level of geography as discipline and is becoming significant for tourism as a whole (Ruhanen, Cooper, 2004; Shaw, Williams, 2008) as many universities embrace government objectives and funding for increasing knowledge transfer as part of the knowledge management agenda to improve the skill base and research available to the wider economy. Perhaps, as Harvey (1984, p. 7) commented, "Geography is far too important to be left to generals, politicians and corporate chiefs. Notions of applied and relevant geography pose questions of objectives and interests served. There is more to geography than the production of knowledge".

One recent area of useful development for applied geographical research has been in the use of GIS. GIS, developed by advances in computer hardware and software incorporates more sophisticated systems to search, query, present and analyse data in a spatial context. This enables geographers to assist decision-makers in making planning decisions. Butler (1992) outlined some of the great contributions that GIS can offer in tourism as did Elliott-White and Finn (1998) but its utilisation has been dependent upon the skill base of the geographer and the large amounts of data to meet the requirements of creating a representative sample to derive meaningful results from the GIS-related mapping outputs.

The spatial approach of tourist and tourism and the possibility of representing through GIS various characteristics of tourism represent the original and unique scientific contribution of geography. Tourist motivations and especially, tourist places are the most important objects of study for the geographer.

"Once pioneer, much more closer to the observation than the analysis, geography of tourism has nowadays the ambition of introducing the reflection amongst tourists and also local population in order to find a tourist optimum that some scientists call it sustainable" (Lozato Giotart, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, geography creates not only a legitimate role for itself in tourism research, but also its complexity justifies a passage between geography of tourism to geographies of tourism (Hall, Page, 2008).

But the geographical approach of tourism needs pluridisciplinary openings if we want to comprehend the overall of tourist strategies which have as a core the space in and with which the societies live, space that changes in a way more or less visible (Dewailly, Flament, 2000, p. 6). "Tourism geography has its own geography of production and circulation, variegated differently than for other parts of geography. It still struggles to pervade publishing in 'global' journals, and yet, when eventually appearing elsewhere, tourism geography appears to be on the whole more cosmopolitan. [...] This seems an important (even defining) contradiction of tourism in contemporary geography". (Gibson, 2008, p. 418)

Is it geography the key-factor because "the tourism deals first of all with population and places (Pearce, 1987; Schmetzkopf, 2002), the geography's exact basic notions or is it just a supplementary element without a complementary function as Hoerner (2002) states it:

“geographers have described tourism rather than explain it”? Probably, neither of them is valid.

3. The advantages of the geographically approach

For a better illustration of the geographical approach advantages, we’ve partially left the theoretical space and we’ve decided upon something more practical. Therefore we’ve chosen a study on relative and absolute dynamic of tourism arrivals between the years 2002 and 2008 in Romanian region, Moldavia (figure 1).

First of all, we can observe the advantages of visualizing, localising and quick understanding of region’s tourism realities, advantages that were unavailable in the initially data table.

Secondly, mapping the tourist arrivals and their dynamics inside the administrative-territorial units allows the detection of some phenomena which any other approach could not highlight:

- Simultaneous evolution of some territorial structures on the strength of common attractive or repulsive elements (evolution of Piatra Neam and Târgu Neam, involution of Trotu Valley units);

