The End of Sustainability? A Note on the Changing Politics of Mass Tourism in the Balearic Islands

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Sustainability is often presented as the holy grail for mass tourism. There is a wide consensus linking the environmental upgrade of tired resorts with the competitiveness of mass tourism (Bramwell, 2003). The mantra of sustainability is particularly strong in the Balearic Islands, which is often presented as an example of sustainable mass tourism (Batle, 2000; Bardolet, 2001 and Buswell, 2011). However, there are many doubts about how serious mass tourism is about sustainability (Buckley, 2007) and the lack of theoretically informed critical assessment (Bramwell & Lane, 2014). The academic consensus on sustainability is not always reflected on the ground, where contradictory logics coexist. The objective of ´sustainability´ is particularly fragile at times of economic recession. This paper looks at the changing politics of mass tourism in the Balearic Islands. Specifically, it questions whether during the last period of recession there has been a shift away from a sustainable vision of mass tourism in favour of a more aggressive growth-orientated model. The paper addresses this question by examining a new tourism act adopted by the regional parliament in 2012 and subsequently modified in 2013 and 2014. The act was promoted by a conservative government in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis to promote tourism growth. The paper follows a discursive approach to policy analysis as articulated by Hajer (1995), which emphasises the constitutive role of discourse in political practice. Central to this approach is the notion of story line, the narrative on social reality that provides the basis for a common understanding of the problem, which then underpins policy interventions. By looking at the 2012 Tourism Act as a discursive intervention, the paper shows the extent to which ideas of tourism, its challenges and opportunities are at stake in mature destinations.

Much of the political debate on mass tourism in the Balearic Islands has been framed through the prism of sustainability (Ivars Baidal, 2004), which seeks the integration of environmental objectives into the tourism planning framework. The shift towards sustainability started in the 1980s with a series of planning and tourism measures that brought to an end a highly relaxed town planning system that was designed in the 1960s to accommodate tourism growth (Rullan, 2010). Protection for the most emblematic natural areas was established, the minimum ratio of land per tourist bed was set up at 60m2 and the opening of new hotels was severely restricted. The legislative efforts were stepped up in the 1990s with planning measures seeking to restructure mature destinations (Batle, 2000) with the Agenda 21 in Calvià (Mallorca) being the most celebrated example (Aguiló et al., 2005). The shift culminated with the first tourism act in 1999, the approval of a master plan for each island and the failed implementation of an Eco-tax in 2001 (Ivars Baidal, 2004).

The case of the Balearic Islands has been widely discussed in tourism research. However, there is remarkably little consensus about the reach of its sustainable policies. Drawing on Butler’s 'Tourist Area Life Cycle' Knowles and Curtis (1999) consider that enhancing tired resorts will only delay their inevitable decline. The mainstream view, however, is in line with the principles of ecological modernisation, which locates the solution of environmental problems within the existing economic and social framework (Hajer, 1995), considering sustainability a way to upgrade the fabric of tired resorts built under a Fordist regime. According to Aguiló et al. (2005) sea and sand forms of tourism can gain a competitive advantage by meeting higher environmental standards. Such optimism has been challenged by critical geographers who have called attention to the advance of more flexible neoliberal forms of tourism development in what has been termed the 'third boom of mass tourism' (Pons et al., 2014). Moreover, the rapid growth of residential tourism is undermining sustainable policies by dramatically increasing the ecological footprint of tourism.

The 2012 Tourism Act redefines the public problem of mass tourism in the Balearic Islands from an issue of quality and saturation to one of loss of competitiveness and legislative barriers to growth. The new story line points to an inefficient planning system that increases the cost of tourist development, thus preventing private investment. This story line is clearly established in the preface of the law, which states that ‘compliance with the regulations that affected the sector raised the operating costs of the tourism industry drastically, (…) which did little to encourage investment'. Contrasting with the 1999 Tourism Act, which called attention to excessive growth and permissive legislation, the 2012 Tourism Act seeks to reduce public interference into private investment. In so doing, it moves away from the principles of ecological modernisation to embrace a more expansionary vision for tourism. To address the supposed loss of competitiveness, the 2012 Tourism Act introduces a series of exemptions in the planning system, effectively creating a state of exception in tourism planning, with fewer democratic safeguards. At the heart of the law is the discretionary powers of the regional government to declare a tourist development of regional interest as a way to accelerate (and legalise) tourist developments that do not necessarily comply with ordinary regulations.

