Title: Slum tourism: A review of state-of-the art scholarship

Short title: Slum tourism review

Author: Dr Rodanthi Tzanelli, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Postal address:
School of Sociology & Social Policy
Social Sciences Building, Room 12.04
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
WEST YORKSHIRE
UK

Email: r.tzanelli@leeds.ac.uk, rosetzanelli@gmail.com

Tel: 0113 343 8746

Fax: 0113 343 4415
INTRODUCTION

“Slum tourism”, commonly known in Brazilian contexts as “favela tourism” and in South African ones and elsewhere as “township tourism”, is a term of plural and, often indecorous subtexts in Anglo-Saxon colloquialism. The term’s Anglo-Saxon specificity dissolves, when the phenomenon is studied in economic and cultural contexts from the stance of the spread of capitalist development, which induced social mobility to cities, the emergence of a working class and an underclass, spatialized urban divides between the affluent and the poor, non-white and disenfranchised populations, and the rise of curiosity amongst the former to consume the latter as spectacles or care for as subjects in need. Indeed, coupled with connotations of disorder, dirt and physical or symbolic danger, slums or squatter areas of substandard housing (United Nations, 2003) are academically discussed as by-products of uneven urbanisation. Thus, it is entirely logical to respectively consider slum tourism as an adventurous pursuit, born in disorganised capitalist contexts, where consumer supply by independently-run capitalist networks meets demand for relevant tourism. Notably, the growth of subject-specific literature allows for this peculiar consumption niche to feed into more established social science fields, such as urban studies, urban ecology, and globalisation. Such examples are provided by work focusing on governmental activity to organise townships on the eve of the South Africa 2010 Soccer Cup in favour of global visitors (Tzanelli, 2016a), and in Brazil that was directed towards the supposed clean-up of favelas prior to the Brazil 2014 World Cup and the Rio 2016 Summer Olympics (Müller, 2016, p.182; Tzanelli, 2016b, pp.82-83). However, as I explain later, the same thematic of slum tourism informs work in film studies and cultural theory, albeit in a markedly different way. With the appearance of the internationally acclaimed films, such as City of God
(2003), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *District 9* (2009), among other global hits, the issue of representing the slum has become popular in humanities and social sciences. I expand on these developments individually in this article, which provides a thematic review of relevant state-of-the-art literature in tourism studies. I discuss intersections and disjunctions between modes of analysis of slumming in major urban centres around the world (e.g. New Delhi, Mumbai, Rio, São Paulo, and Johannesburg) and the social scientific traditions on which these are constructed, so as to shed light on the underlying norms and values by which the overall field is currently informed.

A value-oriented presentation of publication trends suggests theoretical organisation grounded on vision (*theoría* [θεωρία] as both perspective and gazing). Herein rests the *critical* angle of my analysis: by “gazing at” a datum or social issue/problem, slum tourism scholars produce perspectives on the social, cultural and politico-economic world they study, thus ultimately making versions of this world in their writings (Hollinshead, 2004 & 2007). By extension, their perspectival analysis may inform or suggest particular forms of action, which make their way into real policy-making contexts (in tourism or other cognate socio-political and cultural fields). To signpost such theories, I proceed to examine first how different analytical “modes” or “styles” connect to specific perspectival commitments (“gazes”). I consider “mode” as both scientific mannerism attuned into the rules of a particular way of investigating and recording social phenomena. Incidentally, the birth of a mode was originally linked to the musical arrangement of keys to produce a melody. Reflecting Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) “rhythmanalysis”, the uncovering of laws informing the repetition of phenomena in spatio-temporal terms, *modes of investigating slum tourism* are harmonised scientific
discourses about touristic slumming in urban contexts (space), which are synchronically and diachronically rooted (time). Thereafter, I provide more information on the epistemological frameworks by which these modes are driven to produce different versions of reality (of and in the slum, but always from within textual worlds). The connection of modes to what I term “traditions” looks to Thomas Kuhn’s (2012) conception of paradigm development in the (social) sciences. Much like Lefebvre’s acknowledgment that modes or rhythms are not a priori given, but made while collecting and analysing data, Kuhn argues that the evolution of scientific theory is not based on straightforward accumulation of facts. However, Kuhn also stresses the significance of changing intellectual circumstances and possibilities in the establishment of new scientific schools and traditions. The absence of coherent, globally coordinated research on slum tourism before the beginning of the twentieth-first century prompts us to ask what changed in the rhythm of inquiry to deliver new ways of researching it; by extension, it allows us to ask why some groups proceeded to betray established traditions in favour of new investigative paradigms. Delivery and betrayal, the twin meaning of tradition (from Latin tradere), explains the schism between critical political and popcultural analyses of slum tourism that I look into in the third section.