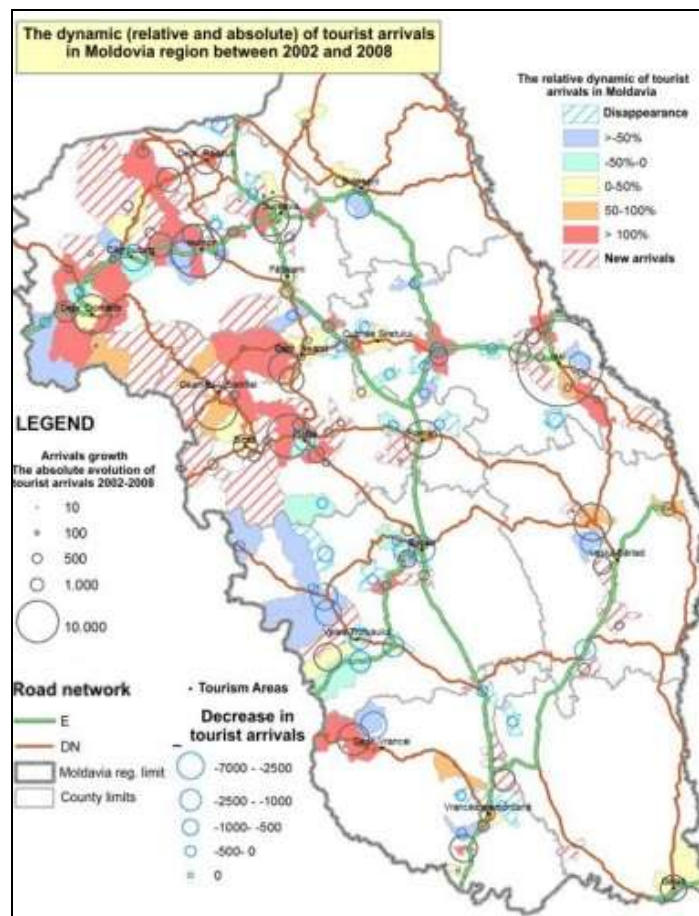


Figure 1: The dynamic of tourist arrivals in Moldavia region between 2002 and 2008

- The prominence of the relation between tourist destination and transport elaborated by Miossec (The typology of tourist spaces and the impact of tourism on spatial planning);
- The satellisation of some developed destinations, and the transfer of the accommodation function to the adjacent rural area (very visible at Vatra Dornei, Gura Humorului, Piatra Neam and Târgu Neam);
- The transfer of tourist arrivals from a less visited destination to an adjacent dynamic one (one of the best examples is the couple Soveja – Lepșa in Vrancea County).

In this manner, using a simple approach of points (destinations, locations, attractions), of spaces (territories, zones, regions) and connexions (tourist flows, access infrastructure) settled between emitter and attractive zones, and mapping them using GIS, we could obtain additional information. So, the main characteristic of the geography, when we refer to tourism studies is the prominence of the factor *space* (Hoerner, 1993; J.-C.Gay, 2000, cit. by MIT Team, 2002 and J.-M. Dewailly, 2006) represented in the analysis as a *point* (a holiday resort, an objective, a city), a *zone* (a region, a county) or a *flux*. The ability of geography of tourism to evidence phenomena, interactions or evolutions goes from an international level to a micro one, of urban planning (Hall, Page, 2008).

4. The limitations of the geographical approach

Despite the obvious advantages mentioned above, some limitations are noticeable in this kind of approach:

The chronological limitation: The geographical approach is, by definition, a post-factum approach. It analyses, interprets, explains phenomena that already happened or that are happening at the moment of the study. The capacity of geographical approach is limited. Specific tourism phenomena (and not only) developed at a time T_1 in one or several spaces can be interpreted at $T_2 \geq T_1$ (the equality condition is equivalent to interpreting the on-going phenomena). However, this approach is incapable of prediction. When referring to the impact of introducing a new infrastructure element, for example building a highway, we can anticipate, based on a model that will take into account data referring to road traffic in that area and the distance from the highway, the average flow that the highway will be submitted to. But geography cannot anticipate the impact (especially economic impact) of entering a new space in a tourist trail, or the arrivals that it will be submitted to.

Geography explains very well past events (post-factum), its forecasting and prediction abilities being quite limited. It can anticipate, eventually, the transport stream when introducing a new facility (a highway) but not the tourist flow when creating or modifying a tourist destination.

Economy, social psychology, sociology have better methods when trying to predict a phenomenon, than geography that bases its capacity on accessibility, proximity or flows.

Over- or under- cartographical representations problem, especially in human geography, is given by the need to report the data to the area of the considered administrative territorial unit. Therefore, the approximate dynamic of tourist arrivals in Moldavia region becomes more visible within the larger administrative territorial units in the eastern part of the region than in those from Siret Corridor. This problem is usually acknowledged in geopolitical maps, especially in the international ones where the attention is drawn towards representative indices of larger countries. The solution employed by geography is to use anamorphic maps (fig. 2) where the surface of a unit modifies according to the index that it represents. Therefore, by keeping the contour, but accentuating the units with high values of the index, the map can offer a more accurate image of the reality.