There are seven key changes to the planning system. First, it opens the possibility to reduce the minimum ratio of land per tourist bed to less than 60m2, thus undoing the most celebrated measure introduced in the 1980s. Second, it introduces special exemptions for unique tourist developments led by internationally renowned architects, which can be exempted from any regulation over which the regional government has authority. Third, it exonerates hospitality establishments that modernise their infrastructure from complying with ordinary regulations. Their height and volume can be increased beyond the established standards. Fourth, it authorises the construction of big sporting complexes (golf courses mainly) in rural land not earmarked for development, which can include a five star hotel. Fifth, it facilitates the opening of hotels and complementary offer in protected natural areas. There is no restriction on the reconversion of existing buildings which can be substantially enlarged. Sixth, it facilitates the regeneration of obsolete tourist areas with a series of planning exemptions, including the possibility of converting hotels into housing, breaking with the old principle of exclusive use. Finally it authorises new forms of hospitality that combine residential and commercial functions including condo hotels and time shares, effectively recognising the fractioning of their ownership.

The 2012 Tourism Act opens the door to the fast expansion of tourism infrastructure, particularly outside coastal areas, and yet it is highly protective of the commercial interests of the established hotel chains. Like the previous act, the opening of new establishments is conditional upon the closure of tourist beds of lower category. A procedure is established to swap tourist beds, which favours hotels of higher quality at the expense of the more traditional establishments. City centre hotels, five star hotels, rural establishments and hotels opening all year round are not affected by a measure that effectively hands over to existing hotel chains the control of hospitality permits. The act emphasises free enterprise and yet there is little space for new forms of entrepreneurialism, leaving outside the law bed and breakfast and other emerging forms of hospitality like airbnb. The rental of private housing for tourism is authorised, but its complex regulation does little to organise a market that is now largely illegal. The act retains a commitment to sustainability insomuch as all establishments are required to have a permanent modernisation plan, covering environmental, safety and health measures as well as general appearance. However, such commitment is limited to the quality of the physical hospitality complex and does not include the surrounding environment.

The recent economic crisis has triggered a systemic shift in the politics of mass tourism in the Balearic Islands away from the principles of sustainability. With the 2012 Tourism Act the sustainability-led agenda of the 1980s and 1990s aimed at containing growth is abandoned in favour of a boosterist approach that prioritises short term gains, which, in Spain, is closely associated with the first phase of mass tourism (1959-1974). The rights of developers have been expanded at the expense of both the democratic control of tourism development and the quality of the tourist experience. In this new framework sustainability is no longer the solution to mass tourism but one of its main problems, a luxury that can scarcely be afforded. The legislative changes, however, have not had the expected results partly because of the credit restrictions following the financial crisis. There has neither been a rapid acceleration of urban development, which remain below the pre 2008 levels, nor a fast conversion of hotels into housing. The effects of the legislative changes on the regeneration of obsolete tourist areas are particularly meagre. The most visible outcome relates to the consolidation of an *a la carte* planning system. Many new tourist projects, often in sensitive areas, that do not comply with existing regulations have been approved including Rafa Nadal´s tennis academy in Manacor.

The case of the Balearic Island reminds us of the need to examine the complex relations between social and economic power, cultural meanings and discourses and public policy. There is much more to this shift than a simple policy change to fit local interests. It is also an attempt to articulate an alternative understanding of social reality that legitimises a speculative model of tourism development. A new vision for mass tourism is promoted, which is not centred on the bodily pleasures of the sea as much as on dreamlike luxury landscapes of leisure. There is less of Robinson Crusoe here and more of Las Vegas and Dubai. The new vision has a geographical as well as historical dimension. Whilst the old sustainable framework sought to Europeanise the Balearic islands by adopting its high environmental standards, the new vision aims to reproduce the favourable conditions that made it possible for Balearic hotel chains to expand aggressively in the Caribbean. It is a vision that de-Europeanises mass tourism, aligning the Balearic Islands with highly speculative and socially exclusive forms of tourism. The advancement of aggressive forms of tourism development has met an increasingly radicalised response. New forms of activism have emerged which advocate the need for ‘de-growing’ tourism economies and restricting tourist arrivals, prompting a shift in public discourse back to issues of saturation. The tourism laws are now again under review following the arrival of a left leaning government in 2015 with a clear mandate to develop a stricter, more comprehensive planning system for mass tourism. A new eco tax has already been reintroduced, emergency planning restrictions have been fast-tracked and new legislation is currently being drafted to contain the growth of residential tourism. The mantra of sustainability is, however, fast losing its attraction, trapped between capitalist dreams and anti-capitalist revolts. Mass tourism is indeed an increasingly contested terrain where alternative understandings of sustainability clash. The 2012 Tourism Act is just another step in a cultural battle for the tourism hegemony that needs further attention.

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