I. MODES

I.i. Political and social: on activist and charitable gazes

As a precarious type of urban flânerie, the practice of wasting time or idling in the city to collect impressions of social minutiae, slumming is traced in the industrial beginnings of Western modernity, the rapid urbanisation of Western countries, the histories of internal (rural to urban) migration and class stratification, the professionalised (artistic,
journalistic) and adventurous gaze on the poor, and the inclusion of novel conceptualisations of terror and monstrosity into middle-class consumerisms. The semi-professional or amateur interest in slumming in 20th-century American shantytowns studied by Seaton (2012) cannot be disconnected from earlier academic studies of America’s European migration histories and the concomitant rise of organised crime, as well as prominent sociologist Robert Merton’s (1948) autobiographical look at shantytown social organisation and the great Chicago School’s (e.g. Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Harvey Zorbaugh’s research – see Bulmer, 1984) sociological studies of deviance.

In a similar vein, several contemporary scholars considered slum tourism as a form of consumerist mobility, riddled with ethical prohibitions and political meaning (Korstanje, 2016). The emergence of European and American slums as a “social issue” connected discussions on tourist leisure to those of inequality and poverty. The rise of “township attraction” (Rolfes et.al., 2009) was discussed as “extraordinary tourism” (Rolfes, 2010), “poorism”, “ghettotourism” (Williams, 2008) and voyeurism, thus often setting the uncritical gaze of consumers against the critical gaze of informed scholars and activists. This trend of analysis informs, and is informed directly by critical globalisation studies focusing on a growing inequality split between the Global North (slum gazers) and the Global South (gazed upon) (Escobar, 1995 & 2015). Considerations of slum tourism as a growing “industry” (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p.62) often echo early critical theoretical perspectives on the dialectic of Enlightenment and the propagandist rise of entertainment industries (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991),
rejecting slumming as a leisure activity and praising it when it attains a political-activist orientation.

The global slum problem was also connected to the emergence of welfarism as a state-led ideological practice in urban enclaves in the nineteenth century (Stedman-Jones, 1971). This centrally-organised system of care for the poor and the disenfranchised is now often taken up as a cause by individuals and activist groups resisting its global neoliberal dismantling. The realisation that privatisation of social services, an increased emphasis on individual responsibility and competitive capitalist profit-making disempower poor and ethically different communities in slums calls for activist protection in the place of state welfare structures. Activist scholarship on slum tourism, which supports practical action and empowerment of slumdweller communities, foregrounds the aesthetics of touristic slumming with an ethics of care (Basu, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2014; Tzanelli, 2016). There are instances, in which this charitable gaze becomes intertwined in scholarship with the activist gaze, so as to interrogate, for example, the extent to which small tourist business can be integrated into mainstream world markets to yield economic and cultural benefits for localities (Ashey & Heysom, 2006; Koens, 2012). All in all, such publications have a clear political, action-orientated tone, which often sets them against the leisurely cultural dimensions of slumming.

I.ii. Cultural: On pop(ular) tourist gazes

Tourism can both comprise and be supported by multi-industrial complexes that operate across different scales and levels of governance in global spheres. A constant in the way it functions both experientially and industrially is that it manages (represents,
incorporates or manufactures) both local and global ("glocal" (Robertson, 1992) or “hybrid” (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004)) versions of culture. However, the proliferation of slums in the developing world, but also in marginalised areas of the developed (urban) hemisphere, has had a peculiar impact on business, tourist and host understandings of what counts as an authentic tourist experience in slumming. Generally, these days slum tourism may overlap with volunteer and educational tourism, but these forms of tourism are often deemed as problematic First-World hegemonic pursuits, much like straightforward slumming for leisure. Whereas nineteenth and early twentieth-century slumming was a novelty for visitors, contemporary slum tourism in the townships of the Global South acquired the patina of heritage and the lustre of “serious” cultural tourism. Notably, there is a raging interdisciplinary battle over what counts as cultural tourism, which is further complicated by unacknowledged scholarly interpellations of heritage as something in need of protection from foreign capital investment. There are slums in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, India or China that belong to the sacrosanct domains of post-colonial or industrial national history. Yet, any residual memories of violence attached to them (for example, genocidal incidents in Mumbai’s slums during and after the 1948 Partition) have also become the staple of tourist and other media industries, such as film.