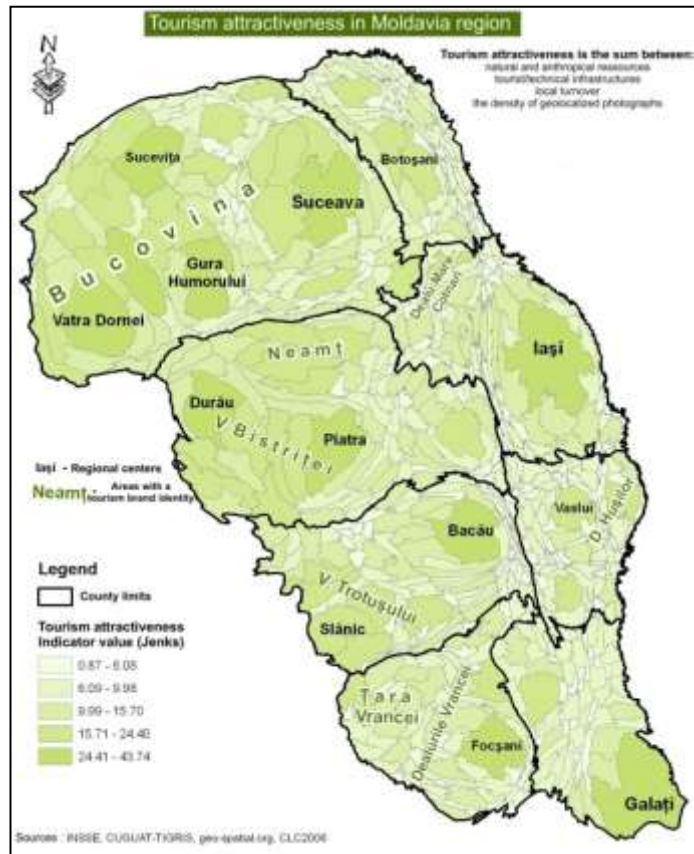


Figure 2: Tourism attractiveness in Moldavia region (anamorphic map)

Motivation of choice, personal factors : A wrongful interpretation of maps that represent arrivals and tourist flows is to explain the tourist motivation by the chosen destination. However, individual choices that are strongly influenced by each individual personality represent an index that is impossible to map.

Geographical approaches cannot explain the motivation of choosing a certain destination, this domain being covered by psychology (individual traits or characteristics that make a certain destination more appealing for an individual than for another, the hierarchy of need for every individual and the place occupied by tourism in that hierarchy). Moreover, every individual has its own preferences (some people prefer the mountains; others the sea, while others love adventure tourism). In order to investigate these issues, the psychology uses qualitative and quantitative methods.

The social trend: An aspect similar to motivation is the social trend, very well highlighted by the British writer Gilbert Keith Chesterton : “*The traveller sees what he sees, the tourist see what he has come to see*”, aspect enforced by Barbaza (1983). The choices depend on individual decisions or small groups decisions and are directed toward favourite places by their emotional charge or by their tourist image.

The social trend represents the base of tourist flows, aspect covered by sociology that accentuates that tourism is by definition a social activity. Geography cannot explain or treat such a subject and it does not have the necessary means in order to assess the social trend (the

human being is a social animal – he copies other's behaviours – why does everybody go or want to go to Cannes or Saint Morritz?). Trendsetters play a very important role, like the tourist guides (Michelin, National Geographic, Lonely Planet) and represent another element that geography cannot assess or control.

Cultural differences: According to World Tourism Organization, Australians spend almost \$1014 per capita for tourism activities, the Dutch \$952, the British \$780, the French \$625, the Americans \$244, while the Japanese only \$219. The indicator of GDP per capita cannot explain these fluctuations by itself. Cultural differences are responsible for travelling preferences of each nation. History models individuals, their education, economical power and social influence. In this case proximity, accessibility and other geographical factors can explain only part of certain tendencies. As in the other cases, the cultural differences cannot be assessed by geographical means or methods (Barbaza, 1983).

Conclusions

Tourism presents some spatial logics that cannot be freely observed nor explained except by a geographical approach. The role played by geography in studying tourism is very important but has its clear limits that set it apart from other sciences. In order to have a complete and clear vision of tourism phenomena a holistic approach is needed without setting apart the factors because everything can be mapped (the original idea that we started from), but mapping is not everything (at least in tourism).

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