Scholarly publications that consider tourism as part of a novel popular culture range from ethnographic to netnographic or cinematic-tourist analyses, and they may prioritise studies of tourist design and experience (Muldoon and Mair, 2016). However, there have also been blended critical analyses at the cultural end that pay particular attention to the wider geopolitical context, in which cultural production takes place within slums,
or with slums as a representational epicentre (Diekmann & Hannam, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Promburom, 2016; Tzanelli, 2015a & 2016). And yet, we may encounter a major perspectival clash between activist/charitable and popular cultural gazes, which organises antithetically their academic contributions in ethical-as-aesthetic terms, often within a single publication (on this, I am ready to critique myself, amongst others). On other occasions, the emergence of local tourist industries out of media (cinematic, online) representations of slum life, simply acquires the badge of anomic evil-doing at the expense of the poor in academic writings (Mendes, 2010). Such publications may revert to unconditional support of slum life, which comes dangerously close to romanticisation of ethnic origins by nationalist factions (see conceptualisations of the “labouring (hu)man” in Tzanelli & Korstanje, 2016).

We must pay additional attention to this point: the recognition (by the nation-state, international arbitrators, such as the UN, and cultural industries) of slum cultures as national heritage sites in terms of location, cultural production (e.g. craft-making) or custom, intertwines slum tourism with dark tourism. Broadly defined as organised visitations to sites of heritage, suffering and disaster “wholly or partially motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death” (Halgreen, 2004, p.49; Lennon & Foley, 2000), slum-dark tourism is anything but a progressive venture. Paradoxically then, some activist/charitable scholarship mirrors centrally-sanctioned cultural tourism, which “is as much about representation as is a film, a book, an advertisement or a museum display” (Jeursen & Tomaselli, 2007, p.23; Tomaselli & Wang, 2001; Hollinshead, 2009; Tzanelli, 2011). This is so because, while it rests on the desire to save slum lifeworlds from exploitation (paralleling heritage conservation), it cannot
suggest any form of positive action outside representation (of suffering and
victimisation of pure forms of community – see critique by Meschkank, 2012). Now we
may begin to consider the two gazes as extensions or symbolic enactments of “action”
or discourses. As such, each of them rests its case on particular epistemological tools.

II. CRITICAL REVIEW OF TRADITIONS

In many respects, considering academic production from a “cultural gaze” perspective
equips us with all the necessary tools to deconstruct mainstream notions of pure and
disinterested political commitment: who decides that it is more worthy to think and
write about the slum and (re)act in ways specific to slum tourism, and to what/whose
ends? But even the counter-critical (but not a-critical!) “popcultural” gaze (see
Gyimóthy et.al. 2015) as a leisurely variation of the allegedly serious cultural gaze
supports a particular worldview, in which seriousness as a sort of hegemonic
behavioural habitus merits deconstruction. Work on slum tourism that elaborates on the
dangers of representation (for example, of slum dwellers by film or Internet industries
selling slum tourism) often falls back on the call to “be there” in body, flesh and soul to
“help out” the poor instead of using them as commodities. This call for “non-
representational” methodology and action (see Thrift (2007) on non-representation)
consolidates schisms between culturally and politically informed traditions of research
traditions (Tzanelli, 2015). Therefore, we still have to consider how and why slum
tourism scholarship arrives at particular renditions of social and cultural reality (on
which see a slightly different thoughtful analysis in Frenzel, 2016) – how, in other
words, we produce knowledge (epistemology), with what sort of tools (methods) and
theoretical organisation of research (methodology). Generally, we have a freer
distribution of methods and methodologies across the two gazes, but more rigid epistemological commitments within their “schools” – so, particular epistemologies are more clearly associated with one of the two gazes. The epistemological paradigms that circulate in slum tourism publications are:

a. Marxism-inspired critical realism (more favoured in the political & social fields).

b. Post-structuralism (favoured evenly across the social and cultural fields, but with Foucault-inspired analyses at the “serious”/hegemonic cultural end and cultural studies-inspired, feminist analyses at the “popcultural” end).

c. Phenomenology (faring well at both ends of the cultural field, with some reflexive political ethnographies as an exception to the rule and with feminism often as a critical overlay at either ends of the gaze).

This distribution is not illogical: critical realists favour a particular version of reality (the slum and its residents are victims of governance inequalities – see Meschkank, 2011 & 2012; Steinbrink, 2012), where phenomenologists may acknowledge this reality as one of the many possible perspectives to investigate (e.g. inequalities produced by local custom, rather than capitalist and/or national “oppression” (Tzanelli, 2015a & 2016), or poverty alleviated or managed by local and global tourist business and interventions/disruptions of reality by local voices (Dyson, 2012; Linke, 2012)). Within the post-structuralist tradition there can be analyses of the power that particular governmental regimes (central national administration, the region, the city or global
markets) exert in slum tourism, simultaneously impacting on the organisation of slum life (Tzanelli, 2015b).

Yet, there is an unspoken dilemma in most of these studies, which has to do with interplays or disjunctions between poverty and inequality. The overwhelming emphasis is on social stratification or social immobility, therefore class (e.g. see the state-of-the-art review by Frenzel et al., 2015), rather than inequalities stemming from gender, ethno-racial or even international “orders” (Herzfeld, 2004), which support specific interpretations of social and cultural value. This imbalance is occasionally rectified by introductions of post-colonial development theory examining the role of inter-state relations and global governmental regimes in the maintenance of slum disenfranchisement and marginality. Nevertheless, overall, such gaps and micro-silences in cultural and globalising processes are symptomatic of a very old conundrum in development theory: the cognitive and emotional management of guilt and responsibility by those that international politics placed on the allegedly right side of the fence.

Lest I am accused of insensitive criticism of scholarship that is difficult to conduct in the first place, I must clarify here: scholars studying slum tourism are, by and large, sensitive and committed researchers. But reflexivity has its limits in all of us, when we are forced to comment on the global panoramic picture of inequality. When I indicate the presence of guilt in research, I refer to the centuries-long duration of development and its solidification in patterns of globalisation, within which slum tourism researchers are now invited to produce “expert” realities (see for example an otherwise excellent
state-of-the-art literature review of slum tourism by Frenzel et.al., 2015, in which positionalities appear more rigid). Conducting research on slums as immutable tourist commodities invites epistemic self-questioning: the researcher, a post-modern bricoleur, who weaves patches of reality into a single quilt, is charged with the crime of representing the other for a consuming audience, after all (on the ethics of social research see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp.4-7). Slums as ethno-national heritage nodes do the same job in international cultural politics as that of dark tourist spots: the craters left by atomic bombs in post-World War II national landscapes (Halgreen, 2004) and, equally importantly, the concentration camps that scarred European modernity and global memory matrices forever (Bauman, 1989). In this instance, Europe’s “Holocaust” acts as a globally applicable metaphor for “urban cleansing”, which connects to the city’s need to produce a respectable façade and thus eliminate economic, social and ethno-cultural otherness. As the locus of such otherness, slums remind us that the world is split into realities conditioned by colonial or subsequent economic discrepancies, which may interact in various ways. In tandem, they remind scholars that they may always be the privileged gazers of those populations and cultures that politics and economics condemn to a softer-than-Auschwitz but ultimate social eradication in favour of consumerist expansion. The critical realist and critical phenomenological camps in slum tourism analysis address such heritage impositions of responsibilisation, which popcultural analysis discards as parochial and discriminatory against popular cultural tourism. In reality, I would argue, both camps negotiate the self-same tensions of post-modern mobilities, which tourism business generates (or, more often, is made to reproduce) in the “developing” world. The minimum they should all share is acknowledgment of other, especially conflicting, perspectives.
References


